

# Mystical Anarchism<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the philosophical significance of the history of mystical anarchism for contemporary ethics and politics. It examines the complex relationship between religion and politics, and elaborates the thesis that many of our contemporary political concepts are secularized theological concepts. After a critical discussion of Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and John Gray's critique of liberal humanism, it examines the anarchist practices of medieval mystics such as Marguerite Porete and the heresy of the Movement of the Free Spirit, and contrasts this mystical anarchist tradition with more recent forms of anarchism, such as Raoul Vaneigem's Situationism.

Retrieving the mystical anarchist tradition might help us rethink the relationship between religion and politics and suggest ethically grounded forms of anarchism that avoid violence or abstraction.

**Keywords:** anarchism, mysticism, ethics, politics, religion, love

The return to religion has become perhaps the dominant cliché of contemporary theory. Of course, theory often offers nothing more than an exaggerated echo of what is happening in reality, a political reality dominated by the fact of religious war. Somehow we seem to have passed from a secular age, which we were ceaselessly told was post-metaphysical, to a new situation where political action seems to flow directly from metaphysical conflict. This situation can be triangulated around the often fatal entanglement of politics and religion, where the third vertex of the triangle is violence. Politics, religion and violence appear to define the present through which we are all too precipitously moving: the phenomenon of sacred political violence, where religiously justified violence is the means to a political end. The question of community, of human being together, has to be framed – for good or ill – in terms of this triangulation of politics, religion and violence. In this essay, I want to look at one way, admittedly a highly peculiar and contentious way, in which the question of community was posed historically and might still be posed. This is what I want to call “mystical anarchism”. However, I want to begin somewhere else, to be precise with two political theories at the very antipodes of anarchism.

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1. Paper prepared by Robert Sinnerbrink.

## Carl Schmitt – the political, dictatorship and the belief in original sin

Let us return to that return to religion. Perhaps no thinker has enjoyed more popularity in recent years and seemed more germane than Carl Schmitt. The reasons for this are complex and I have tried to address them elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> In his *Political Theology*, he famously writes, “All significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”.<sup>3</sup> This is not just true historically, Schmitt insists, but systematically and conceptually. The omnipotent God of medieval Christianity becomes the omnipotent monarch, for example in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Until the late seventeenth century, the general will was a theological term of art that referred to the will of God. By 1762, in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, the general will had been transformed into the will of the people and the question of sovereignty was transposed from the divine to the civic. Of course, this entails that the will of the people is always virtuous and those who oppose it can be legitimately exterminated as evil. The politicization of theological concepts leads ineluctably to the attempt to purify virtue through violence, which is the political sequence that begins with French Jacobinism in 1792 and continues through to the dreadful violent excesses of twentieth-century politics that we can summarize with the proper names of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler through to what some might call the “Islam-Leninism” or “Islam-Jacobinism” of al-Qaeda and related groups.

But such an argument does not exonerate so-called liberal democracy. On the contrary, Schmitt views the triumph of the liberal-constitutional state as the triumph of deism, a theological vision that unifies reason and nature by identifying the latter with divinity. As can be seen most obviously in the deism of the Founding Fathers, American democracy is a peculiar confection of Roman republicanism and puritanical providentialism, enshrined in the John Winthrop sermon about the “Citty (*sic*) on the Hill” (that Sarah Palin ascribed to Ronald Reagan), the building up of the “New England”. At the core of American democracy is a civil religion that functions as a powerful sustaining myth and buttresses the idea of manifest destiny. Barack Obama’s political genius was to have reconnected classical liberal constitutionalism with a motivating civil religion focused around the idea of belief and a faith in change and progress.

Schmitt’s problem with liberalism is that it is anti-political. What this means is that for the liberal every political decision must be rooted in a norm whose ultimate justification flows from the constitution. Within liberalism, political decisions are derived from constitutional norms, and higher than the state stands

2. See my *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London/New York: Verso, 2007), 133ff.

3. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, G. Schwab (trans.) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

the law and the interpretation of the law. This is why the highest political authority in a liberal state rests with the Supreme Court or its equivalent. Political action is subordinated to juridical interpretation. For Schmitt, a truly political decision is what breaks with any norm, frees itself from any normative ties and becomes absolute. This is why the question of the state of exception is of such importance to Schmitt. The state of exception is that moment of radical decision where the operation of the law is suspended. This is what the Romans call *iustitium*, and which Giorgio Agamben has written about compellingly.<sup>4</sup> What the decision on the state of exception reveals is the true subject of political sovereignty. Schmitt famously writes that, "Sovereign is who decides on the state of exception" (*Soverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet*).<sup>5</sup> That is, the sovereign is the person who is exhibited by the decision on the state of exception. The question "Who?" is answered by the decision itself. That is, the decision on the state of exception, the moment of the suspension of the operation of law, brings the subject "Who?" into being. To put it into a slogan, *the subject is the consequence of a decision*. The subject that is revealed by the decision on the state of exception is the *state* and the core of Schmitt's theory of the political is to show that the true subject of political is the state and that the state must always stand higher than the law.

Schmitt makes the fascinating remark that the concept of the state of exception is the jurisprudential analogue to the concept of the miracle in theology. The triumph of liberalism as the triumph of deism is the hegemony of a religious view of the world that tries to banish the miracle, as that which would break with the legal-constitutional situation, the order of what Badiou calls the event, and which at times he compares with a miracle. Liberal constitutionalists, such as Locke, Kant or Neo-Kantians like Kelsen<sup>6</sup> seek to eliminate the state of exception and subject everything to the rule of law, which is the rule of the rule itself, namely reason. Schmitt criticizes the rationalism of liberalism in the name of what he calls – and here we find echoes of Dilthey in Schmitt that will resound further in the young Heidegger – a philosophy of concrete life. Such an existential approach embraces the exception and breaks with the rule and the rule of the rule. Schmitt writes, thinking explicitly of Kierkegaard, "In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid through repetition".<sup>7</sup>

4. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, D. Heller-Roazen (trans.) (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

5. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 1.

6. Hans Kelsen *Pure Theory of Law*, M. Knight (trans.) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 221–2.

7. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

It is not difficult to see why Schmitt's existential politics of passion and concrete life and his critique of liberal democracy should have won him many friends on the left, such as Chantal Mouffe. Sadly, perhaps, they are not friends that Schmitt would have chosen. He was much happier in the company of Catholic counter-revolutionaries such as Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortés. What has to be grasped is that Schmitt's argument for the state of exception as exemplifying the operation of the political is also an argument for dictatorship. If the subject of sovereignty is revealed in the decision on the state of exception, then this decision is the act where the constitution is suspended and dictatorship is introduced. Dictatorship, then, is justified when there is an actual or imagined danger to the existence of the state. Roman republicanism explicitly allowed for this possibility and one might ponder as to the conceivability of republicanism as a political form without the possibility of recourse to dictatorship. The condition of possibility for legality and legitimacy is the political act that suspends it.

Obama writes in *The Audacity of Hope*, "Democracy is not a house to be built, it is a conversation to be had".<sup>8</sup> At the core of Obama's liberal civil religion is a resolute defence of the primacy of the constitution, an absolute conviction that all political decisions have to be derived from norms, and that the procedure for decision-making is deliberation. It is enough to make Habermas burst into a breakdance. However, Schmitt would be turning in his grave. For him, the idea of everlasting conversation is a gruesomely comic fantasy. If liberals were presented with the question "Christ or Barabas?", they would move to adjourn the proceedings and establish a commission of investigation or a special committee of inquiry that would report back some time the following year. Within liberalism, everything becomes everlasting discussion, the glorious conversation of humankind, the sphere of what Schmitt with a sneer calls "culture". Such a culture floats like foam over the socioeconomic reality of the liberal state, which Schmitt, following his teacher Weber, compares to a huge industrial plant dominated by capitalism and scientism and incapable of political action. For Catholic counter-revolutionaries, such as Donoso Cortés, faced with the hegemony of a depoliticized liberalism powerless in the face of a capitalist economy, the only solution was dictatorship. Faced with the toothless liberal constitutionalism of Weimar Germany in the 1920s and the fact of economic collapse, it is not difficult to understand the appeal the argument for dictatorship had for Schmitt with the rise of the National Socialists. The only way to restore the true subject of the political, namely the state, was the suspension of the constitution and the decision to declare a state of exception.

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8. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Random House/Crown, 2006), 92.

The political theology of liberalism is the pervasiveness of a weak deistic God. The liberal, like Obama, wants God, but one that is not active in the world. He wants a God that permits no enthusiasm and who never contradicts or overrides the rule of reason and law. That way, it is assumed, leads to the prophetic radicalism of Jeremiah Wright. In short, liberals want a God that cannot perform miracles. Against this, Schmitt wants to revivify the political by restoring the state of exception and the possibility of the miracle. But, as Schmitt makes crystal clear, this requires a belief in original sin.

