Ryan Vu

“For a long time I believed that what distinguished theory from, say, literature, was its impatience to transmit content, its special capacity to make itself understood. And that effectively defines theory, theory as the unique form of writing that is not a practice. Thus it is that the infinite has its origin in theory, which can say everything without ever saying anything at all, in the end, of any consequence—to bodies, that is. One will see clearly enough that our texts are neither theory, nor its negation, but simply something else.”

Tiqqun, This Is Not A Program

“ON THE ONE HAND, WE WANT TO LIVE COMMUNISM; ON THE OTHER, TO SPREAD ANARCHY.”

The Invisible Committee, Proposition VI, Call

What is left to say about the anonymous collective Tiqqun, or its “revolutionary-experimental wing,” the Invisible Committee? Their hard-to-classify yet undeniably seductive writings, first published in their self-titled journal from 1999-2001 then reprinted in innumerable pamphlets, have been prominent in theoretical debates on “communization” over the last decade and change, from underground anarchist message boards in North America to the pages of rival ultra-left journals in France (Troploin, Théorie Communiste) and the UK (Endnotes, Monsieur Dupont) to the continental theory wings of humanities departments on both sides of the Atlantic. Their sudden fame was largely due to the spectacular “preven-
“tative arrest” in 2007 of the Tarnac 9 (a collective made up of former Tiqqunists) for sabotaging a high-speed rail system, based on little more evidence than a police investigator’s hyperbolic reading of the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* (2005). While English translations of varying quality have unofficially circulated for some time, outside the anarchist/activist milieu they emerged rather late, well after the 9/11 attacks and their horrific consequences had completely altered the political field, and out of order (*The Coming Insurrection*, the final text associated with Tiqqun, was the first to be published in translation by Semiotexte). This has helped to condition critical claims that their work is misleading and irrelevant, overextended beyond the limited, even provincial scope of their initial composition. Suffice it for now to say that a survey of Tiqqun reception over the past decade is decidedly mixed, even as their popularity in left-anarchist circles continues. The English publication of *This Is Not A Program* (a compilation of the eponymous essay with “A critical metaphysics could emerge as a science of apparatuses...”), perhaps the collective’s most comprehensive account of their work and its aims (originally the final essay of *Tiqqun* 2), came only after they had been frequently discredited for failing to offer their readers any competent *theoretical* understanding of the present conjuncture.

All this criticism is not merely a response to lazy, superficial reception by the hipster-cum-academic leftist that critics assume Tiqqun’s ‘typical reader’ to be. Despite the central interest in valorizing Italy’s “creeping May” of 1969-1977 as a period of revolt completely forgotten by the authors’ own *fin de siècle* France, despite extensive borrowing from academic political theory and philosophy, theirs is a syncretism that lends itself to being read out of context. For them, France and the French (for example) are reducible to symbols of Enlightened liberalism promoted by their national mythology, “the country of world citizenism…the ridiculous epicenter of phobic opposition that claims to challenge the Market in the name of the State,” which failed to notice the truly radical developments in 1970s Italy. And their critical concepts better resemble a demonology of social types than orthodox class or identity analysis. Inside their millennial bestiary lurk such quasi-allegorical figures as the Bloom, the Young Girl (*jeune-fille*), the THEY (*On*), the ONE, each some decadent symptom of capitalist civilization in terminal decline. Never departing from the form of the manifesto, Tiqqun/IC prefer grand abstraction and the dramatic entrance to scholarly argument.

This approach is perhaps what makes Tiqqun serve as a kind of Rorschach image of betrayed promises for their critics. For example, Frère Dupont (one half of Monsieur Dupont) writes, “For a ‘how to’ manual, *Introduction To Civil War* is surprisingly biased towards the framing of an abstract ethical theory rather than to the description of practical techniques which might be deployed in the field.” That Tiqqun’s focus is ethical rather than theoretical or technical is indeed the case. But the expectation for a “description of practical techniques” is just the sort of presumption used by French authorities to have them arrested, and has little to do with how they define themselves. We might revise Dupont’s critique to say Tiqqun attempts to produce a post-theoretical ethics, or more concretely a series of handbooks for
an ethics appropriate to the praxis of communization and insurrection, a modern *Hagakure* for the antiauthoritarian left.

