

Lightning Rod: Full text of interview with Julien Coupat¹

The public prosecutor's office has once again kept the description "terrorism" in your case files and asks that you be sent back to prison. How have you taken this news?

In any other European country, a case such as this would have been dismissed long ago with the discreet apologies of the authorities. But we are in France and, as Alexandre Herzen² once wrote, "In France, when you go to court, you go back two or three centuries in time." In its rather serious historical autism, the magistracy obviously hasn't caught wind of the fact that the monarchy has fallen. It thinks it is capable of regulating everything from the wings, watching for signs from the [Royal] Court before it makes any of its decisions, wringing the neck of all logic and putting to death those convicted of treason. The Daumier-like humanity of the courtrooms³ would do well to become aware of the arrogance of its anachronistic existence. Or the magistracy could use its own eyes to see that François Hollande⁴ has the same profile as Louis XVI.⁵

Only three of you from the Tarnac group have been targeted. Have you ever hoped that the charges would be definitively dropped?

Ever since our arrest, we have always found hilarious the charges that have weighed upon us. And we also think it's hilarious that the public prosecutor's office, in order to prop up the accusation of 'terrorism,' relies in its indictment on a book that is widely available through FNAC,⁶ *L'insurrection qui vient*,⁷ and on the

¹ Conducted by *L'Observateur*, which published excerpts from it on 11 May 2015. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/coupat.pdf>. Translated from the French and footnoted by NOT BORED! 27 May 2015.

² A Russian writer and socialist (1812-1870).

³ Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) was a caricaturist who made satirical portraits of French lawyers and judges in the 1840s.

⁴ The current President of the French Republic, allegedly a Socialist.

⁵ The King of the French from 1774 to 1792, when he was deposed.

⁶ *Fédération nationale d'achats des cadres*, a huge chain of French retailers.

⁷ Translated as *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotexte, 2009).

anonymous testimony of a compulsive liar who confessed on French television⁸ to being manipulated by the anti-terrorist police. The prosecutors are the authors of failed crime stories. Full of “structures designed for clandestine subversion,” “terrorist plans,” and “attempts to destabilize the State through the destruction of the railway infrastructure,” their literature is manifestly the product of the meager imaginations of people who see life from the windows of their quilted offices. Their bad faith is laughable. But, as with the D104 testimony,⁹ the hilarity stops when you become aware that the magistracy, in its suspended little world, has the power to transform a gross falsehood into a “legal truth,” despite all evidence to the contrary – when you realize that all this is grotesque but that it works, and that it is now rising up to crush you. We haven’t fought, and we aren’t fighting now, to have some of kind of innocence be recognized or so that the justice system in its great goodwill deigns to give up its unfounded legal proceedings. We fight because they have tried and are still trying to destroy us, to definitely remove the political possibility that the State has made us an example of from the map. We fight for ourselves, for those close to us, for our friends and for all those who have expressed their sympathy for us, and all this despite the massive disproportion of the forces in play. Rather than take a prudent step backwards, the anti-terrorist apparatus – drunk with its recent popularity – insists on having the last word in its little courtrooms. It will learn that we aren’t like those who allow themselves to be done in, that we will always prefer to unleash the fires of hell than to allow ourselves to get trampled, and that we aren’t alone in this.

The most serious charge, that of “leading” a terrorist group, which had initially been made against you, has been dropped. No longer “leader,” you have become a simple “organizer.” How would you define your real role in the Tarnac collective?

Lightning rod.

Your lawyers have responded by saying that applying the broad description of “terrorism” opens the door to a “hyper-criminalization of social movements.” Is that your fear, especially after the [recent] adoption of the law on spying?

We live in a world that is heading towards a wall at break-neck speed and knows it. The facts attest to it as much as Hollywood productions do. Those who hold the

⁸ The *20-Heures* show on FT1.