For Schmitt, every conception of the political takes a position on human nature. It requires some sort of anthropological commitment: human beings are either naturally good or evil. Schmitt thinks – and I agree – that this leads to the two most pervasive political alternatives to liberalism: authoritarianism and anarchism. Anarchists believe in the essential goodness of the human being. Their progenitor is Rousseau and his belief that wickedness is the historical outcome of the development of society towards greater levels of inequality. By contrast, on this view, political legitimacy can be achieved by what Rousseau frequently referred to as “a change in nature”, from wickedness to goodness, of the kind imagined in *The Social Contract*.<sup>9</sup> Although this is a caricature of Rousseau and he could in no way be described as an anarchist, this view is more accurately developed by Bakunin: namely that if human beings are essentially good, then it is the mechanisms of the state, religion, law and the police that make them bad. Once these mechanisms have been removed and replaced with autonomous self-governing communes in a federative structure, then we will truly have heaven on earth. We shall come back to this view below, but it is worth noting that arguments for anarchism always turn on the idea that if human beings are allowed to express what comes naturally to them, if the force of life itself is not repressed by the deathly force of the state, then it will be possible to organize society on the basis of mutual aid and cooperation.

By contrast, authoritarians believe that human nature is essentially wicked. This is why the concept of original sin is so important politically. For Donoso Cortés and de Maistre, human beings were naturally depraved and essentially vile. There is something essentially defective in human nature that requires a corrective at the political and theological level. It requires the authority of the state and the church. Thus, because the human being is defined by original sin, authoritarianism, in the form of dictatorship say, becomes necessary as the only means that might save human beings from themselves. Human beings require the hard rule of authority because they are essentially defective. Against this, anarchism is the political expression of freedom from original sin, that is, a sin-

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9. See Simon Critchley, “The Catechism of the Citizen, Politics, Law, and Religion in, after, with, and against Rousseau”, *Continental Philosophy Review*. 42(1) (February 2009), 5–34.

less union with others in the form of community is the realization of the highest human possibility.

The idea of original sin is not some outdated relic from the religious past. It is the conceptual expression of a fundamental experience of ontological defectiveness or lack that explains the human propensity towards error, malice, wickedness, violence and extreme cruelty. Furthermore this defect is not something we can put right, which is why authoritarians think that human beings require the yoke of the state, God, law and the police. Politics becomes the means for protecting human beings from themselves, that is, from their worst inclinations towards lust, cruelty and violence. As Hobbes shows, any return to a state of nature is an argument in favour of the war of all against all. We can find numerous post-Christian attempts to rethink the concept of original sin. For example, Freud advances the Schopenhauerian thesis that there might simply be a disjunction between eros and civilization, between the aggressive, destructive workings of libidinous desire and the achievements of culture. This disjunction is only held in check through the internalized authority of the super-ego. Again, Heidegger's ideas of thrownness, facticity and falling were explicitly elaborated in connection with Luther's conception of original sin and seek to explain the endless human propensity towards evasion and flight from taking responsibility for oneself. Although such a responsibility can be momentarily achieved in authentic resoluteness, it can never arrest the slide back into inauthenticity. The concept of original sin is still very much with us.

### John Gray – the naturalization of original sin, political realism and passive nihilism

The most consequent contemporary defence of the idea of original sin can be found in the work of John Gray. What he gives us is a naturalized, Darwinian redescription of original sin.<sup>10</sup> To put it brutally, human beings are killer apes. We are simply animals, and rather nasty aggressive primates at that, what Gray calls *homo rapiens*, rapacious hominids. Sadly, we are also killer apes with metaphysical longing, which explains the ceaseless quest to find some meaning to life that might be underwritten by an experience of the holy or the numinous. Today's dominant metaphysical dogma – and this is Gray's real and rightful target – is liberal humanism, with its faith in progress, improvement and the perfectibility of humankind, beliefs that are held with the same unquestioning assurance that Christianity was held with in Europe until the late eighteenth century. As Gray

10. See John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003); *Enlightenment's Wake* (London: Routledge, 2007); *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).

makes clear, progress in the realm of science is a fact. Furthermore, it is a good. De Quincey famously remarked that a quarter of human misery resulted from toothache.<sup>11</sup> The discovery of anaesthetic dentistry is, thus, an unmixed good. However, although progress is a fact, *faith* in progress is a superstition and the liberal humanist's assurance in the reality of human progress is the barely secularized version of the Christian belief in Providence.

The most extreme expression of human arrogance, for Gray, is the idea that human beings can save the planet from environmental destruction.<sup>12</sup> Because they are killer apes, that is, by virtue of a naturalized version of original sin that tends them towards wickedness and violence, human beings cannot save their planet. Furthermore, the earth does not need saving. This is where Gray borrows from James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis. The earth is suffering from a *disseminated primatemaia*: a plague of people. *Homo rapiens* is ravaging the planet like a filthy pest that has infested a dilapidated but once beautiful mansion. In 1600 the human population was about half a billion. In the 1990s it increased by the same amount. This plague cannot be solved by the very species that is the efficient cause of the problem, but only by a large-scale decline in human numbers, back down to manageable levels, say half a billion or so. This is the wonderfully dystopian vision at the heart of Gray's work: when the earth is done with humans, it will recover and human civilization will be forgotten. Life will go on, but without us. Global warming is simply one of many fevers that the earth has suffered during its history. It will recover, but we won't because we can't.

Gray writes, with Schmitt explicitly in mind, "Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion".<sup>13</sup> Politics has become a hideous surrogate for religious salvation. Secularism, which denies the truth of religion, is a religious myth. Specifically, it is a myth of progress based in the idea that history has a providential design that is unfolding. Now, such myths are important. They enable presidents like Barack Obama to get elected. But it does not mean that they are true or even salutary. What most disturbs Gray are utopian political projects based on some apocalyptic faith that concerted human action in the world can allow for the realization of seemingly impossible ends and bring about the perfection of humanity. Action cannot change the world because we are the sort of beings that we are: killer apes who will use violence, force and terror at the service of some longed-for metaphysical project. For Gray, the core belief that drives utopianism, on the Right as much as the Left, is the false assumption that the world can be transformed by human action and that history itself is progress towards such a transformation. As Gray makes explicit, his critique of utopianism derives in

11. Quoted in Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 155.

12. *Ibid.*, 6–17.

13. Gray, *Black Mass*, 1.



large part from Norman Cohn's hugely influential book, originally published in 1957, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.<sup>14</sup>

It is Cohn's analysis of millenarianism that is so important for Gray. This is the idea that salvation is not just a possibility, but a certainty that will correspond to five criteria: salvation is collective, terrestrial, imminent, total and miraculous. In his later work, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, Cohn traced the roots of this millenarian faith back to Zoroaster's break with the view that the world was the reflection of a static cosmic order defined by a cycle of conflict.<sup>15</sup> On the Zoroastrian view, some time between 1500 and 1200 BCE, the world was moving, through incessant conflict, towards a conflictless state. A time would come when, during a final bloody battle, God and the forces of good would defeat once and for all the armies of evil. Thus, a marvellous consummation is at hand, the moment when good will triumph over evil and the agents of evil will be annihilated. After that time, Cohn writes, "The elect will thereafter live as a collectivity, unanimous and without conflict, on a transformed and purified earth".<sup>16</sup>

This idea finds expression in certain Jewish sects before finding its most powerful articulation in Christian ideas of the Apocalypse, the Last Days and the Millennium. On the basis of the authority of the Book of Revelation, it was believed that after Christ's Second Coming, he would establish a kingdom of God on earth and reign over it with his elect, the company of saints, for a thousand years until the Last Judgement and the general resurrection of the dead. Early Christians, like St Paul, believed that the Second Coming was imminent and that they were living in the end times. The search for signs of the Second Coming obviously took on enormous importance. The key clue to the beginning of the end times – and this is crucial – is the appearance of the Antichrist: the prodigious, evil, arch-enemy of God. The Antichrist is what Ernesto Laclau would call a "floating signifier" in millenarian political theology. He is endlessly substitutable: he can be personified as the great Satan, the Pope, the Muslims or the Jews. What is crucial here is the identification of the Antichrist as the incarnation of evil that presages the reappearance of Christ or a similarly messianic figure and leads to a bloody and violent terrestrial combat to build heaven on earth. This, of course, is the deep logic of the Crusades, which began with Pope Urban II's plea to the Church Council of 1095 to go to Jerusalem and, in his words, "liberate the Church of God". This lead directly to the "People's Crusade" or the "Peasants' Crusade" in 1096–7 and to the formation of a Christian fighting force in Asia Minor that was 50,000–70,000 strong. It is a compelling and dis-

14. See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, revised and expanded edn (London: Temple Smith, 1970).

15. See Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

16. *Ibid.*, foreword.



turbing historical fact that the recruitment of soldiers for the “People’s Crusade” in France, Germany and the Low Countries established a disturbing new and seemingly addictive habit in Western life: pogroms against the Jews. It would appear that the idea of the people requires the external identification of an evil enemy who can be legitimately annihilated in the name of God. Such has arguably always been the justificatory logic of Western military intervention: it is right to exterminate the enemy because they are the incarnation of evil. Such views have always vindicated crusaders from the eleventh century through to their more recent epigones. From the time of Saladin’s destruction of the Third Crusade in the last years of the twelfth century, the response has always been the same: *jihad* or war against infidels. It is perhaps not so surprising that Saddam Hussein sought to depict himself in propaganda alongside Saladin. After all, they were both born in Tikrit, despite the awful irony that Saladin was a Kurd.