The very title of *This Is Not A Program* is a knowing joke on how they will be misread, tempting just such a misreading. But this ‘error’ cannot simply be sidestepped, for though Tiqqun are being honest when they claim to produce neither program nor theory, they do rely on a theoretical background. Of all their writings, that background is most explicitly referenced in this text. Its main points are drawn from an amalgamation of (largely) anti- or post-Marxist writers who, in the long aftermath of May 1968, have come to be reconstructed as an alternative radical canon among left-leaning academics: Foucault, Deleuze, Agamben, Heidegger, and Schmitt.

They begin with history, in order to stage their break with what contemporaries Théorie Communiste call “programmatism,” or proletarian praxis from the 19th century through “Fordism” up to its defeat in the ‘70s, a period in which struggles coalesced around the affirmation of workers’ identity and the formation of political organizations directed against the capitalist state. Following their argument for the importance of Italy ‘77 over France ‘68, they identify a rift within the Italian movement, not between different institutional allegiances (i.e. Autonomia and the PCI) but libertarian/creative elements and “organized” ones, culminating in a harsh critique of Antonio Negri and “Negrism,” or the post-workerist strain of Autonomia. They accuse Negri of advocating a state even more all-encompassing than its liberal enemy, “bureaucratizing” autonomism (57). This effort is based, they argue, on his expansion of the classical Marxist definition of productive labor and corresponding reappropriation of the language of citizenship from the liberals. As Jason E. Smith characterizes their argument: “If the PCI labored to underline the split between these two societies, one productive, one unproductive, the tendency of organized Autonomia desired in its turn to *heal* this fracture between the two societies by dilating the concept of productive labor so widely that it included *even* the unemployed or precariously employed.” Tiqqun takes him to task for his uneasy merging of vanguardism with populism, his attempt to generalize the condition of the most “advanced” sectors of the capitalist economy: white-collar information workers.

These critiques center, in other words, on Negri’s failure to draw the correct lines of opposition. His abandonment of class and the classical Marxist logic of exploitation, while continuing to ground his analysis in production (however broadly defined), leaves him with little other basis for a revolutionary subject than voluntarism, the choice to manifest the intrinsic desire within existing social arrangements for what Negri calls “the multitude” and Tiqqun call the precursor to a universal state. For Tiqqun, “Negrism indeed expresses an antagonism, but one within the management class, between its progressive and constituent parts,” which merely represents “the idealist face of imperial thought.” The task Tiqqun set for themselves is to reestablish the lines of struggle separate from both economic discourse and the politics of identity—including that of “citizen” or even “worker.”

For Théorie Communiste, revolutionary struggle in our era of “post-Fordist” neoliberal counterrevolution is oriented around the limits of the working class’s coherence as a political subject. Tiqqun, on the other hand, reject not only any pro-
gram for class struggle, but the very notion of class struggle itself, which “condemns us to paralysis, bad faith, and empty talk.” Though they share with TC a critique of working class identity as the excrescence of a previous era of conflict, Tiqqun defines identity in ethical or ‘lifestyle’ terms, never in the language of economics or class (or race and gender, for that matter). As they put it: “The front line no longer cuts through the middle of society; it now runs through the middle of each of us, between what makes us a citizen, our predicates, and all the rest.” If the state itself—an anachronistic fantasy for Tiqqun—is not directly the proprietor of the necessary proofs of citizenship, then that function has been taken over by the disciplinary mechanisms of generalized normativity, which use the principle of the state as their ideological justification. The state exists not to repress war between opposed classes, then, but civil war between (and within) individuals. Theirs is a capitalism—if it can still be called that—that has become fully abstract, placeless, and subsumed by the Hardt/Negrian notion of Empire.