⁹ The original police report that claimed that the cops had spotted Coupat and others near the location where sabotage was later discovered to have been committed.

machine's reins prefer things this way than to give up the least scrap of their power. They simply limit themselves to keeping the population asleep and filling their dreams with terrorist nightmares. The vote without qualms on the new heinous law that is said to be "about spying" is an excellent example. The fact that, 15 years after the *Patriot Act*,¹⁰ after the American Senate's report on torture,¹¹ after Snowden's revelations,¹² they are adopting such exorbitant measures [as the spying law of May 5] speaks to both the inflexible cynicism and the pathetic mimicry of the French rulers. They truly believe that, 15 years on, they will be able to renovate warlike neo-conservatism and that we are all too stupid, too cowardly and too passive to rise up against it. Obviously, the fact that the prosecutor's office, which had its indictment ready for months, chose to leak it to *Le Monde* the day after the vote on the law adds to the impudence of its gesture. This gesture says, "Yup, we're going make all of you conform through mass surveillance launched in the name of anti-terrorism, and you'll see the type of treatment that we reserve for those who resist us." It is true that the governors' only hope is to convince each person that there's no other choice than to follow them, that it is vain to believe that other worlds could be constructed, and that is madness to organize against them and suicide to attack them. This is why Tarnac must be decapitated. This is why the ZADs¹³ must be brought into line, whether it is through legal means or with the help of militias.

Your only interview with the press came in 2009, three months before the election of François Hollande. At the time, it was common on the Left to reproach Nicolas Sarkozy and Michèle Alliot-Marie¹⁴ for their instrumentalization of a "domestic enemy," their loose use of the concept of terrorism, not to mention a specific kind of relentlessness with respect to you. Would you say that the coming to power of the Socialist Party changed nothing where your situation is concerned and with the government's treatment of the "ultra-Left" as a whole?

The current Social-Democrat regime, as everyone can see, is in the process of successfully doing what Nicolas Sarkozy wasn't able to do when it comes to "austerity," anti-terrorism, the right to work and the repression of everything on its

¹⁰ English in original.

¹¹ Issued in December 2014.

¹² June 2013.

¹³ Zones À Défendre (the zones to be defended).

¹⁴ The French President and his Minister of the Interior, respectively (2007-2012).

Left. Noske¹⁵ has found his worthy postmodern descendant. But there's nothing specifically French about this: [Matteo] Renzi in Italy and [Barack] Obama in the United States have [recently] made the same political salad and, from the heritages of their respective Leftist organizations, they have only retained their authoritarian bent and their hypocritical rhetoric. The disappointments of Hollandeism are being added to those of Jospinism, Rocardism and Mitterrandism;¹⁶ and so perhaps it is finally time to understand what Mascolo¹⁷ established decades ago: the opposite of being Left isn't being Right; it is being revolutionary.

Rémi Fraisse, the young protestor who was killed this past October during demonstrations against the Sivens dam, was the first protestor killed by French cops in 30 years. What's your take on this event?

Precisely this: only a Leftist regime could kill a protestor, lie for days about the circumstances of his death, and end up expelling his comrades in struggle, thanks to the long arms of the FNSEA¹⁸ – and all this without causing a mass revolt. But the protestors who *did* respond to the murder of Rémi Fraisse, especially in Toulouse and Nantes, managed to trouble the government, which let nothing about them get out and sought to limit both their extent and the scope. Because these days, what's being expressed in the streets isn't some little group's obsession with fighting the police, but a widespread rage. That Saturday afternoon, all of the crowds in these cities said in a single voice, "Everybody hates the cops." Grandmothers suddenly started banging their handbags on vehicles with numbers printed on them. Fathers braved the assaults of the CRS.¹⁹ Passersby, their fears gone, charged the BAC.²⁰ This past autumn, which was also the moment that rioting broke out in Ferguson, [Missouri] the separation between the police and the population reached its widest point. You can't understand the way in which the government led the response to the attacks of January if you don't understand it strategically, as a calculated reaction to this extreme dissensus. Ever since then, it seems that the police are here to protect us. One only speaks of "national unity"

¹⁵ Gustav Noske (1868-1946) was instrumental in the crushing of the Spartacist revolt in Germany circa 1919.

¹⁶ All former Socialist presidents of the French Republic.

¹⁷ Dionys Mascolo (1916-1997), a French Marxist.

¹⁸ Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants d'Agricoles (the National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions).

