

Lecture Notes
Talk on the “Tarnac 10”
Bluestockings Bookstore, New York City
11 November 2015

1. Bill Brown.

Editor, translator and publisher of *“I have spoken and saved my soul,”* which is the first book to bring together the public statements of the so-called Tarnac 10 – ten young men and women who have spent the last 7 years fighting against bogus charges that they are saboteurs and terrorists.

2. Thank Bluestockings – not only for stocking the book, but also for hosting this event.

3. Begin with an excerpt from a statement 3 November 2015 by several anarchists recently arrested under the second stage of “Operation Pandora,” which has resulted in dozens of searches and arrests in Barcelona and elsewhere in Spain.

(translation by the blog called “Insurrection News”):

The generic accusation against all 9 of us is “belonging to a criminal organization with terrorist aims.” Specifically we are charged with being part of ‘GAC-FAI-IRF,’ which as we all know is a concept that has been constructed by the police. A set of acronyms which they have quite calculatedly mixed together – the coordination of anarchist collectives (GAC) along with the ‘signature’ used internationally by some groups to claim acts of sabotage (FAI-IRF).

The construction of this organizational framework gives the police all of the repressive resources that the anti-terrorism laws provide: closed courts, greater legal uncertainty, much tougher sentences for comrades convicted of carrying out certain actions, isolation, special prison regimes, the criminalization of personal friendships / partners and relatives, amplified media coverage and social stigmatization etc. It is enough to say that during the whole process of our detention – from the moment we saw our homes being invaded and looted right up until we were brought before the judge – we did not even know what we were being accused of.

With the invention of the acronym GAC-FAI-IRF the police forces have designed a network with which they can potentially catch everything that moves within anarchist and anti-authoritarian circles. In the context of this new organizational framework, attending debates, taking part in assemblies, visiting imprisoned comrades or even simply having personal contact with a person suspected to be a member of the organization are sufficient reasons to be placed on a black list. It is this diffuse and extensive nature that gives real power to the anti-terrorist strategy: after each wave of repression, those who show solidarity with the detained will also be considered part of the organization and then arrested, and so on.

What’s striking about this statement is that it documents what appears to be the contemporary

Spanish version of the Tarnac Affair. Not isolated instances: also Greece, Italy, and Germany.

4. The backstory to the Tarnac Affair starts in 2005.

Anonymous publication of an anonymous pamphlet titled *L'Appel*, which has been translated as *Call*. (“The Appeal”).

(In 1941, *L'Appel* was the name of a French collaborationist journal published by the French League for Purification, Social Aid and European Collaboration.)

In hindsight, it seems clear that *The Call* was written by one, several or all of the comrades who'd just recently moved to small village of Tarnac, located in the “department” called Corrèze, way out on the huge plateau in south-central France. See map.

There were almost two dozen of them, it seems. They'd originally met each other in Paris, either through their university studies (graduate students), their political work in the “anti-globalization” and “social justice” movements, and/or their everyday life in squatted “autonomous” spaces.

Among these people was Julien Coupat, who'd been among the contributors to *Tiqqun*, which came out twice, in 1999 and 2001. A very unusual publication in its mixture of influences:

Marx and the situationists – concept of spectacle and rhetorical style

Foucault and Agamben – concept of biopower and historical analysis

Gershom Scholem and Jewish mysticism – the meaning of *Tiqqun* (restoration of cosmic harmony through human action) and the significance of the Messiah.

5. Around 2003 or 2004, a few of these folks (Benjamin Rosoux, Gabrielle Hallez, Aria Thomas and Muriel C-) had pooled their resources and purchased an abandoned farm in Tarnac, which they'd carefully selected.

Their immediate goals were to get the farm up and running again as a collective enterprise, to rehabilitate the village's only general store and to create a library and information center.

In the words of one of the “Friends of the Tarnac Commune,” writing in early 2010, “If we have settled in Tarnac,” and not some other place, “it is of course for the old traditions of resistance to central authority, working-class mutual assistance and rural communism that survive there. Our idea has never been for us to take refuge there, but on the contrary to regroup there so as to elaborate other social relations, to make livable relations with the world that are different than those that currently dominate, and precisely *to devastate the world.*”

6. *The Call* is clearly an attempt to go beyond *Tiqqun* and, I might say, a success.