What is implied fairly discreetly by Cohn and rather loudly trumpeted by Gray, is that Western civilization might be defined in terms of the central role of millenarian thinking. What takes root with early Christian belief and massively accelerates in medieval Europe finds its modern expression in a sequence of bloody utopian political projects, from Jacobinism to Bolshevism, Stalinism, Nazism and different varieties of Marxist–Leninist, anarchist or Situationist ideology. Much of Gray’s *Black Mass* attempts to show how the energy of such utopian political projects has drifted from the Left to the Right. The apocalyptic conflict with the axis of evil by the forces of good has been employed by Bush, Blair and others as a means to forge the democratic millennium, a new American century of untrammelled personal freedom and free markets. In the past decade, millennial faith has energized the project of what we might call military neo-liberalism, where violence is the means for realizing liberal democratic heaven on Earth. What is essential to such neo-liberal millenarian thinking is the consolidation of the idea of the good through the identification of evil, where the Antichrist keeps putting on different masks: Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Kim Jong-il, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and so on.

We saw how Schmitt’s critique of liberalism led him towards an argument for dictatorship underpinned by a belief in original sin. Where does Gray’s naturalization of the concept of original sin leave us? He powerfully identifies the poison within liberal humanism, but what is the antidote? This is what he calls “political realism”. We have to accept that the world is in a state of ceaseless conflict never far from a state of war. In the face of such conflict, Gray counsels that we have to abandon the belief in Utopia and try to cope with reality. This means accepting the tragic contingencies of life and the fact that there are simply moral and political dilemmas for which there is no solution. We have to learn to abandon daydreams such as a world of universal human rights, or that history has a teleological purpose that underwrites human action. We even have to renounce the Obamaesque delusion that one’s life is a narrative that is an episode in some

universal story of progress. Against the grotesque distortion of conservatism into the millenarian military neo-liberalism of the neo-conservatives, Gray wants to defend the core belief of traditional Burkean Toryism. The latter begins in a realistic acceptance of human imperfection and frailty, a version of original sin. As such, the best that flawed and potentially wicked human creatures can hope for is a commitment to civilized constraints that will prevent the very worst from happening. Political realism is the politics of the least worst.

The most original feature of Gray's work is the way in which a traditional conservatism underpinned by a deep pessimism about human nature is fused with a certain strand of Taoism. As Gray points out, "Nothing is more human than the readiness to kill and die in order to secure a meaning for life".<sup>17</sup> The great human delusion is that action can achieve a terrestrial salvation. This has led to nothing but bloodshed, the great slaughter bench of millenarian history. Killer apes like us have to learn to give up the search for meaning and learn to see the purpose of aesthetic or spiritual life as the release from meaning. If seeing one's life as an episode in some universal narrative of meaning is a delusion, then the cure consists in freeing oneself from such narratives. Maybe we just have to accept illusions. What interests Gray in the subtle paradoxes of the greatest Taoist thinker Chuang-Tzu is the acceptance of the fact that life is a dream without the possibility or even the desire to awaken from the dream. If we cannot be free of illusions, if illusions are part and parcel of our natural constitution, then why not simply accept them? In the final pages of *Black Mass*, Gray writes, "Taoists taught that freedom lies in freeing oneself from personal narratives by identifying with cosmic processes of death and renewal".<sup>18</sup> Thus, rather than seek the company of utopian thinkers, we should find consolation in the words of "mystics, poets and pleasure-lovers".<sup>19</sup> It is clear that for Gray, like the late Heidegger, the real source of human problems resides in the belief that action can transform the world. Action simply provides a consolation for the radical insignificance of our lives by momentarily staving off the threat of meaninglessness. At the core of Gray's work is a defence of the ideal of contemplation over action, the *ataraxia* of the ancients, where we simply learn to see the mystery as such and do not seek to unveil it in order to find some deeper purpose within.

Schopenhauer, often read in an abridged aphoristic form, was the most popular philosopher of the nineteenth century. Nothing sells better than epigrammatic pessimism. It gives readers reasons for their misery and words to buttress their sense of hopelessness and impotence. Such is what Nietzsche called "European Buddhism". Gray is the Schopenhauerian European Buddhist of our age. What he offers is a gloriously pessimistic cultural analysis that rightly reduces to rubble

17. Gray, *Black Mass*, 186.

18. *Ibid.*, 206.

19. *Ibid.*, 206.

the false idols of the cave of liberal humanism. Counter to the upbeat evangelical atheism of Dawkins, Hitchens and others, Gray provides a powerful argument in favour of human wickedness that is consistent with Darwinian naturalism. It leads to the position that I call “passive nihilism”.

The passive nihilist looks at the world from a certain highly cultivated detachment and finds it meaningless. Rather than trying to act in the world, which is pointless, the passive nihilist withdraws to a safe contemplative distance and cultivates and refines his aesthetic sensibility by pursuing the pleasures of lyric poetry, bird-watching or botany, as was the case with the aged Rousseau. In a world that is rushing to destroy itself through capitalist exploitation or military crusades (usually two arms of the same killer ape), the passive nihilist withdraws to an island where the mystery of existence can be seen for what it is without distilling it into a meaning. In the face of the coming century, which in all likelihood will be defined by the violence of faith and the certainty of environmental devastation, Gray offers a cool but safe temporary refuge. Happily, we will not be alive to witness much of the future that he describes.

I have looked at two interrelated responses to the thought that the modern concepts of politics are secularized theological concepts. Schmitt's critique of constitutional liberalism as anti-political leads him to a concept of the political that finds its expression in state sovereignty, authoritarianism and dictatorship. Gray's critique of liberal humanism and the ideas of progress and Providence that it embodies leads him to a political realism of a traditional Tory variety. He fuses this, in an extremely compelling way, with what I have called passive nihilism. Both conceptions of the political are underpinned by ideas of original sin, whether the traditional Catholic teaching or Gray's Darwinian naturalization of the concept. The refutation of any and all forms of utopianism follows from this concept of original sin. It is because we are killer apes that our metaphysical longing for a conflict-free perfection of humanity can only be pursued with the millennial means of violence and terror.

## Millenarianism

Is the utopian impulse in political thinking simply the residue of a dangerous political theology that we are much better off without? Are the only live options in political thinking Schmitt's authoritarianism, Gray's political realism or business-as-usual liberalism; that is, a politics of state sovereignty, an incremental, traditionalist conservatism or varieties of more or less enthused Obamaism? In order to approach these questions I would like to present the form of politics that Schmitt and Gray explicitly reject, namely anarchism. Now, I have sought to outline and defend a version of anarchism in some of my recent work. This is

what I call an ethical neo-anarchism where anarchist practices of political organization are coupled with an infinitely demanding subjective ethics of responsibility.<sup>20</sup> However, for reasons that I hope will become clear, I want to present a very different version of anarchism, perhaps the most radical that can be conceived, namely “mystical anarchism”. The key issue here is what happens to our thinking of politics and community once the fact of original sin has been overcome.

Let us return to Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. What Cohn tries to show is the way in which millenarian Christian belief took root among significant sectors of the rootless and dislocated poor of Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. The belief that these were the Last Days led to a revolutionary eschatology, where a series of messiah figures, prophets or indeed “Christs” would spontaneously appear. Cohn gives an extraordinary catalogue of these messiahs, from Tancheln, the Emperor Frederick, the Pseudo-Baldwin, through to John Ball, Hans Böhm, Thomas Müntzer and terrifying and bloodthirsty Jan Bockelsen, better known as John of Leyden. What unites these figures is not just their heretical fury and utter self-belief; it is, rather, their capacity to construct what Cohn calls, non-perjoratively but put psychoanalytically, a *phantasy* or social myth around which a collective can be formed. The political structure of this phantasy becomes complete with the identification of an enemy. It is always in relation to an enemy that the eschatological phantasy finds its traction. This enemy is always the Antichrist, whose identity floats in different historical manifestations of millenarianism. It can be the Moslems or indeed Jews for the Crusaders, but it is more often simply the forces of the Catholic Church and the state. A holy war is then fought with the Antichrist, where violence becomes the purifying or cleansing force through which the evil ones are to be annihilated. Terror is a common feature of life in the New Jerusalem.

