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## Diverging Roots: The Coming Insurrection's Situationist Lineage

Timothy Fitzgerald

*University of Minnesota, Morris*

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Tim Fitzgerald

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Final Paper

Diverging Roots: *The Coming Insurrection's* Situationist Lineage

Over the past 60 years, there has been a resurgence of anarchism in Western Society. The revolutionary spirit has very much returned to the consciousness of popular culture, if it ever left at all. This ‘comeback’ of anarchist ideology has become progressively louder in the past decade, with the rise of cyberterrorist/hacktivist groups such as Anonymous and Lulzsec, the proliferation of political and governmental distrust following the 2008 recession, and the vocal increase in anti-fascist, anarcho-capitalist, post-left anarchism, eco-anarchism, and insurrectionary anarchist groups and activists such as The Invisible Committee. But many of these ideas haven’t been pulled from thin-air, or ancient ideological tomes that have gone out of fashion. In fact, most of them, particularly post-left anarchism and insurrectionary anarchism, have direct roots in the Situationist International of the middle of the twentieth century, pioneered by Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. Despite these roots however, contemporary anarchist texts, such as The Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* starkly diverges from their Situationist roots. This paper is an attempt to investigate Situationist roots of *The Coming Insurrection* through contrasting elements of The Invisible Committee’s ideal revolutionary group, the *commune*, to Guy Debord’s *workers’ council*, focusing on four distinct points of divergence – assembly, visibility, power, and individuality. These points of divergence illustrate the change in ideology from the Situationist era of the 60’s to the pre-financial crisis moment that The Invisible Committee is writing in.

First, it is important to clearly define both Debord's *Workers' Council* and The Invisible Committee's Commune. The Workers' Council is Debord's ideal revolutionary group. He notes that the appearance of workers' councils in the first quarter of the 20th century was "the high point of the proletarian movement" despite going relatively unnoticed (Debord 87). There is an irony in this claim, given the same could be said about Debord's own ideology today. The workers' council is a term Debord uses to refer to groups which vest "all decision making and executive powers in themselves and federating with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time" (Debord 86). The workers' council is a clearly defined entity that manages the proletariat's struggle and represents their interests, functioning in an almost democratic way.

The commune, on the other hand, is The Invisible Committee's ideal revolutionary group. They are sociopolitical groups which form "every time a few people, freed of their individual straitjackets, decide to rely only on themselves, and measure their strength against reality" (The Invisible Committee 102). Communes then form networks with other like-minded communes that potentially could "displace the institutions of society" (The Invisible Committee 102). The commune, not unlike Debord's workers' council, draws heavily on Marxist ideology, with echoes of the proletariat and Marxist communes lingering in both idealized revolutionary groups.

A first point of intersection where The Invisible Committee's commune differs from Debord's Situationist idea of the workers' council is in the idea of the general assembly. The Invisible Committee views assembly as "not a place for decisions, but for talk, for free speech exercised without a goal." (The Invisible Committee 122). They seem to have a very blatant stance against public delegate discourse, viewing it as ineffectual and even urging for the

“fantasy of a General Assembly” to be set aside in favor of an “assembly of presences” or rather, of actions (The Invisible Committee 123). This seems to originate in The Invisible Committee’s idea that a multiplicity of actions, not deciding on actions, should be the goal of the commune. Debord holds similar ideological sympathies, which is evident in his criticism of Marxism’s single-minded focus towards science and western rationality when Marx’s theory is fundamentally “*beyond* science”, with science “only preserved within” Marx’s theory “inasmuch as it is transcended by it” (Debord 52). However, he may have very different views here. In fact, Debord seems to promote the use of assembly as a way to organize communication between worker’s councils, as a method of “federating with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time” (Debord 86). This illustrates that The Invisible Committee has moved away from Debord’s ideology in a very stark way, placing far more emphasis on ‘actions’ instead of ‘the right action.’

Both Debord’s workers’ councils and The Invisible Committee’s communes execute power in relation to physical space, though in very different ways. For Debord, “The most revolutionary idea” is “the decision to reconstruct the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of the established workers’ councils” and the councils’ power is only effective if it “if transforms the totality of existing conditions, and it cannot assign itself any lesser task if it aspires to be recognized – and to recognize itself – in a world of its own design” (Debord 126-127). Debord seems to be suggesting that the power of the workers’ council is executed through the deconstruction and reconstruction (as in order to ‘reconstruct’ something, it must first be deconstructed) of a space to transform the social conditions of that space and establish the control of workers’ council. The Invisible Committee on the other hand, suggests something extremely different. For the commune, “it’s not about possessing territory. Rather, it’s

a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation and of solidarities to the point that the territory becomes unreadable,” communes “don’t want to occupy the territory” they “want to be the territory” (The Invisible Committee 108). The commune doesn’t seek to control the space to reconstruct it, but through their very existence become the space, in doing so making a space that is completely uncontrollable by outside authority. While these might not really seem all that different, because they’re doing very similar things, the ideology is clearly very different here, moving from Situationist ideology that seeks to clearly and directly transform what is by deconstructing it and then reconstructing it, with a more ‘postmodern’ ideology seeking to void authority through the projection an unending multiplicity of networks.