“We must get organized,” *The Call* says, and by this its author(s) mean(s) three steps:

(1) secede or withdraw from Politics: rejection of all meetings, assemblies, demonstrations,

protests, demands and negotiations.

(2) lead a “sectarian” way of life: form sects.

The Call: “If the obsession of the founders of liberalism was the neutralisation of sects, it is because they united all the subjective elements that had to be banished in order for the modern state to exist. For a sectarian life is, above all, what is adequate to its particular truth – namely a certain *disposition* towards things and events of the world, a way of not losing sight of what matters. There is a concomitance between the birth of ‘society’ (and of its correlate: ‘economy’) and the liberal redefinition of the public and the private. The sectarian community is in itself a threat to what is referred to by the pleonasm ‘liberal society’. It is so because it is a form of organisation of the secession. Here lies the nightmare of the founders of the modern state: a section of collectivity detaches itself from the whole, thus ruining the idea of social unity.”

(3) not “escape to the countryside,” but straddle the division by living in both city and countryside.

“We neither want to leave for the countryside nor gather ancient knowledge to accumulate it. We are not merely concerned with the reappropriation of means. Nor would we restrict ourselves to the reappropriation of knowledge. If we put together all the knowledge and techniques, all the inventiveness displayed in the field of activism, we would not get a revolutionary movement. It is a question of temporality. A question of creating the conditions where an offensive can sustain itself without fading, of establishing the material solidarities that allow us to *hold on*.”

“Our strategy is therefore the following: to immediately establish a series of foci of desertion, of secession poles, of rallying points. For the runaways. For those who leave. A set of places to take shelter from the control of a civilisation that is headed for the abyss.”

Constitute a “political force” that has “its farms, its schools, its arms, its medicines, its collective houses, its editing desks, its printers, its covered trucks and its bridgeheads in the metropolis.”

7. Worth noting a certain intentional ambiguity.

“The ‘we’ that speaks here is not a delimitable, isolated we, the we of a group. It is the *we of a position*.”

Remain consistent: from *The Call* to *The Incoming Insurrection* to *To Our Friends*.

I know what they are trying to do here: attack the role of “the author” (the “proprietor” of ideas); avoid confusion between the message and the messenger; and defeat easy identification of the “leaders” (those who theorize and write).

But this fails: replacing one set of names with another (“the Imaginary Party,” “The Invisible Committee”) and defeats the purpose.

Meanwhile, something important is lost: the tie between what the members of the Invisible Committee are saying in their writings and what they are actually doing in their lives.

Obviously such a tie is useful to the authorities, who want to use writings as evidence of guilt (if not “thought crimes” in themselves). And refusing such a tie might be called an instance of “security culture.”

But the problem is that the demand for the existence of this tie is not an external demand, but their own:

“Everyone is daily enjoined to accept that the concern of the ‘link between life and thought’ is evidently naive, out of date, and shows at root a simple absence of culture. We consider this a symptom. For this evident is just an effect of that most modern liberal redefinition of the distinction between the public and the private. Liberalism works on the assumption that everything must be tolerated, that everything can be thought, *so long as* it is recognised as being without direct repercussions on the structure of society, of its institutions and of state power. Any idea can be admitted; its expression should even be favoured, *so long as* the social and state rules are accepted. In other words, the freedom of thought of the private individual must be total, as well as his freedom of expression in principle, but he must not *want the consequences* of his thought as far as collective life is concerned.”

To want the consequences, someone has to be there, doing the wanting: a certain group of people, at a certain place, at a certain time. – Not answered by “The Invisible Committee.”

8. In October 2005, just a few months after *The Call* was published, nearly a month a very intense rioting broke out in Paris and elsewhere in response to the killing of two teenagers Zyed Benna, 17 years old, and Bouna Traoré, 15, by the French police in the “banlieu” of Clichy sous Bois. Its hallmark: the burning of cars. These events were deeply troubling to one Nicolas Sarkozy, who’d been the Minister of the Interior since 2002, a post that he would retain until 2007, when he was elected President. An anti-68er.

