“It seems to me nonetheless necessary to note the following: the word chosen to describe the desired process, destitution, is not especially convincing, not stirring enough and too tied to what it has to be separated from.”[1] This is Jean-Luc Nancy replying to the call published by Julien Coupat and Eric Hazan in late January 2016 in Libération titled “Pour un processus destituant: Invitation au voyage” (In Favour of a Destituent Process: An Invitation to Travel).[2] Nancy’s reply, “Pour répondre à l’appel de Julien Coupat et d’Eric Hazan” (To Reply to Julien Coupat and Eric Hazan’s Call), was published a little more than a fortnight after Coupat and Hazan’s initial sweeping critique of nation-state based democracy and the French Left’s attempt to mobilize the political public sphere, denouncing president Hollande’s proposal to revoke the citizenship of convicted terrorists in the wake of the attack in Paris on November 13th, in which 130 people were killed. Nancy was well disposed to Coupat and Hazan’s call and their critique of politics, but had doubts that destitution was the next step in the process.

A brief note on the following presentation: I have opted for a montage in which I put the two texts side by side, outlining their arguments and differences. I think this is the right way to proceed in the present situation, where the camp and the state of exception are the starting points; each day refugees are ‘disappearing’ trying to reach Europe, fleeing from the wars, terror and economic strangulation pursued by the Western powers in an attempt to kill the ‘Arab Spring’. The negation of capital does not (yet?) produce a critique that can clear up the philosophical situation. Any attempt to clarify the positions must thus be established horizontally and with focus direct on the positions themselves. I end the exposé with a brief historical comparison.

Destitution

In their text Coupat and Hazan, the young Left communist accused of sabotaging a high-speed train and writing L’insurrection qui vient (The Coming Insurrection) and the old publisher turned public intellectual, start off by denouncing the French Left’s attempt to critique Hollande’s turn to the Right and bid for a new, Left-wing presidential candidate. This all amounts to nothing but a new round of political in-fight, Coupat and Hazan note. “They [the Left] want to continue believing in politics”. But politics is dead and the opposition
between left and right has no meaning whatsoever today, Coupat and Hazan argue, rejecting these debates and the attempt to reignite a dampened Leftist or socialist political program: “We have no reason to endure a year and half of electoral campaigns, when it’s already set to end in some democratic blackmail. To stop being subjected to this countdown any longer it’s enough to go against the clock: We have instead a year and a half to be done with the sad domesticity of aspiring leaders and end the comfortable role of spectator to their race. To denounce, take sides, [and] try to persuade serves no purpose.”

Coupat and Hazan rearticulate this critique in a manifesto-like mode where they argue that any attempt to restore meaning to politics or do things differently will miss what is in fact already taking place, namely an abandonment of politics, with a catchphrase: Time is up for politics. It is already over. Politicians have themselves emptied politics of any meaning whatsoever, the course of affairs in Greece, where one election followed another without changing the terms of the bailout is telling, Coupat and Hazan write, quoting the German Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble’s statement that “we cannot let elections change anything”. But more importantly than politicians showing the futility of politics themselves, people all over Europe have stopped being interested in politics, are voting for Right-wing parties, or not voting at all. “Nobody [...] cares”, Coupat and Hazan write, continuing the analyses of Tiqqun and The Invisible Committee, where politics has collapsed but has not been replaced by anything, continuing to live on as its own shadow with politicians and journalists pretending to ‘do politics’, or show images of people doing politics: debating, discussing, negotiating. But the electorate has already left the building (of parliamentary democracy). And what might look like passivity or political fatigue is in fact, Coupat and Hazan argue, when seen from the proper perspective, from outside the system, an active process of “destitution”. The insurrection is already taking place, at least as an inarticulate refusal of ‘proper’ politics. Coupat and Hazan talk about an “interior desertion” that is “diffuse but wide as a continent”. Their proposal is, of course, to escalate the process. Instead of engaging in party politics or trying to infuse meaning into politics in the usual sense we must deepen this collapse, the young activist philosopher and the old publisher write.