As a translation of the Foucaultian critique of biopower into the discourse of sovereignty, Empire indicates a global situation in which formerly central institutions and processes have been decomposed into apparatuses (dispositifs). Following Deleuze, this is not a regime of power, exploitation, or even capture, but strictly of control and equivalence, with an eye toward the production of political-economic subjects (citizens) and the nullification of events. “Everything has been carefully parameterized so that nothing happens, ever,” the author(s) complain. But in its most salient logic, Tiqqun’s conception of politics is an update of Schmitt’s (or rather, Agamben’s interpretation of Schmitt). Schmitt’s critique of liberalism holds that in its attempt to moderate political conflict via universal values, liberalism only succeeds in obscuring its inevitability, resulting in the incapacity of the modern liberal state to maintain internal order. Tiqqun extend Schmitt’s critique to Empire, arguing that its system of planetary control makes inter-state conflict of secondary importance to internal policing. “What is ultimately at stake is no longer the extraction of surplus value, but Control… Capital is no longer but a means to generalized Control.” Yet war against a non-sovereign Empire does not reduce to guerilla warfare: “Contrary to the thinking of the BR [Red Brigades]…Empire is not the enemy. Empire is no more than the hostile environment opposing us at every turn. We are engaged in a struggle over the recomposition of an ethical fabric,” what they elsewhere call an “ethic of civil war.” Though they are at pains to distinguish themselves from Negri’s reifying version, “an institutional subject with which to enter into contract or take over power,” they attribute to Empire the same troublingly contradictory characteristics as that line of theorists who, after Foucault, have tried to redefine social domination without a concept of class: an amorphous, all-encompassing “power” anterior to all agency, unidentifiable and therefore irrecusable.

Tiqquun’s solution to the theoretical impasse of Autonomist Marxism, like that of turn-of-the-century “revolutionary syndicalist” and onetime Marxist Georges Sorel, is therefore to dismiss the field of political economy altogether. In short, “…the logic of the present situation is no longer of an economic but of an ethico-political kind.” This means they are as committed to a phenomenological critique of the everyday as
a Marxist would be to objective relations of exploitation. “Bloom,” to cite one of their most consequential figures, manifests “the crisis of presence,” the social problem of alienation reduced by biopolitical apparatuses of control to an individual pathology. Taking its name from the decidedly unheroic protagonist of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the figure of “Bloom” is an “attempt to historicize presence, to record, for starters, the current state of our being-in-the-world.” It should be emphasized that Bloom is not a subject; for *Tiqqun*, subjectivity and the theoretical questions constructed around it (i.e. the search for a properly revolutionary subject) have been reduced to just so many apparatuses. Bloom is rather something like the avant-garde of alienation, somewhere between a social symptom and a zeitgeist. Because Bloom manifests the “crisis of presence,” in other words the crisis of modernism and modernist ideology, “he” is a problem for power, which, in the form of generalized normativity, figures as “THEY” (a playful reference to Heidegger’s “*das Man*”): “By defining him as a disease, THEY individualize him, THEY localize him, THEY isolate him such that he can no longer be assumed collectively, commonly.” Bloom is the tragic attitude toward the impossibility of a collective subject, the passive nihilism of Nietzsche’s last men.

Now we come at last to their political exhortations. In place of Negri’s “citizenism,” *Tiqqun* describe a movement propagated through the expansion of what they call the Imaginary Party. This is no organizational program; like Bloom, it is a concept that merely registers facts Empire wishes to deny, in this case difference and heterogeneity, “the fact that contradiction exists at all.” The Imaginary Party neither predicts nor prescribes. If it ever seems to exist as a discrete entity, that is because Empire can’t represent the forces of resistance in any other way. “Building the Party no longer means building a total organization within which all ethical differences might be set aside for the sake of a common struggle; today, building the Party means *establishing forms-of-life in their difference, intensifying, complicating relations between them, developing as subtly as possible civil war between us.*” Against organization, against identification and representation, against consensus, these anti-programmatic negations imply the proliferation of forms of resistance based on an ontology of indiscernability. As they write: “Not only is there no longer a revolutionary subject, but…it is the non-subject itself that has become revolutionary, that is to say, effective against Empire.” The praxis that follows from this is (appropriately) obscure, but rhetorically centers on conspiracy, crime, and experimentation. Their revolutionary science, “a science of apparatuses or critical metaphysics” to replace the Althusserian model of resistance, “is finally nothing other than the science of crime,” communicated not through institutions (schools, etc.), but “zones of opacity,” spaces seized and subtracted from the reign of apparatuses.