The Invisible Committee is much more directly in favor of using anonymity as a source of power, noting, “the longer we avoid visibility, the stronger we’ll be when it catches up to us” (The Invisible Committee 114). Debord, on the other hand, doesn’t have much to say on the matter. He merely refers to the “illusions” lost by the proletariat through the evolution of class struggle, and points to the “signs of a new and growing tendency towards negation in the more economically advanced countries” (Debord 84-85). But he never outwardly attacks or defends the notion of anonymity. Debord’s stance against the “accumulation of spectacles” which have allowed representation to replace life can easily be seen as counter to the multiplicity of anonymous actions that The Invisible Committee seeks to draw power from (Debord 12). His notion of the “generalized separation between worker and product” as obstructing the view of whether the job is done, could easily be extended to a perceived separation between the revolutionary and the revolutionary action which could then inhibit any conclusive change (Debord 21). However, it’s hard to argue that The Invisible Committee is perpetuating the spectacle when their goal is to interrupt the communication of information in an area to “make it

unreadable” (The Invisible Committee 108). In fact, The Invisible Committee’s goal seems to be ‘anti-spectacle,’ with the anonymity of the individual not separating the individual from their action, but separating the individual from the spectacle and allowing them to act as themselves.

For Debord, a large part of the power of the Workers’ Council seems to come from the ideas of the individual as he notes “Once embodied in the power of worker’s councils ... the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself, and in his own eyes the producer has himself as his goal. Only in this context can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in its turn” (Debord 87). But the language of The Invisible Committee alone shows they have a very different idea. In the last chapters of the book, particularly chapter twelve: ‘Get Organized,’ whenever referring to the function of communes, they always refer to the collectives they’re speaking of as ‘we’ – “How will *we* communicate?”, “*We* want to be the territory.”, “*We* must use all means at our disposal and rethink their uses – *we* ourselves being means.” (The Invisible Committee 105, 108, 112). As soon as they have established the commune as a framework that already exists, it is a collective that includes the author(s) for the remainder of the book. This dramatically illustrates that communes aren’t just a mythological ideal, but living breathing communities that are already here, and that we might already be a part of. However, it also emphasizes that the power of the commune comes from its community, that it’s the commune’s existence as a collective of individuals, and the shares truth among those individuals that gives it power. The product is no longer the ‘producer himself’ as Debord saw, but the ‘collective itself.’ Individuals no longer fight against the machine side by side, but a network of groups tied together overheat the machine and render it impotent.

This difference can also be seen in the terms themselves. Debord’s *worker’s* council puts emphasis on the fact that the council belongs to the workers, and that their individual selfhood is

what defines the group. It is the individual's council, with the proletariat as "the bearer" of the revolution (Debord 85). But The Invisible Committee's *commune* neglects that emphasis on the individual. The commune does not directly signal that it's owned by individuals, or that it is made up of a certain type of person, like Debord's *worker*. Going back to the definition of the commune, The Invisible Committee defines the formation of communes happening "every time a few people, freed of their individual straitjackets, decide to rely only on themselves" (The Invisible Committee 102). This notion of formation seems to give the commune more power, showing it as coming into being, not so much as being created and defined by a group of individuals. It also seems to evoke the idea that the individual is a societal illusion and a cage, with the notion that one must free themselves from the 'individual straitjacket' in order to make the decision to 'rely solely on themselves'. This seems to be a big change from Debord to The Invisible Committee, directly showing a change in how power is viewed through the terminology the authors use to describe their revolutionary groups. This might possibly be an illustration of an ideological shift prompted by the information age, which seemed to exacerbate Debord's idea of the spectacle with the introduction of the internet, information tracking services, and technological espionage using mass data collected from individual technology usage.

Further, the *commune* does not signal in any way the individuals that make it up on a terminological level. Again, there is no reference to the *worker* (the commune's roots in Marxism is a further avenue of critique to investigate here in a longer paper), like Debord's *workers' council*. This disconnection of the commune from the people who participate in it seems to align with The Invisible Committee's idea of *nothingness* as it pertains to power, where they say "To be socially nothing is not a humiliating condition, the source of some tragic lack of

recognition ... but is on the contrary the condition for maximum freedom of action” (The Invisible Committee 113). This ideology seems to be drawing power from putting emphasis on the commune itself and not the individuals that make it up, simultaneously increasing the power and effect of the ideological message and protecting the anonymity of those involved in crafting it. A great example of this is *The Coming Insurrection* itself. There is a kind of power of intrigue that comes with the anonymity of the author or authors. The emphasis is put on the ideas and the community that is formed between the readers who relate to those ideas and the author(s). In a way, The Invisible Committee is not the author(s) of the text, but the commune that is formed between the reader, the idea, and the author(s).

This dissonance between the Commune and the Workers’ Council is extremely interesting as, at these four points of intersection they often seem antithetical and very alike in the same moment – especially in the ways they approach power, anonymity, and individuality. The Workers’ Council seeks to destroy the multiplicity of illusions that is the spectacle, reconstruct spaces, and encourage the transparency and accountability of individuals to the whole, whereas the Commune encourages anonymity and divisive action of the individual, becoming spaces that cannot be controlled, and seeks to multiply communes and overload systems of communication until authority is completely disintegrated. In many ways The Invisible Committee could be argued to be wielding Debord’s spectacle for their cause, or perhaps even fighting the spectacle with more spectacle. But I offer a different claim. The contemporary moment of The Invisible Committee, and maybe more-so our own, offers a distinct opportunity for a complete rejection of the spectacle that has a spectacular effect. The lines of communication and the transmission of information is both increasing and being normalized exponentially. Fifteen years ago we lived in a society without social media, and now

we are a society utterly dependent on it. The more massive and normalized this routine of informational projection becomes, the more the effect of rejecting it will become exponentially more potent. At a certain point the only thing that can be fathomed as spectacular is a lack of spectacle entirely. The Invisible Committee diverges from Debord not by wielding spectacle to defeat spectacular society, but by envisioning and promoting the defeat of spectacle in a time where spectacle has become so massive and normalized that the vision of a world without it is the most spectacular thing possible.

Works Cited

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