Coupat and Hazan articulate a critique of politics we could call Situationist, where politics is a spectacle, democracy a ruling representation where politicians are performing ‘politics’ in front of passive voters disconnected from any kind of real participation. In line with The Invisible Committee’s stance, it is a Situationist or a Creative Autonomist vocabulary the two are using, and not a more Marxist critique like that which Marx himself formulated in the 1840s, in texts like “Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel ‘Der König der Preußen und die Sozialreform. Von einem Preußen’” (“Critical Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’”) where he criticized the idea of political revolution in favour of social revolution.31 Coupat and Hazan refrain from using more explicitly Marxist terms and do not engage in a critique of the separation of politics and political economy, where a formal political equality masks social and economic inequality. Instead they rework a Situationist critique of democracy, where the opposing parties of parliamentary politics are shown to be in cahoots and performing a spectacle whose function is to transform people into voters bereft of any kind of agency when it comes to changing the world. Elections are nothing but traps for fools, as Sartre famously put it in 1973.34

Coupat and Hazan have had enough of the usual ‘political’ procedures, being for or against this or that candidate, for or against this or that law, and instead propose to engage in what they term a process of destitution, where one refrains from participating in a system whose primary function is clearly the preservation of the status quo. It is time to do something different, time to break away from the rigmarole of modern politics; it is not a question of constituting something but of dismissing, ridiculing the empty gesture of voting and leaving the political public sphere. And this is already taking place all over the world according to Coupat and Hazan. Not constitution, but destitution. This is “not an attack, but a movement of continual withdrawal, an attentive, gentle and methodological destruction of any politics that hover over the sensible world.”

Coupat and Hazan do not really enter into any detailed discussion of the notion of destitution in their call, preferring to advance a critique of politics and French national democracy, but the term plays a central role in À nos amis (To Our Friends), the
second book by The Invisible Committee, which came out in 2014. There, destitution is described as the attempt to exit from the vicious circle of constituent and constituted power, where revolution always ends up creating a new power. The revolutionary project must refrain from establishing a new sovereign. Revolution has to be rethought as destitution, where one deprives power of its foundation without erecting it anew. Destitution is thus an attempt to undo both the constituent moment that creates a new order and the restoring moment that repairs and tries to recreate the connections between the constituent and the constituted, the pre-existing constitution. The problem is of course that both the constituent and the constituted power are repressive and more or less immediately require some kind of defence and persecution of the enemies of the constitution. This is the vicious deadlock Walter Benjamin already talked about in his “Kritik der Gewalt” (“Critique of Violence”), asking how we might unlock the tight interlacing of law and violence. It is a question of developing modes of life in which law and power (constituent and constituted) no longer have a monopoly in defining life, the world and its objects. How do we create a political power that suspends the law’s power on people and instead make it possible to do something different without recreating a particular political order.

This is the ambitious task Coupat and The Invisible Committee have set for themselves. They go about this task combining ultra Leftism and Situationism with a large dose of Foucault. This mix sometimes results in some slippery slopes on which it’s not always clear what the Committee means when they write about contemporary power, whether it is the contemporary capitalist system or power as cybernetics, an almost all encompassing but invisible network-based figure with a capital P. It is not always clear in the analysis how we get from capital accumulation to sovereignty, from the creation of surplus value to the nation state’s exclusions. The project of course being always to block power (capital and the state), or to somehow slip free of its meshes, disappearing from its maps.

The attempt to think destitution is an ongoing collective endeavour already being tested and put into practice in France and Italy in the construction of autonomous communes, most famously the ‘zone à défendre’ in Notre-Dame-des-Landes outside Nantes, where people are blocking the construction of a new airport. The Committee is heavily involved in this struggle. The more ‘theoretical’ part of the development of the notion of destitution is also a collective process – À nos amis circulated among a large readership before being finished and sent to the press – in which, among others, Giorgio Agamben is also active. Agamben has recently picked up the term and put it to use in the last volume of the Homo sacer series, L’uso dei corpi (The Use of the Body). Agamben uses the term in more or less the same way as the Committee, describing a negative operation that deactivates existing distributions, and undoes the law and its separations. Destitution is a destructive act where one blocks power using whatever is at hand making room for another relationship with the living body. Whereas À nos amis is a kind of compte rendu of the new cycles of revolts they foresaw in their first book L’insurrection qui vient (2007), Agamben is of course primarily engaged in philosophical analysis of sovereignty, where destitution becomes another term for in-operativity or form-of-life, attempts at describing man’s original openness or resistance towards predicates or definitions. In-operativity thus being both a deactivating operation and the final state of humanity after the withering away of production and self-reproduction.