Throughout the text (and *Tiqqun’s* work in general), there is an equation of control with visibility, and of visibility with knowability, a standard claim made about “Western metaphysics” by its critics, from Heidegger through Foucault. *Tiqqun* seem to imply that the validity of this chain of equivalences is internal to discourse itself. Empire is none other than the “power that has made itself the heir of Western metaphysics,” which “draws its entire strength as well as the enormity of its weakness from this same metaphysics.” Within this idealist framework, the increase of ap-
paratuses—police, identity discourses, security and surveillance measures, etc.—is attributed to the very failure of these apparatuses to fix actual bodies to normalized identities and relations, “to ensure that a certain economy of presence persists.” The reasons for their declining efficacy, for the emergence of Bloom, or why “things themselves, free of all attachments, come more and more urgently into presence,” are left unclear. On the other hand, the rationale for Tiqqun’s valorization of criminality, conspiracy, and vagueness of all kinds is relatively easy to grasp: visibility, the organization of power, the positive affirmation of subjectivities, all directly place one in the grip of apparatuses, no matter from what position they are enunciated. I’ve already discussed how this rules out direct opposition to Empire in the form of a revolutionary subject. But perhaps the most striking consequence of Tiqqun’s total rejection of the politics of visibility is that anyone who refuses representation, for any reason, is automatically linked to the Imaginary Party.

Once invisible/illegible to Empire, the free play between “forms-of-life” and the development of an ethic of civil war can proceed without inhibition. To tell “the conservative segments of the Imaginary Party—libertarian militias, right-wing anarchists, insurrectionary fascists, Qutbist jihadists, ruralist militants” apart from “its revolutionary-experimental segments” is what building the Party consists of. This formulation seeks to accept “the most formidable stratagem of Empire, that of throwing everything that opposes it into one ugly heap” as the Party’s very precondition, then from this space of exile produce new distinctions (“establishing forms-of-life in their difference”) in a state of secession from Empire’s repressive control apparatuses. The anti-structure Tiqqun has in mind for the Party is perhaps best thought via Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “plane of immanence”—attractor and context for the experimental play of concepts, affects, and forms—rather than as a totality or ground. Radicals in the style of Tiqqun refuse all class, race, or gender divisions, all of which are different orientations toward a (molar) center of power; instead they differentiate themselves through experiencing intense “ethical” encounters, increasing the Party’s power through the circulation of criminal knowledge and conspiratorial bodies (just as Empire’s power is built through maximizing circulation between apparatuses). Tiqqun thus synthesizes the absolute pessimism of the more Foucaultian strains of (post)structuralism, that there is no subject external to power, with a romantic optimism closer in spirit to Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on radical escape, seemingly concluding a) that meaningful resistance must come from outside any system of subjectivity and representation; b) that it inevitably will, no matter how voluntaristic the motivation; and finally c) that direct confrontation with power is only desirable in moments of opaque insurrectionary violence.

Though they often write of the need to “reclaim” violence, a number of provisional statements keep their idea of insurrection somewhat aloof from the specific acts of exemplary violence associated with the anarchist tradition of “propaganda of the deed.” They draw on the anthropology of Pierre Clastres to critique the idea of violence as a specialized activity, favoring something more along the lines of the Black Panther Party’s community self-defense than the later guerilla strikes of the Black Liberation Army. As the Invisible Committee put it, “An insurrection is more
just about taking up arms and maintaining an ‘armed presence,’ than it is about entering an armed struggle.”

At the same time, the uninhibited, “ecstatic” insurrection they elsewhere celebrate maps easily onto the eschatological messianism of Benjamin’s “divine violence.” This would seem to be the only possible radical temporality given Tiqqun’s open antagonism toward progressivism: “The main source of the paralysis from which we must break free is the utopia of the human community, the perspective of a final, universal reconciliation.”