Revolutionary millenarianism desires a boundless social transformation that attempts to recover an egalitarian state of nature, a kind of golden age of primitive communism. This required the abolition of private property and the establishment of a commonality of ownership. Justification for such views would invariably be biblical, usually the Garden of Eden. As a famous proverb from the time of the English Peasants’ Revolt puts it, possibly recited by the hedge priest John Ball: “When Adam dived and Eve span, / Who was then a gentleman?”. The task of politics was the construction of the New Jerusalem and the model was always paradise: the Garden of Eden before the occurrence of original sin. There was a perfectly obviously reason why such forms of revolutionary millenarian belief should arise among the poor: they owned nothing and therefore had nothing to lose. Thus, by destroying private property, they had everything to gain.

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20. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*.

The only extant fragment from John Ball, preserved and probably embellished by chroniclers, makes the point powerfully,

Things cannot go well in England, nor ever will, until all goods are held in common, and until there will be neither serfs nor gentlemen, and we shall be equal. For what reason have they, whom we call lords, got the best of us? How did they deserve it? Why do they keep us in bondage? If we all descended from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve, how can they assert or prove that they are more masters than ourselves? Except perhaps that they make us work and produce for them to spend!<sup>21</sup>

Yet, the poor, as the saying goes, have always been with us. What seems to be novel in the earlier part of large historical panorama that Cohn describes is the emergence of the urban poor in the rapidly industrializing textile-producing towns of Flanders and Brabant from the eleventh century onwards. Thus, it is not simply that millenarian belief arises among the poor, but specifically among those groups whose traditional ways of life have broken down. Millenarian belief arises among the socially *dislocated*, recently urbanized, poor who had moved from the country to the city for economic reasons. Although Cohn says nothing on this topic, it is interesting to note that the socioeconomic condition of possibility for revolutionary eschatology is dislocation, the same category that Marx employs to describe the formation of the industrial proletariat during the industrial revolution.

(Perhaps a similar hypothesis could be used to explain the formation of millenarian sects in the United States from the time of settlement onwards. I am thinking in particular of the explosion of millenarian faith in areas like the “burned-over district” of upper New York State during the late eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century in groups like the Shakers. It is not exactly difficult to find the living descendents of such millenarian religious belief all across the contemporary United States. There seems to be a powerful correlation between evangelism, social dislocation and poverty. Yet, what is sorely missing from contemporary American millenarianism is the radical anarcho-communism of groups like the Shakers. For the latter, all property was held in common, without mine and thine. An ethos of manual labour was combined with spiritual purification achieved through taking the vow of chastity. With hands at work and hearts set to God, the Shakers attempted to recover the communistic equality of Eden without the sins of the flesh. This was further radicalized through the revelations of the founder of the Shakers, Ann Lee or

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21. Quoted in Jean Froissart, “The Peasant Revolt in England”, in *Chronicles*, G. Brereton (trans.), 212–13 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1381] 1968); see Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 199 [Eds].

Mother Ann (1736–84), from Manchester, who brought a select band of persecuted Shakers (more properly, the Church of Believers in Christ) from England to New York in 1774 before setting up communities in Upstate New York and Western Massachusetts. Various divine visitations led her to declare celibacy and the imminent second coming of Christ. She was seen by some as the female equivalent of God, the female complement to the divine male principle. (For the Shakers, to be a believer in Christ was to participate in the dual nature of divinity, both male and female.)

Medieval revolutionary millenarianism drew its strength and found its energy among the marginal and the dispossessed. It often arose against a background of disaster, plague and famine. As Cohn notes, “The greatest wave of millenarian excitement, one that swept through the whole of society, was precipitated by the most universal natural disaster of the Middle Ages, the Black Death”.<sup>22</sup> It was among the lowest social strata that millenarian enthusiasm lasted longest and expressed itself most violently. For example, the flagellant movement first appeared in Perugia in 1260 as an apparent consequence of the famine of 1250 and the plague of 1259. It swept from Italy into the Rhine Valley in the fourteenth century, where great crowds of itinerant flagellants went from town to town like a scourging insurgency, becoming God-like through acts of collective *imitatio Christi*. Such extreme self-punishment was deemed heretical because it threatened the Church’s authority over the economy of punishment, penitence and consolation. The poor were not meant to take the whip into their own hands. But the centrepiece of Cohn’s book is the description and analysis of the dominant form of revolutionary millenarianism: the so-called heresy of the free spirit. It is to this that I would now like to turn.

## The Movement of the Free Spirit

We know very little about the Movement of the Free Spirit. Everything turns on the interpretation of Paul’s words, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Lord’s Spirit is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). There are two possibilities here: either the Lord’s Spirit is outside the self or within it. If the Lord’s Spirit is outside the self, because the Soul languishes in sin and perdition, then freedom can only come through submitting oneself to divine will and awaiting the saving activity of grace. Such is the standard Christian teaching, which explains the necessity for the authority of the Church as that terrestrial location or, better, portal to the Lord’s Spirit. But if – and here is the key to the heresy – the Lord’s Spirit is within the self, then the Soul is free and has no need of the mediation

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22. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 282.

of the Church. Indeed, and we shall come back to this presently, if the Lord's Spirit is within the self, then essentially there is no difference between the Soul and God. The heretical Adamites who moved to Bohemia after being expelled from Picardy in the early fifteenth century, are reported as beginning the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Our Father, who art within us ...". If a community participates in the Spirit of God, then it is free and has no need of the agencies of the Church, state, law or police. These are the institutions of the unfree world that a community based on the Free Spirit rejects. It is not difficult to grasp the anarchistic consequences of such a belief.

The apparently abundant and widespread doctrinal literature of the Movement of the Free Spirit was repeatedly seized and destroyed by the Inquisition. Very few texts remain, but among them is the fascinating *Schwester Katrei*, apocryphally attributed to Meister Eckhart. At least one of the extant manuscripts bears the inscription, *That is Sister Katrei, Meister Eckhart's Daughter from Strasbourg*. Although this is a huge topic that I do not want to broach here, the relation between Eckhart's thinking, deemed heretical posthumously by the Pope at Avignon in 1327, and the Movement of the Free Spirit is hugely suggestive. Of the documents related to the Free Spirit that remain, I would like to focus on Marguerite Porete's extraordinary *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls and Who Remain Only in Wanting and Desire of Love*, to give the text its full and indeed ambiguous title.<sup>23</sup> The text was only discovered in 1946. It seems clear that Eckhart knew Porete's *The Mirror* and responded to it explicitly or implicitly in his texts and sermons. Michael Sells claims that when Eckhart returned to Paris in 1311, one year after Porete's execution, he stayed at the same Dominican house as William Humbert, Porete's inquisitor. One can only wonder at the content of their conversations. *The Mirror* is an instruction manual of sorts that details the seven stages that the Soul must pass through in order to overcome original sin and recover the perfection that belonged to human beings prior to their corruption by the Fall. *The Mirror* seems to have circulated in multiple manuscripts and translations in the Middle Ages and Porete appears to have had many followers as far away from her native Hainaut in northern France as England and Italy. We know relatively little with certainty about Porete, although there is a surprising amount of documentation related to her trial and execution for heresy. She was a learned Beguine, which was the term that was used to describe semi-religious women who lived alone or in Beguine houses or *Beguinaiges*. These began to appear in the southern Low Countries in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and were effectively communes or experimental associations for the sisters of the Free Spirit and their brothers, the Beghards, from which we derive

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23. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, E. Babinsky (trans.) (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).



the English word “beggar”. Marguerite seems to have led an itinerant mendicant life of poverty accompanied by a guardian Beghard. Her book was condemned, seized and publicly burned at Valenciennes, but she refused to retract it. When Porete came to the attention of the Inquisition in Paris, she was imprisoned for eighteen months, but refused to recant or seek absolution. She was burnt at the stake in 1310. The fact that she was treated with relative liberality and not immediately executed seems to suggest that she was from the upper strata of society and she had some powerful friends. Although it is not my topic here, it is truly fascinating how many women were involved with the Movement of the Free Spirit and their relatively high social status. Scholars of mysticism such as Amy Hollywood and poets such as Anne Carson have rightly identified Porete and the Beguine movement as a vital precursor to modern feminism.<sup>24</sup> It is highly revealing that, in the proceeding of her trial, not only is Porete’s work referred to as being “filled with errors and heresies”, but she is described as a “*pseudo-mulier*”, a fake woman.<sup>25</sup>

## Becoming God

I would like to identify the core of the Movement of the Free Spirit by recounting the seven stages of what Porete calls “the devout Soul” outlined in Chapter 118 of *The Mirror* (the book contains 139 chapters). What is described is nothing other than the process of self-deification, of becoming God.