**Situation**

Nancy is quick to respond to Coupat and Hazan’s call and starts off by saying that he is indeed very well disposed towards testing other forms than the usual political ones. But he is equally quick to sound alarm bells at the nature of the term Coupat and Hazan present as a new rallying call. Nancy is reluctant to go down the road of “negative terms”. He is in complete agreement with Coupat and Hazan regarding the bankruptcy of elections and party politics, it is indeed necessary to stop being “accomplices in the political farce”. He writes: “We are many that know more or less clearly that politics has been defeated, dissolved in commerce, on the Stock Exchange and no doubt also in mutations even deeper than these frequently mentioned figures.” Politics is dead. Nancy is in total agreement with Coupat and Hazan. But what is to be done then? Nancy hesitates, he is not sure Coupat and Hazan’s proposal is the right one. Destitution is filled with
problems according to Nancy. Not only is it too negative, it is last in a long list of negative concepts that almost inevitably ends up confirming what it set out to challenge. “We know very well that to discount [démarquer] something that you want to get rid of very often risks making it more marketable [remarquer].” The danger of recuperation is massive, Nancy warns. Destitution remains too attached to the sphere of politics, he writes, the sovereign is precisely left destitute by the people. We remain within the framework of the same political procedures. Although Coupat and Hazan do not rely on its terms, the operation remains the same, it is the same function, Nancy writes. And this is a political function. Destitution “requires the constitution of a supra-political authority”. Nancy warns against raising “all the questions that has to do with constituting powers and instituting imaginations”.

Destitution is not the right word; it remains within the framework of negation and subtraction, Nancy writes. In places he is somewhat opaque and does not develop this critique of negation, but it would be reasonable to suppose that he is referring to the tragic history of the revolutionary movement in the 20th century. The long lists of failed attempts to create a different world from Russia 1917 to Berlin 1919, Barcelona 1936, Budapest 1956 etc. In each their own way these events come down to us with a heavy dose of despair, their promises and hopes crushed by counterrevolutionary forces or turned upside down by the revolutionaries themselves. The visions of the revolutionary tradition turned out to be prone to extremely violent political practices in the period from 1917 to 1989. Destitution risks bringing us back to these visions of a world to come, or more precisely a negative task to be undertaken, conjuring up images of destructive gestures and violent manoeuvres. The attempts to create a new world ex nihilo not only never took place but always led to extreme brutality and suffering, as Nancy has argued in La communauté désœuvrée (The Inoperative Community). Nancy is sceptical of any attempt to remove all obstacles in order to erect a new structure, and destitution looks a lot like the latest negative move in the repertoire of destructive revolutionary gestures, which so often turned out to be a horrid inversion of capital’s own modernising terror, as part and parcel of the capitalist modernity it half-opposed, half-embodied.

The problem no doubt also has to do with the difficulty of distinguishing between positions, from the 1930s we know how easy it is to stage the revolutionaries as fascists, as the Stalinists did to the anarchists and POUM in the Spanish Civil War. Today this takes place within the framework of the state of emergency and the war on terror where anti-systemic movements are being labelled terrorists. Already before 9/11 this was the order of the day when the Italian state came down hard on the alter-globalisation movement in Genoa July 2001, where Carlo Giuliani was shot and subsequently run over by the police. The ability of the ruling order to complicate or distort the revolutionary perspective has to be taken into account; Nancy is well aware of the function of the lie in the confrontation between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces. The lie makes it very difficult to advance or present any kind of revolutionary position. The developments in North Africa and the Middle East speak volumes to this, from the alliance between the mosque and the army in Egypt, which broke down surprisingly quickly and left the army and the old regime in power, to Assad and Putin’s attempt to transform the Syrian revolution into a civil war with extremely complicated fault lines where large parts of the so-called opposition took on an Islamic shape. The lie is probably one reason for Nancy’s cautious reply. It is complicated, Nancy warns Coupat and Hazan. Who knows what will happen when we unleash the furies? So often in history, revolutionary projects turned out to be further violence and more misery for the wretched of the earth. There’s also a humanitarian perspective lurking somewhere in Nancy’s answer. It is always important to prevent violence and further suffering.

We need to critique politics and stop reproducing the democratic spectacle. Nancy is in agreement with Coupat and Hazan on this but is reluctant to go further. Or at least to follow them in the transformative process they set out on. What does destitution mean, he asks. Destitution is overthrow and avoidance. It is a process of destruction. Thus de-stitution is just the last entry in the long lists of words that begin with de-’, Nancy writes mentioning de-construction, dés-œuvrement or dis-sensus. These are all negative words that all too easily lose their power when they are disconnected from the specific use Derrida, Blanchot and Rancière put them to in their particular analyses.
“Words quickly lose their power”, Nancy writes, warning against turning them into programs. Derrida warned against the use of the word deconstruction, Nancy says, and we would be ill advised to dismiss his cautious approach.