It is unclear from this text how Tiqqun negotiate between these two notions of violent resistance to instigate large-scale social transformation, an end they seem ambivalent about. But if insurrection is desirable in itself, then why waste time with alternative lifestyles? If eking out an alternative lifestyle in the interstices of apparatuses is the best that can be achieved, why risk insurrection? A quote from The Invisible Committee is a bit more programmatic, albeit still speculative: “The commune is the basic unit in a life of resistance. The insurrectionary surge is probably nothing more than a multiplication of communes, their articulation and inter-connection.”

This assertion places them within the “communization” current of 70s French “ultra-leftists” like Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nesic (now chief editors of the journal Troploin), who proposed a break with historical materialism and the orthodox theory of revolution as the seizure of state power and subsequent rule of a transitional worker’s state. Instead, they argued for the immediate production and expansion of communist social relations in the present.

Opening themselves to comparison with other communization theorists (i.e. Endnotes and Théorie Communiste), this reference also puts Tiqqun/IC in dialogue with multiple traditions of revolutionary strategy, from anarchist “prefigurative politics,” to Deleuzo-Guattarian “molecular revolution,” to Trotskyist “permanent revolution,” though without the minimal degree of specificity that could constitute an argument within any of them.

And this is as far as Tiqqun can be considered as “theorists” in any traditional sense. They do not explain or analyze, they present, and paradoxically. Classes that are not classes, manifestos without programs, critique without scientific foundation, parties without organization. Throughout the text are principles of inclusion/exclusion without any structure or rational basis. The obvious risk is that Tiqqun’s largely affective call will only resonate with a small, self-selected group, a risk they seem well aware of and even to embrace—unmoored from class or identity, their “we” is only intelligible in terms of a shared radical desire (and a shared bibliography). But it is difficult for anti-identitarianism to avoid trending white, privileged, and male, and Tiqqun makes no effort to assuage the reader’s suspicion that they are being sold membership in an elect organized along the lines of The Matrix: a few randomly selected enlightened discovering each other amongst the somnolent masses. Who, for example, could follow this directive: “we have to develop the art of becoming perfectly anonymous, of offering the appearance of pure conformity,” without the privileged capacity to seamlessly adopt normative behaviors—and bodies? Not only do they leave themselves open to the same charge of voluntarism with which they accuse Negri, they narrow their group of addressees to a tiny avant-garde through the language of anonymity and radical openness.
On a practical level, it's unclear how useful a mostly-to-exclusively conspiratorial practice can be for any radical left today. The historical experiments inspiring Tiqqun—Italian and German autonomists, mainly—already had their moments, with mixed results, and their actions ranged widely from overt to covert. The Tarnac 9 were arrested on trumped up charges precisely because no one knew anything about them, and they needed the public support of intellectuals and liberal sympathizers to get them out of jail; in any case, their attempt to sustain themselves as both invisible and militant failed. The Greek anti-austerity movement has perhaps the greatest affinity with Tiqqun's writings (the Invisible Committee openly associates themselves with Greece in the 2008 preface to *The Coming Insurrection*), but is also a tactical hybrid of street demonstrations, electoral organization, rioting, and targeted “Black Bloc” actions; it's also openly class-based. Similar observations could be made about the revolutionary uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Arab world. Even the unemployed workers' movement of 1997-98, or the anti-CPE demonstrations of 2006, both of which Tiqqun and IC were directly involved in, were organized around visibility, however diverse their component actions. And the Occupy movement, while free of official demands or party structure, prides itself on its transparency, on its open and public experimentation with democratic process. These are, in short, popular uprisings. None of this is to argue categorically against clandestinity. One could (I suppose) claim that no existing praxis is yet adequate to Tiqqun's demands. Or, more interestingly, one could conclude that they are not calling for conscious, directed action at all, but are giving largely indiscriminate encouragement to latent forces—the 2011 riots in England may be the best example we have of a truly anonymous, opaque uprising.43