9. The following year, 2006, was also full of disturbances – many of them centered upon the *Contrat Première Embauche* (“First Employment Contract”) was introduced at the end of 2005 and adopted in February 2006. Designed to make it easier to fire young workers, it triggered an intensely negative response from high school and college students from February to April, which included riots, blockades, and occupations.

The Call certainly had an influence on some of those events. Or, rather, its authors were active in them.

Bye-Bye St Eloi (2015): “The graffiti that appeared during the riots in Paris, Rennes, Rouen, Toulouse and elsewhere left no doubt as to the presence of taggers inspired by *The Call*.”

– a fact that didn't escape either the Ministry of the Interior or the *Renseignements Généraux*, short for the *Direction centrale des renseignements généraux*: the intelligence service of the French police; the equivalent of the American FBI.

St. Eloi also says, “even before 2002, the [RG's] ‘specialized documentation’ unit contained ample information about the majority of the accused, who were, back then, of an age that made them the objects of surveillance. Gabrielle Hallez, Benjamin Rosoux and Julien Coupat had their little files brought up to date, which might prove useful later. It was known that they had participated in several different demonstrations and social movements; that they had opened *squats*; that they even had a few friends here and there.” and “Rosoux, Hallez and Coupat were rewarded with the first entries in their files for participation in an occupation, the struggles in the Aspe Valley or the unemployed workers’ movement in 1998.”

10. In 2007, one, several or all of the members of the Tarnac Collective wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, signed it “The Invisible Committee” and got it published by Editions La Fabrique in Paris.

This book quickly found an audience – Alain Bauer, a French criminologist and security consultant for Sarkozy, discovered its existence, bought 40 copies, and distributed them among the highest echelons of the police forces and intelligence agencies.

The reaction was the same everywhere: the book was clearly “subversive” and its authors had to be identified and prosecuted. Why? Its praise for and advocacy of “insurrections” and “insurrectionary” activity, which, for the authors, includes riots, blockades, fighting with the police, occupations.

11. Recently merged with the Directorate of Domestic Surveillance, and in need of an inaugural coup, the RG tasked an agent named Christian Bichet – he'd been investigating the Tarnac Collective since 2002 – to write a report on the subject: “*Du mouvement contre le CPE à la constitution d'un réseau pré-terroriste européen.*” In the words of *Bye-Bye*: “Not surprisingly, apart from the inevitable little groups of Trotskyites in the process of splitting from each other, the novelty of this report was the fact that, thanks to the disturbed affectivity of Christian Bichet, it placed the famous ‘Coupat Group’ at the center of subversion in France.”

12. In response, in early 2008 surveillance of the group was intensified.

For example, when Julien and Yildune came to New York City in early 2008, they were tracked and surveilled the whole way. The authorities thought they'd caught them when there was an explosion at the Army Recruiting Center in Times Square, but they were wrong. Seven years later, it remains unsolved.

13. Why focus on the “Coupat Group”?

The Coming Insurrection and the influence it could have on rebellious youths in the banlieus and radical student milieus – but more than that. And here we come to why it is appropriate to have this event here, at Bluestockings, a feminist bookstore.

(1) Women played a decisive role in the collective: of the 10 people arrested, 5 of them are women.

(2) Many of the 10 are Jews – or at least have Jewish names – and, as we’ve seen, are interested in mystical Judaism, “kabbalism.”

(3) “Sectarians” in Correze, a *currently* Communist area that had actively fought against both the Nazis and the Vichy Regime during World War II.

Put all this together in a patriarchal, Catholic country with a long history of anti-Semitism and *witch-hunts*, and you’ve got something unacceptable.

14. Note: the Tarnac 10 themselves make this connection in *Bye Bye St Eloi*, and do so in accordance with Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, from which they quote several passages. (pp. 131-132).

15. On 8 November 2008, the authorities were caught napping:

Sabotage against the French National Railroad’s lines was carried out in several locations in France and Germany. Iron bars had been twisted into a particular shape and placed upon the overhead electrical lines (“catenaries”). When the trains hit them, the system was be overloaded and the trains had to shut down, causing hours of delays – and no injuries.

The action was immediately claimed by a German-language manifesto that claimed the action had been carried out in memory of Sebastian, an anti-nuclear activist who’d been killed by a CASTOR train. (Cask for Storage and Transport of Radioactive Material.)

