

# THIS IS NOT THE BLACK BLOC

## I. *Semblances*

February fourth two thousand and seven, on the 8 o'clock news I see what appears to be a male figure, filmed from above, throwing stones in a night lit by flames. He is wearing a very elegant Dolce e Gabbana bomber-jacket with a big silver D&G on the back and an immaculate white ski-mask. This figure takes off to join another character who is wearing a black scarf over his face, a very beautiful orange knit hat, rather snug red-and-black plaid pleated trousers, and a chic navy-blue blazer, if I recall correctly. Soon after, I see people charging an ambulance and an orange spot catches my eye again, but this time it's the color of the nurses' uniforms trying to stop these people who are determined to remove the wounded in order to finish them off.

Fragments of images from Italy, from Catania, of the end of a soccer match where someone killed a carabinieri. Al Jazeera, it was announced, reported this news. On the same day, in Baghdad, something much worse but less rare took place. Someone killed a carabinieri during the riots and that someone is from a strange hotbed, he is a supporter of the far-Right wing, Nazi, fascist, revolutionary. The nightly news is over.

I open a newspaper, it's an old tabloid from January, the photos are superb, in particular those of a fellow called Scary Guy whom schools pay \$1000 a day to come and preach peace in England, the USA, in Australia... Scary Guy is a tattoo artist who was rejected by tattoo circles for having tattooed his face—an inexplicable taboo for that community. This rejection made him violent, hateful, up until the (fuzzy) moment he prepared his conversion and decided to speak about peace. I can't tell if he is a real policeman or not, but the photos show him wearing a blue tee-shirt with the word Police embroidered in white on the chest; he also has piercings on his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose. Is Scary Guy a clown—in the same way that Arendt referred to Eichmann? Is he a punk dressed like a cop who is going to persuade schoolboys against hazing?

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben describes Limbo as it is depicted in Saint Thomas. The souls that inhabit this region of the Beyond are not stricken with afflictions because they have done no wrong. However, they are deprived of the greatest good, which is the contemplation of God—yet they are unaware of their plight so they do not suffer from it. They suffer no more than a normal man grieves over not being able to fly. While my eyes follow the footsteps of clients going to the Black Bloc boutique at the entrance to the Palais de Tokyo, on the brushed concrete, under the high ceiling, Agamben's words about the souls in Limbo automatically pop into my head: "like letters without addressees... they remained without destiny."

## II. *Impressions*

Scary Guy tells the children he indoctrinates about social peace for \$1000 a day: you shouldn't trust appearances, but you really shouldn't trust them. You see me like this, piercing-tattoo, dreadful-looking, yeah, well you've got it wrong, I am Ghandi and the Pope rolled up into one, I've come to deliver the good word, and you will love each other, and you will forget all about your crushed, frustrated, childhoods, abandoned to the solitude of TV and video games, you will repress yourselves even more so you can start turning into good little robots right away. Well, he doesn't say that, but the children understand that. He is like a big brother, the terrifying chap, the big brother that we should have had, we the unhappy ones. We should have met him when we were ten years old so we could get that tattoos and piercings are not rebellious gestures, that police is a mode of being for everyone rather than a profession, that what counts is not just finding one's place in society as it stands, without criticizing it (changing it, even less so), what counts is inventing one's own place in it, if nobody offers you one. It doesn't even matter if it's a paradoxical and insulting place, as long as it's not in opposition, doesn't contest anything. Because, after all, life has no meaning, it is like a facial tattoo, like the money we have or don't have, life is arbitrary and hopeless, and that's why one mustn't rebel, what's the point?

And so, getting back to the strange shop in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris that has this name, *Black Bloc*, which I just don't get—surely its owners must have thought they had to do some sort of special thing to make museum visitors understand that they shouldn't trust appearances either. For example: giving a place like that a name that evokes transgression or even the destruction of merchandise, get it?, while here we are selling our merchandise at high prices and we're loving it. Or maybe the black bloc sounded a bit like the opposite of the white cube, or the idea of a black bloc is suggestive, martial, what do I know? And that the two words in English have a lovely musical ring to them, or something.

It's not just appearances one shouldn't trust, one shouldn't trust words either. Or more specifically, the link we imagine exists between words and images, between the visible and the sayable. For example, even if we believe we've found the illustration of this concept in photographs of marching people dressed in black, black bloc is a word without an image. The term black bloc alludes to a manifestation of desire for collective opacity, a will not to appear and to materialize affects that are increasingly hard to take. The black bloc is not a visual object, it's an object of desire.

### III. *Translations*

It's not that these two words are stripped of meaning, they have meaning—"black bloc" means a black bloc—but as soon as they are written down or spoken they show they have been orphaned from their context and that we can do whatever we please with them. Surely because we are dealing with a translation from German. On the other hand, *schwarze Block* means something, it roots us in a history of resistance bound up with the two twentieth century Germans. For while meaning is not lacking from translations, *autonomy* often is. In the movement from one language to another, sometimes meaning is deported despite itself, gets injured, and occasionally dies.

The violence of the act of translating allies itself on a point with the violence of commercial transactions: one presupposes there is an *equivalence* between words from different languages, but one winds up colliding against the incommensurable in singular histories.