1. The first state occurs when the Soul is touched by God’s grace and assumes the intention of following all God’s commandments, of being obedient to divine law.
2. The second state mounts yet higher and the Soul becomes a lover of God over and above commandments and laws. Regardless of any command, the Soul wants to do all it can to please its beloved. In this second state, and one thinks of St Paul’s argument in Romans here, the external becomes internal and law is overcome by love.
3. In the third state, consumed by love for divine perfection, the Soul attaches itself to making “works of goodness”. These can be images, representations, projects and objects that give us delight in glorifying God. But Porete insists, and this is a theme that Eckhart will take up in his extraordinary German sermons, the Soul “renounces those works in which she has this

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24. See Anne Carson, “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God”, *Common Knowledge* 8(1) (2002), 188–201; Amy Hollywood, “‘Who Does She Think She Is?’ Christian Women’s Mysticism”, *Theology Today* 60 (April 2003), 5–15.

25. Quoted in Carson, “Decreation”, 203.

delight, and puts to death the will which had its life from this”.<sup>26</sup> The Soul no longer wills, but undergoes a detachment from the will by obeying the will of another, namely God. The Soul must become a “martyr” – that is, a witness and victim to God – by abstaining from works and destroying the will. Porete’s language here is extremely violent. She writes that, “One must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be”.<sup>27</sup> This is the beginning of the painful process of the annihilation of the Soul, where suffering is necessary in order to bore open a space that is wide enough for love to enter. Anne Carson rightly compares this process of annihilation with Simone Weil’s idea of *decreation*, “To undo the creature in us”.<sup>28</sup>

4. In the fourth state, when I have renounced my will and hewn away at myself, when I have begun to decreate and annihilate myself, I am filled with God’s love and exalted “into delight”. Porete’s wording here is extraordinary, the Soul “does not believe that God has any greater gift to bestow on any Soul here below than this love which Love for love has poured forth within her”.<sup>29</sup> In the fourth state, the Soul is in love with love as such and becomes intoxicated, “Gracious Love makes her wholly *drunken*”.<sup>30</sup>

*Excursus:* In his wonderfully capacious and open-minded investigation of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James discusses the relation between mystical states and drunkenness. This is what he calls the idea of “anaesthetic revelation”, which he links to his own experiences with nitrous oxide or laughing gas, which had been a drug of choice among scientists, poets and intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Nitrous oxide, James recounts from personal experience, induces a feeling of reconciliation or oneness at a level deeper than that of ordinary waking consciousness with its separation of subjects and objects. Indeed, James goes further and compares this mystical experience of reconciliation, or cosmic consciousness, with what he sees as Hegel’s pantheism. This is, for James, the “monistic insight, in which the OTHER in its various forms appears absorbed into the One”.<sup>32</sup> On this reading of Hegel (and, of course, other readings are possible), the key to dialectical thinking is the unity of the Same

26. Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ch. 118.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Carson, “Decreation”, 194. See Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, A. Wills (trans.) (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 81.

29. Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ch. 118, 189–91.

30. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

31. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Random House, 1929), 378–83. See also James’s essay “Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide”, *Mind* 7 (1882), <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/william/nitrous/index.html> (accessed July 2009).

32. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 379.

and the Other, where what Hegel calls the Concept would be that movement of thinking that grasps both itself and its opposite. James adds that, “this is a dark saying”, but he insists that “the living sense of the reality” of Hegel’s philosophy “only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind”.<sup>33</sup> In others words, Hegel can only be understood when one is drunk on laughing gas.

Drunkenness is always followed by a hangover. Such is the condition that Porete calls “dismay”, and which other mystics commonly call distress, dereliction and distance from God. The error of the fourth state – and by implication James’s analysis of mysticism – is to believe that the progress of the Soul is complete in its beatific union with God. Such a conception of *unio mystica* is common to many mystics and was tolerated and even encouraged by the Church, when and where it could be controlled. Porete, however, is engaged in a much more radical enterprise, namely the Soul’s annihilation. This brings us to the fifth state.

5. The dismay and dereliction of the fifth state arises from the following sober consideration: on the one hand, the Soul considers God as the source of things that are, that is, of all goodness. But, on the other hand, the Soul then turns to consider itself, from which all things are not. The free will that God put into the Soul has been corrupted by the Fall. In so far as the Soul wills anything, that thing is evil for it is nothing but the expression of original sin and the separation from the divine source of goodness. As Porete puts it, “The Soul’s Will sees ... that it cannot progress by itself if it does not separate itself from her own willing, for her nature is evil by that inclination towards nothingness to which nature tends”.<sup>34</sup> How, then, can I will not to will? I cannot, for every act of will, even the will not to will, is the expression of separation from divine goodness and therefore evil. As we saw in the third state, the Soul has tried to cut away at itself, to bore a hole in itself that will allow love to enter. But the momentary exaltation of the fourth state, drunk with divinity, was illusory and transitory. The fifth state, Porete writes, “has subdued her [i.e. the Soul] in showing to the Soul her own self”. It is here that we face what Porete repeatedly calls an “abyss”, “deep beyond all depths”, “without compass or end”.<sup>35</sup> This abyss is the gap between the wilful and errant nature of the Soul and divine goodness. It cannot be bridged by any action. In the fifth state, two natures are at war within me: the divine goodness that I love and the evil that I am by virtue of original sin. As Paul puts it, “The Good that I would I do not, but the Evil that I would not that I do” (Romans 7:19). Faced with this abyss, in

33. *Ibid.*

34. Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ch. 118, 191–3.

35. *Ibid.*, ch. 118, 192.

the fifth state I become a paradox. The Soul wants to annihilate itself and unify with God. But how? How can an abyss become a byss?<sup>36</sup>

6. This is the work of the sixth state, which is the highest that can be attained during terrestrial life. In the sobriety of the fifth state, the Soul knows two things: divine goodness and the errant activity of the will. In making “her look at herself again”, in such painful self-scrutiny, Porete adds that “these two things that she sees take away from her will and longing and works of goodness, and so she is wholly at rest, and put in possession of her own state of free being, the high excellence of which gives her repose from every thing”.<sup>37</sup> Having gone through the ordeal of the fifth state, the Soul finds repose and rest, what Eckhart will call an experience of releasement.

The reasoning here is delicate: the abyss that separates the Soul from God cannot be byssed or bridged through an act of will. On the contrary, it is only through the extinction of the will and the annihilation of the Soul that the sixth state can be attained. That is, the Soul itself becomes an abyss, that is, it becomes emptied and excoriated, entering a condition of absolute poverty. It is only in such poverty that the wealth of God can be poured into the Soul. In the fifth state, the Soul looked at herself and experienced dereliction. But in the sixth state, “the Soul does not see herself at all”. Not only that, the Soul also does not see God. Rather, and these words are extraordinary, “God of his divine majesty sees himself in her, and by him this Soul is so illumined that she cannot see that anyone exists, except only God himself, from whom all things are”.<sup>38</sup>

When the Soul has become annihilated and “free of all things”, then it can be illumined by the presence of God. It is only by reducing myself to nothing, that I can join with that divine something. As Porete insists, in this sixth state the Soul is not yet glorified, that is, a direct participant in the glory of God. This only happens after our death, in the seventh state. But what happens in the sixth state is even more extraordinary than glory. Let me quote at length the key passage:

[T]his Soul, thus pure and illumined, sees neither God nor herself, but God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her, who – that is, God – shows to her that there is nothing except him. And therefore this Soul knows nothing except him, and loves nothing

36. This is a reference to Jacob Boehme: “In one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at an university. For I saw and knew the being of all things, the Byss and the Abyss, and the eternal generation of the holy Trinity, the descent and original of the world and of all creatures through the divine wisdom” (quoted in James, *The Varieties of Human Religious Experience*, 400) [Eds].

37. Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ch. 117, 192.

