

# From a Supper of Ashes<sup>1</sup> to Embers of Satin (On the Riots of November 2005 in France)

by Les Amis de Nemesis<sup>2</sup>

No more tomorrows,  
Embers of satin,  
Your intense heat  
Is the [only] duty.

Arthur Rimbaud. *A Season in Hell*

Many of the remarks made by the inhabitants of the banlieus,<sup>3</sup> rioters or not, and related by the press, hit the bull's eye with respect to the crisis that comes to manifest itself in their cities and forces one to perceive that in these remarks there is an unusually well-developed degree of lucidity. The “dump-city” phenomenon is so clear and massive that no one can be deceived on the subject – without wanting to be so, for more or less shameful reasons. But here one touches upon a class of things that capitalist society, if it can prevent one from understanding them, can in no way modify them. Any “improvement” would imply fundamental transformations that are incompatible with the very nature of this society; this is why it is absurd to speak of the “creation of new job markets” at the moment when the old ones are disappearing very rapidly in all of the industrialized countries; or of “raising the level of individual development,” while more developed individuals would have more needs and desires, which would be even more difficult to satisfy, and such people would be capable of expressing their anger in a more diversified and contagious fashion; or of “raising professional education higher,” while education does not provide employment and thus one would simply have unemployed workers who are more specialized than before; etc. etc. One cannot “improve the lot” of a population *condemned by the movement of value* (that is to say, by the rarefaction of economically necessary human labor and by the necessity of only exploiting faraway and cheaper laborers) and [condemned] by the “political ideas” that see to the perpetuation of these necessities (the “ideas” that are no longer ideas and the “political men” [politicians] who no longer have the right to have ideas, since real ideas would necessarily set aside the *business plan*<sup>4</sup> of “society,” that is to say, of capital). If

---

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Giordano Bruno's *Ash Wednesday Supper* (“La Cena de le Ceneri”), published in 1582. In 1600, Bruno was accused of “Atheism” and burnt at the stake; his ashes were scattered to eradicate all traces of him. Note the inscription on the statue of Bruno in the Piazzini dei Fiori in Rome: “Farewell ye ashes. Yet in these ashes is the seed that reneweth the whole world.”

<sup>2</sup> Unattributed (Jean-Pierre Baudet), dated 13 November 2005 and published online by *Les Amis de Nemesis* (the Friends of Nemesis). Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the NOT BORED! website (notbored.org) in 2007. Footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

<sup>3</sup> The outskirts of Paris, dominated by low-income housing blocs.

<sup>4</sup> English in original.

these durable and intangible impasses demonstrate anything, it is the fact that the question is no longer changing things within society but changing society itself.

The imbecilic Ségolène Royal,<sup>5</sup> who has never left the bourgeois-bohemian horizon of the 6th arrondissement, recently proposed the re-establishment of the national [military] service “to limit and structure the young people,” and it is Chirac who would straddle such a nag:<sup>6</sup> that is to say, these are the summits of strategic and social thought that the political cadres seek to climb. If one adds to this the generalized expulsion of all those who aren’t as fair, tall and dolichcephalic<sup>7</sup> as Nicolas Sarközy,<sup>8</sup> one has seen all of the “solutions of tomorrow,” which are precisely those that, after decades of false humanism, are well known to be the solutions of the day before yesterday.

The forced lucidity of the population and the necessary lies of the “political” cadres thus become the antipodes of a line that becomes longer and longer, more and more taut, and more and more fragile: a contradiction of the system that becomes accentuated. Two circumstances attenuate this promising effect, which resides in the particular character of the insurgent sphere (the blacks and Arabs), on the one hand, and in the objective limits or boundaries that this sphere intends (is it a question of a will to break *with the market system* or only a will to break *with its inequalities*, of which one has not yet understood that they are intrinsic to it?) on the other hand. These are the two factors that, for years, have hindered the revolt movement from starting a revolution, the factors that in fact aim at deflecting this evolution towards its contrary: towards the impossible quest for integration or, even worse, towards a civil conflict between fragments of the population. The tactics defended by the various “politicians” always aim at realizing one or the other of these perspectives of survival for the dominant system.