Nancy’s critique of Coupat and Hazan’s analysis, or his reluctance to go from a critique of politics to destitution is interesting, and in many regards perfectly understandable. As Nancy has shown several times, most recently in the recently published Que faire? (What is to be done?) (2016), the necessity of doing something is forcing itself upon us, it’s on everybody’s lips, we have to do something. There is indeed a lot that has to be done, a lot that has to be undone or made differently. But the temptation to do something, the revolutionary desire, the need to do something or just anything, Nancy warns, often not only risks foreclosing the question before it has even been posed, but often even ends up consolidating what had to be deposed in the first place.

In accordance with his deconstructive approach Nancy insists on the necessity to rethink the notion of politics beyond any kind of program or project where we already know the answer to the question (or even what it is the question poses), as if merely asking ‘what is to be done?’ supposes having the answer readymade. As if it is just a question of setting to work, realising the political program.

Today we are bereft of a program and we are, for better or worse, without the self-assurance Lenin could exhibit in 1902, when it was a question of the right means to achieve an already stated and clearly defined goal, namely the abolition of capitalism and the coming into being of socialism and a different distribution of material goods. Today we are in a different situation, Nancy argues, without the confidence Lenin had. Hegel has, so to speak exited through the gift shop, the proletariat is missing or at least has gone into hiding. That’s the challenge. There are no ready-to-be-implemented answers; the passage from thought to action is anything but straightforward. Transforming the world cannot be a matter of realising an already given interpretation of the world, Nancy repeats. It is important to avoid the teleological discourse implicit in the question ‘what is to be done?’, where we have finished analysing and now must proceed to action.

Nancy is left in a position in which he both tries to be affirmative to the question, but at the same time displaces it, trying to introduce or locate an open-ended dimension in the question, where both ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ are somehow held open, clearing the way for a kind of infinite responsibility for the already existing world. This is of course why Nancy ends his answer to Coupat and Hazan writing that the process is in fact already underway. It is about being responsible now and to the here and now, being present to the present, so to speak. Being affirmative to the openness of the situation, freed from the shackles of the past and open to the uncertainty of the future. This is freedom for Nancy, not as a political project but as an existential condition. This is Nancy’s existentialism and it seems fitting that he ends his short reply by proposing to substitute the term ‘destitute’ with two terms that played an important role in Sartre’s existentialism, namely ‘situation’ and ‘engagement’. He writes: “Let us prefer then, to do something different. Neither destitute, nor constitute, nor restitute. It is neither sufficiently clear nor sufficiently lively. I would like to say, because of its resonance, that ‘situate’ would do. But that would be nostalgic (to death/enough to kill). Let’s try simply, as this is a call, to respond, which in good Latin would mean engaging oneself.” This is as far as Nancy is willing to go. Destitution is too far. Destitution is dependent on the toppling of the sovereign, it cannot but be contaminated by the instance it wants to get rid of.

Urgency

Nancy affirms Coupat and Hazan’s critique of both the political situation in France and of politics in general, but, nonetheless, disentangles himself from the process that seems to have been initiated by Coupat and Hazan’s gesture, where destitution, according to Nancy, remains somehow attached to the negative impetus that has to be displaced. Nancy is afraid that this process will end in a kind of hall of mirrors, where the destituting act recreates an authority (that can destitute or exclude as a new sovereign). It is crucial for Nancy that the infinite is not transformed into a program or work. If there’s a kind of communism in Nancy it is a fact, something in existence, it is not something that has to be realised or put into a program. The risk is that nothing happens, that he misses the opening, that
his analysis of the ontological conditions always merely postpones ‘what is to be done?’. That the question is always both affirmed ‘yes, we have to do something’, ‘we have to create the world today’ and deconstructed and thus suspended because all identities are violent programs or œuvres.

What, then, of the historical conjuncture? It is important to note that Nancy’s response was written before the Nuit Debout movement began, but the French authorities were already engaged in low intensity civil war with the so-called European refugee crisis in full bloom. So time is pressing, “nous sommes dans l’urgence” as Nancy’s good friend Lacoue-Labarthe once wrote. \[11\]