38. *Ibid.*

except him, and praises nothing except him, for there is nothing but he.<sup>39</sup>

This means the following: *the annihilated Soul becomes the place for God's infinite self-reflection*. The logic here is impeccable: if the Soul has become nothing, then it can obviously see neither itself nor God. On the contrary, God enters into the place that I created by hewing and hacking away at myself. But that place is no longer my self. What the Soul has created is the space of its own annihilation. This *nihil* is the "place", or better what Augustine might call the "no place", where God reflects on himself, where "God sees himself of himself in her". God's love fills the annihilated Soul, in a movement of reflection that is at once both "for her" and "without her". The only way in which the Soul can become for God is by becoming without itself. In its annihilation, the no-place of the Soul becomes the place of God's reflection on himself, in-himself and for-himself.

As Anne Carson rightly asks in her enquiry into how it is that women like Sappho, Simone Weil and Marguerite Porete tell God, "What is it that love dares the self to do?"<sup>40</sup> She answers that, "Love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty".<sup>41</sup> Love is, thus, the audacity of impoverishment, of complete submission. It is an act of absolute spiritual daring that induces a passivity where the self becomes annihilated; it is a subjective act where the subject extinguishes itself. Become a husk or empty vessel through this act of daring, and the fullness of love enters in. It is through the act of annihilation that the Soul knows nothing but God, "and loves nothing except him". Once the Soul is not, God is the only being that is.

7. As I already indicated, the seventh state is only attained after our death. It is the condition of "everlasting glory", of which we shall have no knowledge until our Souls have left our bodies.

## Communitistic consequences

It is time to draw the significant consequences from Porete's sinuous argumentation. Why was *The Mirror* condemned as heresy? For the simple reason that once the Soul is annihilated, there is nothing to prevent its identity with God. By following the itinerary of the seven states described in *The Mirror*, the Soul is annihilated and I become nothing. In my becoming nothing, God enters the

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39. *Ibid.*

40. Carson, "Decreation," 191.

41. *Ibid.*

place where my Soul was. At that point, *I* – whatever sense the first person pronoun might still have – *become God*. When I become nothing, I become God.

As William James shows, varieties of this claim can be found in the mystical tradition. But perhaps everything goes back to St Paul's words, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20). That is, when I annihilate myself, that is, when I crucify myself in an *imitatio Christi*, then Christ lives within me. In other words, the I that lives is not I but God. This might also be linked to Henry Suso's<sup>42</sup> words, "The spirit dies, and yet it is alive in the marvels of the Godhead".<sup>43</sup> Or, indeed, we could make a connection to the difference-less point of the Godhead at the heart of Eckhart's theology. Yet, Porete is more radical still. The heart of the heresy of the Free Spirit is not some Neo-Platonic idea of the contemplative union of the intellect with the One as the source of an emanation, God, the bliss of contact with the divine. Rather, as Cohn writes, "it was a passionate desire of certain human beings to surpass the condition of humanity and to become God".<sup>44</sup> What Porete is describing is a painful process of decreation: boring a (w)hole in oneself so that love might enter. It is closer to Teresa of Avila's piercing of the heart that takes place when she is on fire with the love of God: "The pain was so great, it made me moan".<sup>45</sup> This desire for annihilation unleashes the most extreme violence against the self. For example, Angela of Foligno writes: "and oftentimes was my rage so great that I could scarce refrain from rending myself and beating myself most grievously, thus causing my head and all my members to swell".<sup>46</sup> The consequence of such a process of self-deification is to overcome the condition of original sin and to return to the freedom that human beings enjoyed before the Fall. As the founder of the Quakers, George Fox, has it, "Now was I come up ... to the state of Adam in which he was before he fell".<sup>47</sup> It is not difficult to see why the Movement of the Free Spirit posed such a profound threat to the authority of the Catholic Church and the governmental and legislative authority of various states in which it manifested itself. If it was possible to overcome original sin and regain the Edenic state of intimacy with the divine, then what possible function might be served by the Catholic

42. Henry (Heinrich) Suso was German medieval mystic and student of Meister Eckhart [Eds].

43. See *Life of Blessed Henry Suso by Himself*, Chapter LVI, "Of the Very Highest Flight of A Soul Experienced in the Ways of God", quoted in James, *The Varieties of Human Religious Experience*, Lectures XVI and XVII, "Mysticism", 411.

44. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 174.

45. Teresa de Avila, *The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself*, J. M. Cohen (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), chapter 29, §§16–17.

46. Angela de Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela de Foligno*, Mary J. Steegman (trans.) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1909), 15.

47. George Fox, *Journal*, quoted in Pink Dandelion, *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 161.

Church, whose authority as a mediator between the human and the divine is only justified in so far as human beings live and travail in the wake of original sin. As we have seen in our discussion of Schmitt, all forms of ecclesiastical and governmental authoritarianism require a belief in original sin. It is only because human beings are defective and imperfect that church and state become necessary. If human beings become free, that is, perfected by overcoming the sin and death that define the post-Lapsarian human condition, then this has dramatic political consequences.

To begin with, as we saw in our allusions to John Ball and the Peasants' Revolt, if the spirit is free then all conceptions of mine and thine vanish. In the annihilation of the Soul, mine becomes thine, I becomes thou, and the no-place of the Soul becomes the space of divine self-reflection. Such an experience of divinity, of course, is not my individual private property, but is the commonwealth of those who are free in spirit. Private property is just the consequence of our fallen state. The Soul's recovery of its natural freedom entails commonality of ownership. The only true owner of property is God and his wealth is held in common by all creatures without hierarchy or distinctions of class and hereditary privilege. The political form of the Movement of the Free Spirit is communism.

Furthermore, it is a communism whose social bond is love. We have seen how Porete describes the work of love as the audacity of the Soul's annihilation. Clearly, there can be no higher authority than divine love, which entails that communism would be a political form higher than law (Marx repeats many of these ideas, imagining communism as a society without law). We might say that law is the juridical form that structures a social order. As such, it is based on the repression of the moment of community. Law is the external constraint on society that allows authority to be exercised, all the way to its dictatorial suspension. From the perspective of the communism of the Free Spirit, law loses its legitimacy because it is a form of heteronomous authority as opposed to autonomously chosen work of love. Furthermore, and perhaps this is what was most dangerous in the Movement of the Free Spirit, if human beings are free of original sin, where God is manifested as the spirit of commonality, then there is no longer any legitimacy to moral constraints on human behaviour that do not directly flow from our freedom. The demands of the state and the church can simply be ignored if they are not consistent with the experience of freedom. To be clear, this is not at all to say that the Movement of the Free Spirit implies immoralism. On the contrary, it is to claim that morality has flowed from freedom by being consistent with a principle of that which is located not in the individual but in its divine source, the Free Spirit that is held in common.

The Movement of the Free Spirit has habitually been seen as encouraging both moral and sexual libertinage. One cannot exaggerate the extent to which the alleged sexual excesses of the adepts of the Free Spirit obsessed the Inquisition that investigated and condemned the movement, destroying its literature and



executing or incarcerating its members. Most of what we know of the movement is mediated through the agency of the church that outlawed it. Such evidence is clearly difficult to trust. In particular, the various inquisitors seem obsessed with cataloguing instances of nakedness, as if that were evidence of the most depraved morals. But what are clothes for, apart from keeping the body warm? They are a consequence of the Fall when we learned for the first time to cover our bodies for shame. If that shame is lifted with the overcoming of original sin, then why wear clothing at all? Furthermore, this tendency to prurience is continued by the movement's modern inquisitors, like Cohn, who takes great delight in describing the "anarchic eroticism" of the adepts of the Free Spirit. For example, he takes evident pleasure in describing the excesses of the nuns of Schweidnitz in Silesia in 1330s, who claimed that they had such command over the Holy Trinity that they could "ride it as in a saddle".<sup>48</sup> On this view, the Movement of the Free Spirit allows and even encourages sexual licentiousness where adepts throw off the moral prudery of the Church and run amok in some sort of huge orgy.

It is, of course, impossible to assess these claims of erotic libertinage. After all, the accusations are made by the accusers and it would be somewhat odd to trust them entirely. In the case of Cohn, the curiosity about the sexual antics of adepts of the Free Spirit is perhaps explained by the zeitgeist in which he was writing. In the conclusion to the 1970 revised edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Cohn argues for a continuity between medieval practices of self-deification and "the ideal of a total emancipation of the individual from society, even from external reality itself ... with the help of psychedelic drugs".<sup>49</sup> But I see little evidence for the suggestion of such narcotic or erotic licence. On the contrary, what one finds in Porete and in many other mystical texts from the period and later is not some wild unleashing of repressed sexual energy, but rather its subtle transformation. Texts like *The Mirror* testify to a passion transformed from the physical to the metaphysical, to a certain spiritualization of desire. Some might call this sublimation. What is most striking in the writing of the mystics, particularly female mystics, is the elevation of the discourse of desire in relation to the object cause of that desire, which is the beloved: God usually in the person of Christ. What the female mystic wants is to love and desire in the same place and this requires both the articulation of desire and its transmutation into love. To reduce mystical passion to some pent-up sexual energy is to miss the point entirely. It is to mistake sublimation for repression. If anything, what seems to mark texts like *The Mirror* is an experience of passivity and an emphasis on submission. The Movement of the Free Spirit is not about doing what you want.