16. But the French authorities were only interested in the Coupat Group, whose members were arrested on 11 November 2008 in Paris and Tarnac. Tipped off, the media was there to document the choreographed spectacle of dozens of heavily armed police officers and K9 corps.

The evidence against the Tarnac 9 – Mathieu Burnel, Julien Coupat, Bertrand Deveaud, Manon Glibert, Gabrielle Hallez, Elsa Hauck, Yildune Levy, Benjamin Rosoux and Aria Thomas – was flimsy: a fabricated police report by the DIST; *the Coming Insurrection*; and the contents of the library at Tarnac.

(That’s what got me: the library.)

(Spanish anarchists: usage of Tor or Riseup.net; “subversive” books; copies of the minutes from public assemblies.)

During the next 3 days, the French authorities worked frantically to bolster their case, eventually coming up with Jean-Hugues Bourgeois, a neighbor who claimed he’d heard Coupat say all kinds of cold-blooded things.

The Nine were charged with “criminal association for a terrorist purpose.”

The presumed ringleaders, Julien Coupat and Yildune Levy, were held indefinitely while the other seven were released under heavy judicial supervision. They were eventually released after six and three months, respectively.

17. Significantly: independent, self-generating support groups were formed in Tarnac, several other places in France, and in Germany and Belgium. In the course of his support for his friends, Christophe Becker was arrested – turning the 9 into 10.

In the USA, there was a support website, to which I started to contribute translations.

Though the support groups have all, apparently folded, and did so years ago (circa 2010 and 2011), local support for the Tarnac Collective remains very strong – even exemplary.

Just a few weeks ago, when an international team of investigators came looking for information on one of Julien Coupat’s relatives, they were greeted by a large contingent of masked people who, banding together, prevented their access.

18. The Tarnac 10 fought back – and eventually won. How?

Not by using tactics that would suit the extremism of The Invisible Committee (riots), but by using “traditional” Leftist ones.

-- Hired a legal team, a very good one.

-- Engaged in their own media campaign: at first as individuals (“in their own names”) and then as a group (once again using their “real names”) in defiance of the conditions that mandated that they not associate with each other in any way.

Along the way, there have been at least two very interesting collaborations: one between Benjamin Rosoux and Maka Kante (p. 31); the other between Yildune Levy and Giorgio Agamben (p. 47).

Interesting: the two who have appeared in the media the most (Mathieu Burnel, 12 times between Nov 2008 and December 2009, and Benjamin Rosoux, 13 times during that same time period) have successfully sought election to the Tarnac Town Council.

19. Between 2010 and 2014, the wheels came off the prosecution’s case.

Mark Kennedy, undercover political spy from the Metropolitan Police, who’d tracked Julien and Yildune (among many others), was both exposed and sued because he’d had romantic affairs with dozens of the women he’d been tasked with surveilling.

Christian Bichet, French intelligence agent employed by the *Renseignements Généraux*, who’d been building a dossier on the Coupat Group since 2002, was caught pretending to be the defendants, making claims about the case, and posting prejudicial information to no less than 7 different blogs.

Jean Hugues Bourgeois, witness to statements by Julien, revealed that he'd been pressured and had lied. It was also revealed that, in another matter, Bourgeois had been convicted of lying about threats allegedly made against himself.

Thierry Fragnoli, the “investigatory magistrate” assigned to the case, was caught leaking information about the case to dozens of French journalists, and had to recuse himself.

20. In August 2015, the new judge, Madam Jeanne Duye, rejected the prosecution's contention that the Tarnac 10 should be brought to trial as terrorists. Instead, they would be tried as mere vandals.

The prosecutor appealed this decision. And that's where things stand today.

21. The contents of the Tarnac 10's media campaign have been collected and translated into English in “*I have spoken and saved my soul.*”

Interesting: while these texts are clear, focused, coherent and convincing, those attributed to the Invisible Committee – *The Coming Insurrection*, but especially *To Our Friends* – are none of these things. Muddled, incoherent and self-serving.

As writers and theorists, they are better when confronted with the concrete specifics and worse when they concern themselves with abstract generalities.