Marx and Engels long ago dismissed the class of “professional conspirators” as “the alchemists of the revolution,” for whom “the only condition for revolution is the adequate preparation of their conspiracy.”44 Their quip could certainly apply to Tiqqun, who could be (and often are) sourced in terms of an anarchist genealogy dating back to the late 19th century that would range from Blanqui to Stirner and Sorel to the Bonnot gang, rather than the post-'68 French and Italian *philosophes* I have associated them with here. Indeed, Sorel's anti-rational, anti-materialist concept of “social myth” seems to exert a powerful unacknowledged influence on how Tiqqun conceive their project as a whole. For Sorel, “myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act.”45 The value of his myth of the general strike did not therefore rest on its empirical validity or probability of success, but rather on whether it “embodies in a perfect manner all the aspirations of socialism”; to judge a theory that is purely a motivational symbol, “one must thus abandon all the forms of discussion that are usual among politicians, sociologists, and people who lay claim to practical knowledge.”46 Tiqqun's organizing myth is, in their own words, a “critical metaphysics” of insurrection, in which the “form-of-life” of the radical insurrectionist has been extracted from the practical exigencies of blowing up infrastructure or organizing a popular movement, and in which power is both dis-integrated and omnipresent. It is perhaps this latter assumption—that power is everywhere and nowhere, immune to rational analysis—which conditions a certain
segment of today’s intellectual left, whose leading critical minds can be seamlessly integrated into a political manifesto that “is prepared to compete with capitalism on the playing field of magic.”

Perhaps the most sensible way to read Tiqqun is as a collection of maxims and reflections condensing the experience, frustrations, and fantasies of life on the far left, legible only to a preselected audience, and, in the classic tradition of La Rochefoucauld and Debord, sharpened beyond the point of utility. But I feel it would be a condescending insult to Tiqqun to ignore the activist thrust of their work, it being still too early to reduce them to mere literature. In Tiqqun, the distance between radical critique and instrumental myth—or what the less charitable might call “pure ideology”—has shrunk almost to none at all.

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1 Tiqqun, This Is Not A Program (LA: Semiotexte, 2011), 151.
2 Tiqqun, Introduction to Civil War (LA: Semiotexte, 2010), 193.
4 Tiqqun, Program, 16.
5 Dupont.
7 For an excellent critical analysis of post-’68 French theory’s relationship to Marxism, see Isabelle Garo, Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser, et Marx (Paris: Démopolis, 2011).
8 Jason E. Smith, “Politics of Incivility,” Minnesota Review 75 (Fall 2010): 126.
9 Tiqqun, Program, 116.
10 Ibid., 117.
11 Ibid., 12.
13 Ibid., 12.
15 Tiqqun, Program, 151.
16 For a more conventionally political economic analysis that takes a similar premise, see Randy Martin’s An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management (Durham: Duke UP, 2007).
17 Tiqqun, Program, 155.
18 Ibid., 67.
19 Tiqqun, Civil War, 162.
20 Tiqqun, Program, 125.
21 Ibid., 149.
22 Ibid., 143.
23 Ibid., 149.
24 Ibid., 44.
“For Empire, the Imaginary Party is but the form of pure singularity. From the point of view of representation, singularity as such is the complete abstraction, the empty identity of the here and now. Likewise, from the point of view of the homogeneous, the Imaginary Party is simply “the heterogeneous,” the purely unrepresentable.” (43-44).

Tiqqun thus both appropriate other movement ideologies for their own and give them some strange bedfellows: “Where the workers’ movement had long been eliminated, as in the United States or Germany, there was an immediate move from student revolt to armed struggle, a move during which the use of the Imaginary Party’s practices and tactics was often veiled in socialist or even Third-Worldist rhetoric. Hence, in Germany, the Movement 2 June, the Red Army Faction (RAP), the Rote Zellen, and in the United States, the Black Panther Party, the Weathermen, the Diggers or the Manson Family, were the emblems of a prodigious movement of internal defection” (26-7).

Tiqqun, Program, 13.

The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection (LA: Semiotexte, 2009), 128.

Tiqqun, Program, 61-2.

Tiqqun, Program, 111.


Tiqqun, Program, 194.

The contrat première embauche (“first employment contract”) was a proposal that would have made it possible to fire employees 26 and under without providing a reason. The bill was scrapped after three months of massive youth-led protests across France.

Though it should still be noted that in the aftermath of the rioting, 3,100 people were arrested and 1,000 charged with crimes, thanks no doubt to England’s vast CCTV apparatus.


Tiqqun, Program 174.