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48. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 175.

49. *Ibid.*, 286.

On the contrary, it is about the training and submission of free will in order to recover a condition of commonality that overcomes it, namely love.

Indeed, the emphasis on submission and quietism that one finds in Porete and others seems more likely to lead to chastity than licence. Unrestrained erotic exuberance would simply be the false exercise of the will. The point of Porete's seven-state itinerary is the *disciplining* of the self all the way to its extinction in an experience of love that annihilates it. To my mind, the Movement of the Free Spirit finds a greater echo in the chastity of groups like the Shakers than the exhaustive and exhausting cataloguing of sexual excesses listed that took place in the Chateau de Silling in the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*.

### Do not kill others, only yourself

There is no doubt that the Movement of the Free Spirit is deeply antinomian, refusing the metaphysical, moral, legislative and political authority of both church and state. As such, it constituted a clandestine and subversive movement of resistance. The earliest appearance of the many alleged heresies linked to the Free Spirit comes from an investigation held in Germany in the 1260s. The first of the accusations is extremely revealing: "To make small assemblies and to teach in secret is not contrary to faith but is contrary to the evangelical way of life".<sup>50</sup> Note the emphasis on size and secrecy here. The great threat of the Movement of the Free Spirit was a secret network of small activist groups linked together by powerful bonds of solidarity and love. It was also a highly mobile network and what seems to have constantly worried the Church was the itinerant nature of the Beguines and Beghards and the way in which they moved from town to town and state to state. In addition, the rallying cry of these mendicants was "*Brod durch Gott*" (bread for the sake of God) and they preached, as did the Franciscan Spirituals, a doctrine of the poverty of Christ. As William Cornelius is reported to have said in the mid-thirteenth century, "No rich man can be saved, and all the rich are miserly".<sup>51</sup> The point is not lost on Cohn, who writes that, at its height, the Movement of the Free Spirit, "had become an invisible empire" held together by powerful emotional bonds.<sup>52</sup> Devoted to undermining the power of church and state, abolishing private property and establishing what can only be described as an anarcho-communism based on the annihilation of the self in the experience of the divine, the movement was repeatedly crushed with a ruthlessness that should come as no surprise.

50. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 130–31.

51. William Cornelius of Antwerp, quoted in Raoul Vanegiem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, R. Cherry & I. Patterson (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 115.

52. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 162.

What kind of assessment can we make of the Movement of the Free Spirit? Cohn sees millenarianism as a constantly recurring and dangerous threat that is still very much with us. What finds expression with the heresy of the Free Spirit is, he writes, “an affirmation of freedom so reckless and unqualified that it amounted to a total denial of every kind of restraint and limitation”.<sup>53</sup> As such, the Free Spirit is a precursor of what Cohn calls “that bohemian intelligentsia” that has plagued the twentieth century and which has been living from the ideas expressed by Bakunin and Nietzsche “in their wilder moments”. The Free Spirit was “the most ambitious essay in total social revolution”,<sup>54</sup> which finds its continuation on the extreme Left and Right alike: “Nietzsche’s Superman ... certainly obsessed the imagination of many of the ‘armed bohemians’ who made the National-Socialist revolution; and many a present-day exponent of world revolution owes more to Bakunin than to Marx”.<sup>55</sup> This is not the place to show either the erroneousess of such readings of Nietzsche and Bakunin or the chronic limitation of such arguments by insinuation that allegedly connect the Free Spirit to Nazism via Nietzsche. Let us just note that, as we saw with Porete, the Free Spirit is not a “reckless and unqualified” assertion of freedom that denies all “restraint and limitation”. On the contrary, Porete is arguing for a rigorous and demanding discipline of the self where individual acts of arbitrary freedom are directed outside themselves to a divine source that is the basis for commonality. To say it once again, the Free Spirit is not about doing what you want. Neither is it amoralistic; rather, it is a stringent and demanding ethical disciplining of the self.

Cohn uses the standard “depth psychology” talk of the 1950s and 60s to diagnose the malady that drives the desire for mystical anarchism. He explains mysticism aetiologically as a “profound introversion” of “gigantic parental images”.<sup>56</sup> This is both a defence against reality and “a reactivation of the distorting images of infancy”. Thereafter, two possibilities are possible: either the mystic emerges from the process of introversion successfully, “as a more integrated personality”, or he “introjects” these images unsuccessfully and “emerges as a nihilistic megalomaniac”.<sup>57</sup> Cohn catalogues the repeated occurrence of such megalomaniacs in great historical detail and there is no denying the existence of forms of sophism, obscurantism and charlatanry that are allied to the Movement of the Free Spirit. However, I am not only suspicious of the validity of such aetiological explanations, but would also want to interrogate the normative presupposition that such explanations invoke for the emergence of phenomena like mysticism. Cohn sim-

53. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 148.

54. *Ibid.*, 149.

55. *Ibid.*, 149.

56. *Ibid.*, 176.

57. *Ibid.*

ply assumes that “integrated personality” is an unquestioned good, along with related ideas of reinforcing the ego and encouraging it to adapt to reality. What Porete is describing is what we might call a creative disintegration of the ego, an undermining of its authority that allows a new form of subjectivity to stand in the place where the old self was. Rather than seeing Porete as a retreat to some alleged illusory infantile state, the process of the Soul’s annihilation might be seen as the self’s maturation and mutation where it is no longer organized around the individual and his self-regarding acts of will. Rather than integrating some given personality, what Porete is describing is the emergence of a new form of subjectivity, a transformation of the self through the act of love.

As we saw above, Gray makes explicit what is implicit in Cohn’s approach. He extends the condemnation of groups like the Movement of the Free Spirit to any and all utopian movements. The burden of a book like *Black Mass* is to show the continued malign presence of millenarian, apocalyptic politics in the contemporary world. What is particularly powerful in Gray’s approach is the manner in which he extends Cohn’s diagnosis to the neo-conservative millenarianism of the Bush administration, gleefully embraced by Blair, for whom “the clichés of the hour have always been eternal verities”.<sup>58</sup> However, as I argued in detail above, the critique of utopianism does not vindicate Gray’s call for political realism, which draws on his naturalization of the concept of original sin. Relatedly, it is something of an understatement to suggest that Schmitt would have been out of sympathy with both the theology and politics of mystical anarchism. One could imagine Schmitt happily serving as Porete’s inquisitor and personally lighting the fire that consumed her and her books.

A very different take on these matters can be found in Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Movement of the Free Spirit* from 1986.<sup>59</sup> In many ways, Vaneigem unwittingly confirms all of Cohn’s worst fears: he offers a vigorous defence of the Movement of the Free Spirit as a precursor to the insurrectional movements of the 1960s such as the Situationist International, in which Vaneigem’s writings played such a hugely influential role. He writes of the Free Spirit: “The spring has never dried up; it gushes from the fissures of history, bursting through the earth at the slightest shift of the mercantile terrain”.<sup>60</sup>

In Debord’s dystopian vision of the society of the spectacle where all human relations are governed by exchange – the dictatorship of a commodity system that Vaneigem always compares to the negativity of death – the Free Spirit is an emancipatory movement that operates in the name of life, bodily pleasures and untrammelled freedom. Vaneigem reinterprets the Free Spirit’s insistence on pov-

58. John Gray, *Black Mass*, 99.

59. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, R. Cherry (trans.) (New York: Zone Books, [1986] 1994).

60. *Ibid.*, 94.

erty of spirit as the basis for a critique of the market system where life is reduced to purposeless productivity and life-denying work. As such, the most radical element in the Movement of the Free Spirit, for Vaneigem, was “an alchemy of individual fulfilment” where the cultivation of a state of perfection allowed the creation of a space where the “economy’s hold over individuals” was relinquished. Thus, the Free Spirit’s emphasis on love is “the sole alternative to market society”.<sup>61</sup> Wrapped around a compelling and extended documentation of the Movement of the Free Spirit, Vaneigem argues for what he calls an “alchemy of the self” based on unfettered enjoyment and bodily pleasures. He cites the proposition of Hippolytus of Rome: “The promiscuity of men and women, that is the true communion”. Vaneigem advances an opposition between the Free Spirit and the Holy Spirit, where the latter is identified with God and the former with his denial. Vaneigem is therefore sceptical of Porete’s position in *The Mirror*, arguing that self-deification is too dependant on a repressive, authoritarian idea of God.<sup>62</sup> Although Vaneigem borrows Porete’s idea of the refinement of love, which is allegedly the title of one of her lost books, he finds her approach too ascetic and intellectualized. Vaneigem defends an individualistic hedonism based not on intellect but “a flux of passions”.<sup>63</sup> It has a stronger affinity with Fourier’s utopianism of passionate attraction filled with *phalansteries* of free love and leisure than the sort of self-annihilation found in Porete.