If theoretical critique has a role to play in such a context, it would thus – as its top priority – attack these two obstacles to the greatest possible extent: reduce the opposition between “ethnic” groups (but in a different fashion than that of superficial and laughable anti-racism) and show the impossibility of a generalized “integration” (the production of human waste<sup>9</sup> is inseparable from the market system and especially its current backwards phase). Thus, theoretical critique can contribute by blurring the limited character<sup>10</sup> of the conflicts that will succeed one another.

The media and the other managers of public speech have obviously set into relief, to the point of nausea, the undesirable repercussions of “blind” violence on the totality of the population, deprived of its buses and places of work, finding its cars in ashes or awoken in the middle of the night by the CRS or firefighters. What could one say without falling into a sterile moralism that would be a kind of curfew of the spirit for it alone?

We can say that, on the one hand, the dominant system is no longer – as in the *Ancien Régime* or the strong, national State – a centralized system that possesses a “seat of power”

---

<sup>5</sup> A “socialist” politician.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Chirac would assume the leadership (ride the horse) of this service. The French word employed here (*bidet*) also suggests that Chirac would squat over this toilet.

<sup>7</sup> Possessing a lengthened cranium, that is to say, a long head.

<sup>8</sup> Then the Minister of the Interior; dark and short, and with an oddly shaped head.

<sup>9</sup> *déchets humains*: not feces, but wasted humans.

<sup>10</sup> *Author’s note*: Beyond the limits indicated, it is necessary, on the other hand, to emphasize the remarkable capacity for ultra-rapid extension that this revolt showed, in France, of course, but also in its contagion to other countries.

against which the *jacqueries*<sup>11</sup> must march, with pitchforks and scythes in hand; that there is no longer even a network of factories that the workers can blockade or appropriate, but a diffuse order of which the manifestations are everywhere, like the market values that constitute themselves through all of the moments of the economical cycle (through production, circulation and consumption of commodities), and in which human beings vegetate without jobs and especially without income; that the offensive against the system consequently recognizes that system's existence everywhere, in the supermarket as in the school, in a Public Treasury building as in the auditoriums, in automobiles and the means of transportation; and that it seems easy to understand, at least after the fact, that to undertake one or the other of these objectives inevitably involves annoyances for third parties: there hardly exists an accessible place where *only Power* can be hindered or attacked.<sup>12</sup>

[One could say] that, in the cities to which the market system has relegated the unemployed Arab and black descendents of those whom it brought here several decades ago, during the epoch of its industrial expansion and its need for a badly paid workforce, the youth do not have the least hope of one day emerging into the normalcy pushed so much as marketable survival. And that, in these conditions, which the *punks*<sup>13</sup> summarized exactly so long ago (“*no future*”),<sup>14</sup> it is illusory to expect from this mass of desperate people a “constructive” strategy.

[One could say] that the system, which rests upon violence at all levels of its national and international functioning, has propagated – as never before in the decades of the orgy of the market – the image of violence as the unique means of expression for everyone and that this system is very ill-advised to be astonished that the public has learned its lesson [from it]; that, having deliberately programmed the degradation of individuals, which is profitable for it alone, the market economy has known, like every other system of domination before it, to add subjective, mental conditions to the objective, material conditions of poverty, to the point of massively fabricating individuals who are completely deprived of the possibility of humanizing themselves, even in the widest sense of the term; and that it appears obvious that the system that has produced these neo-human beings will, one day or another, encounter them again along its road; therefore, if the system does not want them, it is itself that it must abolish. Paradoxically, what one must retain are, rather, the ideas that the objective degradations accompany a subjective amelioration, as in all instances of open conflict, and that – things being what they are – it is only in questioning the dominant order that those to whom one has refused all power, and thus all power to constitute themselves as subjects, can accede to the condition of being human. By being insurgents against the absence of their lives, the young banlieu residents will not show that they are human wreckage, but, on the contrary, that they no longer want to be reduced to such. And, faced with such a project and such a necessity, only fools will deplore the fact that they make several mistakes in their syntax.