“Time’s air is sparkling” wrote Paul Valéry in “Le cimetière marin” (“The Graveyard by the Sea”), suggesting that time is always creating sparks which differ in size and direction according to the situation, there can thus be something emergent or pressing in a particular historical situation. \[12\] We have to act and act now. We are responding to something urgent (and not only building towards the future, ‘re-treating’ the political, as Nancy would have it). There are tasks it is impossible to refuse, where you have to take a stand and choose sides, there’s a barricade and there are just two sides to the conflict (there are, of course, a lot of different positions but when it comes down to it, it’s a question of for or against the revolution). Marx talked about these tasks as “the tasks of the time” [die Aufgaben der Zeit]. \[13\] And as we know from testimonies from revolutionaries (the Paris Commune, Russia 1917, the Spanish Civil War, the Syrian Revolution etc.) there is a particular temporality in revolutionary processes. It is as if time becomes different. In his Blood of Spain, Ronald Fraser quotes a revolutionary comparing the revolution to toothache: “You don’t eat, hardly sleep, you forget where you’ve been, what you’ve been doing.” \[14\]

Commitment

The exchange between Coupat and Nancy recalls a previous dialogue about engagement and revolutionary politics in French philosophy. In 1971 Jacques Derrida wrote a letter to Jean Genet as a response to Genet’s attempt to rally French intellectuals in support of the imprisoned Black Panther George Jackson, on trial for shooting a prison guard while serving a sentence for driving the getaway car in a seventy-one dollar gas station robbery. Jackson had been sentenced to ‘one year to life’ following the indefinite sentencing guidelines in California at that time. Genet had been active in the Black Panther’s fight against an oppressive, racist US state for a few years and quickly organised a petition in support of Jackson, demanding not only his release and an end to the repression of the Black Panther Party, but also an end to white supremacy. Jackson was a political prisoner and was to be set free, Genet wrote in the petition. Derrida signed the petition as did a number of other French intellectuals including Marguerite Duras and Maurice Blanchot, but he also wrote a letter to Genet analysing the petition and the position of enunciation of the signatories. Derrida was not sure the petition was the right thing to do. \[15\]

He was afraid that Genet, himself and the others in Paris were merely repeating the very process of subjectification Jackson had been the victim of in the first place; it was Genet and Derrida who were speaking, not Jackson. As he wrote: “With the best intentions in the world, with the most sincere moral indignation in the face of what, in effect, remains unbearable and inadmissible, one could then lock up again that which one wants to liberate?” \[16\] Derrida was afraid the petition would amount to nothing but the usual, almost ritual condemnation where French intellectuals could voice their critique of some event in the world with a clear conscience.

Derrida’s “yes of course, but...” raises a hugely important question about the risk of foreclosing the critical or emancipatory movement one is acting in solidarity with and wants to see happen. But Derrida is also dangerously close to pulling the rug from under political commitment, leaving him safely inside philosophy, preferring to do yet another round of deconstructive analysis of the pitfalls of radical engagement. The meticulous and sensitive close reading of speaking positions – are we, Genet and Derrida, speaking for Jackson? – and contexts – how is Paris related to the US and its prison system? – came close to a kind of paralysis where Derrida could refrain from doing anything.

Nancy’s reply to Coupat and Hazan is oddly similar
to Derrida’s reply to Genet. We don’t really have the same enunciative complications, who is speaking for whom and where, in the exchange between Coupat and Hazan and Nancy. But like Derrida, Nancy is hesitant; he is, of course, as was Derrida in 1971, trying to be both affirmative – I’m with you, I’m with the movement – and critical, stressing the need to analyse the terms Coupat and Hazan are proposing. We have to do something but... I will answer your call and join the discussion, all the while trying to take a step back. There is no question it remains important to analyse the conditions of possibility of engaging in political activities but the philosophical questioning should not be allowed to postpone revolutionary positioning forever. And there’s always bad timing involved in revolutionary processes – just look at the developments in 2011 where the European and US movements were never able to pick up the baton from the revolting masses in North Africa and the Middle East.

Derrida was surely right in asking whether Genet and himself were engaged in a kind of ‘critical bragging’, denouncing the US prison system and its use of violence on black revolutionaries from the safety of Paris. But it did not remove the necessity to get involved, that is at least Genet’s response. And he was right. The deconstruction of political engagement is necessary but it does not remove its urgency; it remains necessary to fight back, to resist, and this will always take place on uncertain terms or in a hostile environment. The essentializing moment cannot be postponed forever.\[120\]

It’s a question of time. And the times are forcing us to take sides. The Western European nation states are busy keeping the fleeing masses from Syria and elsewhere out of Europe, protecting the national sovereignty that legitimizes them. But more and more young people in high-income countries like France are denouncing the Western nation state system that is only capable of banning refugees and asylum seekers. In that context destitution is not a bad position. How we get from that to the negation of capital is still a real question, but displacing the sovereignty of the nation state would amount to half a revolution (and in Western Europe that would already be quite a lot).

\[120\] Copenhagen, 15 May 2016

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