¹⁹ Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (Republican Security Companies). Federal anti-riot cops.

²⁰ Brigade anti-criminalité (Anti-Crime Brigade). Federal anti-gang cops.

against a domestic enemy and, in truth, it is rarely the enemy that one has identified that one fights. What's happened since quite proves this to be true.

After the attacks in France this past January, especially at the offices of Charlie Hebdo, do you fear that anti-terrorism will become a substitute for politics and even a world-view? Do you already see signs of this?

Let's go back to the autumn. Any slightly lucid observer wondered how such a discredited regime could govern for its remaining two and a half years. January brought the answer: through anti-terrorism. Ever since our arrest, we haven't stopped saying that anti-terrorism has nothing to do with the fight against "terrorism"; that anti-terrorism doesn't really aim at those whom it strikes, but at the entirety of the population; that anti-terrorism is a question of intimidation. And it is certainly because of the accuracy of these statements that so many people whom we do not know and who do not know us [personally] have supported us, helped us, given us the strength to hold on. I believe that the entirety of the political maneuvers that followed the January attacks, and most especially the recent law on spying, have demonstrated conclusively that anti-terrorism is in fact a technique of government and an instrument of mass de-politicization. The people who, like us, have been locked up as "terrorists" are only the pretext for a much more general offensive. You've got to be blind or completely insincere to doubt it at present. Thanks to the sleight of hand of anti-terrorism, the government can present itself as the unique guarantor of what is collective – something that the government reduces to a confused mass of shivering atoms, to a statistical series of frightened individuals who are endowed with an illusory and sometimes fatal "liberty." The operation isn't all that complicated: we Westerners are beset by innumerable fears. More than the others, the West is a civilization of fear. Thus we must dissolve as a population, that is to say, each one of us must conquer our fears, stop putting up obstacles to life, and experience the communal in a heart-to-heart way; we are made of it and everything communicates through it. Where the communal goes, the government can't follow [*Par où passe le commun, le gouvernement ne passe pas*].

Today, an ideological battle rages around the events of 11 January.²¹ How did you experience those events, what do you remember of them?

Along with several comrades, we had the misfortune to land in France on the

²¹ The day on which Hollande and other world leaders marched in Paris in support of "unity" and freedom of speech.

morning of 8 January. We were returning from Mexico, where we'd gone to meet the Zapatistas. We'd left a rebel country, and we found ours in a state of siege. Every imaginable uniformed officer was on duty. On television and on the radio, all the scumbags who'd supervised our arrests strutted around as in a nightmare: people like Guéant, Bauer and Squarcini²² gave their opinions as well-informed experts in "security." On the one hand, *Charlie Hebdo* is a politically detestable publication. Long ago, the political line of *Charlie Hebdo* became so right wing that it was, I believe, the only publication that had its offices trashed during the demonstrations against the CPE.²³ On the other hand, if Cabu²⁴ was *Hara-Kiri*²⁵ and *L'Enragé*²⁶ for the 1968 generation, for my generation he was *Récré A2*.²⁷ How crazy would the world have to be if there was an armed attack against *Club Dorothée*? And so, two absurd blocs collided above our heads. And we were there, just below, buried under the [metaphorical] debris. I might add that one of the Kouachi brothers had shared the same judge with us: Thierry Fragnoli. He'd dismissed the guy's charges at the very moment that he was conducting investigations of us that were increasingly implausible. He's someone who has a sense of the Republic. Having seen anti-terrorism up close, we knew that people like Kouachi, Coulibaly and Merah²⁸ didn't slip through the cracks [*n'en étaient pas des ratés*], but, on the contrary, were pure products. We had things to say. We said nothing. We were prohibited from doing so. It didn't seem to us that, at that moment, there was anyone disposed to hear us. Everyone talked nonsense. There's no "spirit of January 11." What there is, is [on the one hand] a basically rather pacifist population that doesn't want to be involved in foreign wars, in the war of civilizations conducted by its government, and [on the other hand] a governmental apparatus that, in an obscene manner, turns a situation into an instrument of increased domination over the population. The catch is that the only way to get out

²² Formerly Sarkozy's Chief of Staff, Claude Guéant was the Minister of the Interior from 2011-2012. Alain Bauer is a professor of criminology who advised Sarkozy circa 2007. Barnard Squarcini is a high-ranking cop who served as Sarkozy's Director of Domestic Intelligence between 2008 and 2012.