Contrary to what the media advances, those who have stayed close to these famous “savages of the banlieu” can ascertain that nowhere in other spheres of society is one capable of

---

<sup>11</sup> peasant revolts.

<sup>12</sup> Like a supposedly “terrorist” organization, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Hamas in Gaza, power has “embedded” itself everywhere, in and among the “civilian” population, as a form of protection.

<sup>13</sup> English in original.

<sup>14</sup> English in original. (“There is no future in England’s dreaming”: the Sex Pistols, “God Save the Queen,” 1977.)

encountering – among the youngest people – such lucid and well-argued comprehension of society, the origins of the troubles, the political exploitation that power can make of them, the function of racism as an indispensable factor in social peace (ethnic warfare as a distraction from the class struggle). What is thus verified, and in the most pronounced fashion, is the fact that such encounters permit one to understand that the spectacle, as one might expect of it, gives an inverted image of these populations, dressing them up as scarecrows for the “respectable citizens,” and seeks to avoid at any cost what such dialogues allow on both sides (the ghetto side and the town side), that is to say, a better comprehension of the by-no-means particular misery from which some people suffer (poverty, survival deprived of everything, *non-participation in the economic cycle*), but the universal misery from which all suffer (the necessity of working, *submission to economic dictatorship*), which would be the most serious threat to the system today. Nowhere or almost nowhere among the young rioters does one find the fascination with violence, the taste for brutality, [and] the nihilism deprived of thought that, in the dominant imagery, constitutes the panoply of the rioter and that the commodity persists in promoting in times of “social peace”; and these people are precisely the supposed “barbarians” who are obsessed by *respect*, by that *civilized* quality that they do not encounter anywhere and that they experience as fundamentally absent from a “society” constituted by factories, supermarkets and police stations. Faced with them, it is, in sum, only the old hatred of the *firmly established* for the dangerous classes that expresses itself everywhere and that is mediatically<sup>15</sup> maintained to explain to the more and more proletarianized part of the population (those who still do not live in ghettos) that, faced with these *barbarians*, the “simple people” – along with the “privileged” ones – have a common enemy, against which the State, quite fortunately, will protect them (and in this, the banlieus play the same spectacular role on the national level that terrorism plays on the international level). Moreover, as one expected, the radicalism of this anger was identified by [George] Bush with the schemes of [Osama] Bin Laden, and by [Vladimir] Putin with the Chechen “Fifth Column,” thus providing irrefutable proof of the *absolute* lack of seriousness in the language used by the different Powers. *La Place Beauvau*<sup>16</sup> would also love to implant the illusion that the November 2005 riots were troubles caused by drug dealers or Islamist extremists: whereas, from all evidence, these two associations detest above all else drawing the attention of the police and having their networks exposed. No one among the owners of the official lie can accept seeing the truth: a negation precisely determined by the existing order, the obvious expression of the social exclusion that is inherent in the movement of capital.

The repressive measures, which apparently will be ultra-severe, will only reaffirm the politics of scorn that were already at the center of the origin of the conflict, and thus will assure the recurrent character of the phenomenon. The pure ferocity of the police has the musty smell of 1905:<sup>17</sup> it proved that the dominant class no longer wants to envision anything else, and that it can no longer make any compromises with the truth. Wedged between the threat of increasing international competition, the greedy desire to grow despite all of the profit made so far, and the obligatory management of reserves of unemployable proletarians, the dominant class seeks any occasion that allows it to unburden itself of the latter. The expulsion of all of them being hardly feasible, it must find other but no less inhuman procedures. One can be assured of it: there will never again be a lull.

---

<sup>15</sup> There is no equivalent in English for the French word used here, *médiatement*.

<sup>16</sup> The location of the French Ministry of the Interior, which is in charge of domestic security.

<sup>17</sup> The year that revolution overthrew Czarist Russia.