I could tell you that *schwarze Block* was a tactical form, that it was a means of preventing the police from identifying and isolating who committed what gesture during a riot. I could tell you that dressing in black meant: we are all comrades, we are all in solidarity, we are all alike, and this equality liberates us from the responsibility of accepting a fault we do not deserve: the fault of being poor in a capitalist country, the fault of being anti-fascist in the fatherland of Nazism, the fault of being libertarian in a repressive country. That it meant: nobody deserves to be punished for these reasons, and since you are attacking us we are forced to protect ourselves from violence when we march in the streets. Because war, capitalism, labor regulations, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, those things are not violent, however you see those of us who want to freely live our homosexuality, the refusal to found a family, collective life and the abolition of property as the violent ones. So, if you want to arrest me instead of my comrade just because we are wearing the same clothing, go ahead, I accept that, I don't deserve to be punished because he doesn't deserve it either... I could go on like this, and even provide you with more specifics, by supplementing it with the history of demonstrations, of victories, with dates to back it all up and everything, like the time a band was playing around the rioters in the deserted streets, or the time when the police took off running... I could go on for pages and pages, but that's not the issue here. All this isn't the black bloc.

Instead, let's ask what "this is the black bloc" means? Who says that? Wouldn't that be a definition like an image filmed from a window, like the one from the 8 o'clock news on February fourth two thousand and seven and so many others, a definition shot from above, taken from the viewpoint of a watchtower, from some panopticon? What we are describing is always a block of ant-men, cockroach-men, a black block, which is black like the earth because it is seen from afar. But the carabinieri, they are also a black bloc. Baudelaire said that his contemporaries, dressed in dark clothes that no painter enjoyed depicting, were an army of undertakers, that they were all celebrating some funeral. Enamored undertakers, revolutionary undertakers.

### IV. *Silences*

No speech comes "from inside" the black bloc, because there is no inside or outside. The black bloc, which we name as such with these two impoverished words, is not constituted like groups, corps, institutions. It is a temporary agglomeration without truth or watchwords. It is also what is left in the hands of our discontent, at the stage of society we have reached, despite ourselves: the impossibility of marching together while shouting out phrases so that they can be heard, the incapacity to engage in indirect and representative actions, the urgent need to unload one-thousandth of the cruelty the State, money, and advertisements inject in all our veins every day.

The category black bloc doesn't designate anything or anyone, or more precisely, maybe it designates *anyone as such*. A distinctive feature of one who finds themselves in what we call a black bloc is to demand nothing for themselves or for others, to cut across public space without being subjected to it for once, to disappear in a mass that has at last come together in places that are not office or factory exits and public transportation at rush hour. Rampant hypocrisy makes us associate the black bloc with a specific and organized entity—like Sony, Vivendi, or Total Fina—and this same hypocrisy considers as "crimes" the minor damage that the desire for willful indistinctness leaves behind when it takes the form of a spontaneous demonstration.

In this night where all demonstrators look alike there is no point in posing Manichean questions. Especially since we know that the distinction between guilty and innocent no longer matters, all that counts is the one between winners and losers. Punishment always lands on the latter, not because they deserve it but because somebody has to be repressed. Trying to figure out if someone has infiltrated a black bloc is like trying to know the extent to which rain infiltrates a river, a lake, or seawater.

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## *V. Repetitions*

Some days I flip through certain art magazines: glossy paper, squeaky clean, repetitions and few differences, but it doesn't matter. These papers are made to put one in the mood, like certain soft drugs. And in the mood, one discovers a particular kind of omnivorous, but leveling, visual sophistication. All things become equally appreciable once delicately placed on the white rectangle of their pages, the forms and colors travel from the white cube to this new square and they have everything to gain there.

One mustn't believe that the vision of the world of these papers excludes radicality, even in its explicitly political form. But this radicality is only a shadow of "what one should detect of it", and never an expression of what it is possible to do with it. It is inevitably a question of taking distance from this radicality, not because it's needed to show that we do not go along with it, but because the problem isn't even one of hearing its message, one must simply judge its tone. And the tone is always monotonous or excited.

Why are you shouting, damn it, if we know that things are the way they are? We already know: stop yelling! Disappear or turn into your image, so we can turn down the sound or put some music on instead, if necessary.

These papers don't have their own voices, but that's how they would speak if they started to speak, and it is not even because of cynicism, but because of lack of experience. The authors of articles, who consider themselves clever theoreticians, anti-conformist or disabused intellectuals, ignore the ways words affect bodies to the point of generating the ordinary miracle of mobilization and the extraordinary one of insurrection. These articles are a form of disguised pornography, in so far as whenever we are dealing with the least communicable moments, when everyone is bare and everyone is the same, and all the bodies are indistinctly breathing together, we can say whatever we want about it because we always already know what we want to see there. It's this violence that is as obscene, superficial and brutal as an identity check.

And this is how the most depleted sophistication, which says it's above the need for making claims, traces the heartless and odorless broad geopolitical picture and ends up finding all direct action folkloric and detestable. This viewpoint considers from the wearied aesthete position the rage-filled gesticulations of those who have no other choice but to scream, smash things, and move in packs on the streets. The hermeneutics of the complex archipelagos of dissension is knowledge that has already disappeared: we no longer need to investigate the reasons, the genealogies, the aspirations of those who revolt outside of associations and unions, it is much easier to criminalize them in the name of democracy and everyone's solitude. Therefore, the formerly respectable "critical" tradition, meant to sharpen the weapons of the mind and ally them to the masses through avant-garde action when the time is right, has been submerged by forgetting.

Putting insurrections into words has simply turned into a not very attractive task. For one revolts first and foremost because words are insufficient.

No desubjectivisation can bridge the abyss that has grown between the critique of social movements and their reality. Once we judge the unique and exceptional moments of autonomous movements with the measure we use on ordinary life moments, we are in the process of constructing the logical and political circle that closes in on its own idiocy. No translation is capable of converting actions into words, for their separation is the daily tragedy of our democratic regimes. In order to approach the uncertain territory of rebellion, we must first honor the disjunction between everyone's words, images and gestures. For the geography of these gaps houses the prospect of knowledge that transforms those who hold it and renders them capable of liberty. The black bloc is you, when you stop believing in it.

*Claire Fontaine, April 1, 2007*