²³ The *Contrat Première Embauche*, which was violently opposed by French youths in March 2006.

²⁴ Jean Cabut was a caricaturist who participated in *Hara-Kiri* and *Charlie Hebdo*. He was one of those murdered on 7 January 2015.

²⁵ Satirical French magazine founded in 1960.

²⁶ Short-lived satirical journal founded in May 1968 by Jean-Jacques Pauvert.

²⁷ Children's TV program (1978-1988) on which Cabu worked.

²⁸ The alleged perpetrators of the attacks upon the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, etc. on 7 January 2015.

of the chokehold in which we find ourselves is, in one way or another, to go to war against those who govern us, but this goes against all forms of pacifism; it requires courage, strategy and accomplices – many accomplices. We must remember that, in the 1930s, [French] pacifism led to collaboration with the Nazis. Pétainism²⁹ was a form of pacifism.

How do you – someone who has had dealings with the intelligence-gathering services for several years now – how do you explain the fact that, in the wake of the NSA scandal in the United States, the issues associated with freedom mobilize only a small part of public opinion?

My experience with the intelligence-gathering services is that they are patent liars, malevolent creatures and fanatics for weapons. And hearing Bernard Squarcini, whom I fortuitously happened to run into at a bookstore, make apologies to me and claim that he had nothing to do with the Tarnac Affair, won't convince me of the contrary. Such are the people to whom I will not entrust my daughter or my "security." As for "public opinion," I've never understood what the phrase is supposed to mean. If we're talking about completely fabricated polls that have been created at this request of this or that sponsor, or about a media apparatus that hardly shines for its attachment to the truth or for the depth of its questioning, then, like the vast majority of people, I pretty much know what to expect. What I hear every time I talk to someone in a bar or meet a hitchhiker, or when I listen to people who don't share my views, is an immense distrust for all that is said "publicly." In the past, the Internet and social networks acted like pressure-release valves, but today they're becoming advanced police tools. Incrimination for "supporting terrorism" exists so that any audacious expression produces the required terror. To really know what "people" think, there's hardly any other means than to reclaim public space physically and convene open assemblies. It is striking that, these days, when people go into the streets to talk and reflect upon things together, they don't waste time convincing themselves that what they are doing is revolutionary or that a revolution is needed. The facts that Snowden has been forced to take refuge in Putin's Russia and that [Julian] Assange, whom we went to London to meet, has no hope of leaving the tiny embassy in which he is cloistered say a lot about what the word "democracy" really means.

"The insurrections have finally come," the Invisible Committee wrote in À nos amis (published by La Fabrique).³⁰ But not yet in France, in any case, where the

²⁹ Philippe Pétain was the Chief of State of Vichy France.

³⁰ Translated by Robert Hurley as *To Our Friends* (Semiotexte, 2015).

radical Left isn't making any progress during elections or in the streets. How do you explain this? Why is the anti-immigrant extreme Right the only political force to profit from the political crumbling?

We live in radical times. This state of things cannot last; the choice between revolution and reaction becomes clearer. If the on-going decomposition essentially profits the fascistic forces, this isn't because "people" are spontaneously inclining towards them, but because the fascists speak up, make bets, take the risk of losing.³¹ But in the current situation, isn't there greater risk in *not* taking any risks? To return to the National Front: the entire landscape of classical politics is nothing but a vast field of ruins, and that includes the National Front, too. Until recently, it served a final illusion: that it could be a party against the parties, a politics against politics. Our unlimited reserves of cowardice always want us to believe that we can abandon the care of saving ourselves to some force other than ourselves, to some leader. But that's over. We must take care of our affairs ourselves. The wind is rising. We must try to live.

³¹ The following sentence, though it appeared in the excerpts from this interview that were published on 11 May 2015, does not appear in this, the full version: "We revolutionaries, on the other hand, are held back by the invisible strings of a tradition that we continually fear that we will betray."