To my mind, something much more interesting than Vaneigem can be found in Gustav Landauer, the German anarcho-socialist who exerted such influence over Buber, Scholem and the young Benjamin.<sup>64</sup> In his “Anarchic Thoughts on Anarchism” ([1901] 2007), Landauer is writing in the context of the anarchist politics of assassination that had seen the killing of US President William McKinley in 1901, itself based on the murder of King Umberto I of Italy the previous year. Both perpetrators identified themselves as anarchists. Landauer asks, “what has the killing of people to do with anarchism, a theory striving for a society without government and authoritarian coercion, a movement against the state and legalized violence?”<sup>65</sup> The answer is clear: “Nothing at all”. Landauer argues that all forms of violence are despotic and anarchism entails non-violence.

61. *Ibid.*, 254.

62. *Ibid.*, 246.

63. See Raoul Vaneigem’s poetic rewriting of declaration of human rights, especially Article 17: “Every human being has the right to feel the movements of affection and disaffection which are inherent in the flux of passions and the freedoms of love”; *A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings: On the Sovereignty of Life as Surpassing the Rights of Man* (London: Pluto Press, 2003) [Eds].

64. See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe – A Study in Elective Affinity* (London: Athlone Press, 1992).

65. Gustav Landauer, “Anarchic Thoughts on Anarchism”, J. Cohn & G. Kuhn (trans.), *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 6, 11(1) (Fall 2007). Originally published as “Anarchische Gedanken über Anarchismus”, *Der Zukunfts* (26 October 1901), 134–40 [Eds].

If anarchists resort to violence, then they are no better than the tyrants whom they claim to oppose. Anarchism is not a matter of armed revolt or military attack, “it is a matter of how one lives”.<sup>66</sup> Its concern is with, “a new people arising from humble beginnings in small communities that form in the midst of the old”.<sup>67</sup> This is what Landauer intriguingly calls “inward colonization”.

Yet, how is such an inward colonization possible? Landauer’s response is singular and draws us back to the idea of self-annihilation. He writes, “Whoever kills, dies. Those who want to create life must also embrace it and be reborn from within”.<sup>68</sup> But how can such a rebirth take place? It can only happen by killing oneself, “in the mystical sense, in order to be reborn after having descended into the depths of their soul”. He goes on, “Only those who have journeyed through their own selves and waded deep in their own blood can help to create the new world without interfering in the lives of others”.<sup>69</sup> Landauer insists that such a position does not imply quietism or resignation. On the contrary, he writes that “one acts with others”, but he adds that, “none of this will really bring us forward if it is not based on a new spirit won by conquest of one’s inner self”.<sup>70</sup> He continues:

It is not enough for us to reject conditions and institutions; we have to reject ourselves. “Do not kill others, only yourself”: such will be the maxim of those who accept the challenge to create their own chaos in order to discover their most authentic and precious inner being and to become mystically one with the world.<sup>71</sup>

Although talk of authenticity and “precious inner being” leaves me somewhat cold, what is fascinating here is the connection between the idea of self-annihilation and anarchism. The condition of possibility for a life of cooperation and solidarity with others is a subjective transformation, a self-killing that renounces the killing of others. For Landauer, it is not a matter of anarchism participating in the usual party politics, systemic violence and cold rationalism of the state. It is a rather a question of individuals breaking with the state’s authority and uniting together in new forms of life. Talk of inward colonization gives a new twist to Cohn’s idea of the Movement of the Free Spirit as an “invisible empire”. It is a question of the creation of new forms of life at a distance from the order of the state – which is the order of visibility – and cultivating largely invisible

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66. *Ibid.*, 88.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 89.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

commonalities, what Landauer calls anarchy's "deep, dark dream".<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this killing of the self in an ecstatic mystical experience is close to what Bataille called "sovereignty", and which for him was constantly linked with his experimentation with different forms of small-scale, communal group collaborations, particularly in the 1930s and 40s, from *Contre Attaque*, the *Collège de Sociologie* and the *Collège Socratique*, through to the more mysterious *Acéphale*.

### The risk of abstraction

We are living through a long anti-1960s. The various experiments in communal living and collective existence that defined that period seem to us either quaintly passé, laughably unrealistic or dangerously misguided. We now know better than to try to bring heaven crashing down to earth and construct concrete Utopias. To that extent, despite our occasional and transient enthusiasms, we are all political realists; indeed most of us are passive nihilists and cynics. This is why we still require a belief in something like original sin. Without the conviction that the human condition is essentially flawed and dangerously rapacious, we would have no way of justifying our disappointment.

It is indeed true that those utopian political movements of the 1960s, like the Situationist International, where an echo of the Movement of the Free Spirit could be heard, led to various forms of disillusionment, disintegration and, in extreme cases, disaster. Experiments in the collective ownership of property or in communal living based on sexual freedom without the repressive institution of the family, or indeed R. D. Laing's experimental communal asylums with no distinction between the so-called mad and the sane, seem like distant whimsical cultural memories captured in dog-eared, yellowed paperbacks and grainy, poor quality film. It is a world that we struggle to understand. Perhaps such communal experiments were too pure and overfull of righteous conviction. Perhaps they were, in a word, too *moralistic* to ever endure. Perhaps such experiments were doomed because of what we might call a politics of abstraction, in the sense of being overly attached to an idea at the expense of a frontal denial of reality.

At their most extreme, say in the activities of the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades in the 1970s, the moral certitude of the closed and pure community becomes fatally linked to redemptive, cleansing violence. Terror becomes the means to bring about end of virtue. The death of individuals is but a speck on the vast heroic canvas of the class struggle. This culminated in a politics of violence where acts of abduction, kidnapping, hijacking and assassination were justified through an attachment to a set of ideas. As a

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72. *Ibid.*, 91.



character in Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004) remarks, "To kill a human being in order to defend an idea is not to defend an idea, it is to kill a human being".<sup>73</sup> Perhaps such groups were too attached to the idea of immediacy, the propaganda of the violent deed as the impatient attempt to storm the heavens. Perhaps such experiments lacked an understanding of politics as a constant and concrete process of *mediation* between a subjective ethical commitment based on a general principle, for example the equality of all, and the experience of local organization that builds fronts and alliances between disparate groups with often conflicting sets of interests. By definition, such a process of mediation is never pure.

Perhaps such utopian experiments in community only live on in the institutionally sanctioned spaces of the contemporary art world. One thinks of projects such as L'Association des Temps Libérés (1995), or "Utopia Station" (2003) and many other examples, somewhat fossilized in a recent show at the Guggenheim in New York, "theanyspacewhatever".<sup>74</sup> In the work of artists such as Philippe Parreno and Liam Gillick or curators such as Hans-Ulrich Obrist, there is a deeply felt Situationist nostalgia for ideas of collectivity, action, self-management, collaboration and indeed the idea of the group as such. In such art practice, which Nicolas Bourriaud has successfully branded "relational", art is the acting out of a situation in order to see whether, in Obrist's words, "something like a collective intelligence might exist".<sup>75</sup> As Liam Gillick notes, "Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three".<sup>76</sup> Of course, the problem with such experiments is twofold: on the one hand, they are only enabled and legitimated through the cultural institutions of the art world and thus utterly enmeshed in the circuits of commodification and spectacle that they seek to subvert; and, on the other hand, the dominant mode for approaching an experience of the communal is through the strategy of *reenactment*. One does not engage in a bank heist: one re-enacts Patty Hearst's adventures with the Symbionese Liberation Army in a warehouse in Brooklyn, or whatever. Situationist *détournement* is replayed as obsessively planned re-enactment. Fascinating as I find such experiments and the work of the artists involved, one suspects what we might call a "mannerist Situationism", where the old problem of recuperation does not even

73. *Notre Musique* 2004, J.-L. Godard (dir.) (France/Switzerland: Avventura Films, Périphérie Suisse, France 3 Cinéma *et al.*).

74. See [http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition\\_pages/anyspace/exhibition.html](http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/anyspace/exhibition.html) (accessed June 2009).

75. H.-U. Obrist, "In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem", *E-flux Journal* 6 (May 2009), <http://info.interactivist.net/node/12666> (accessed July 2009). See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: La presses du réel, 2002).

76. Liam Gillick, "Maybe it Would be Better if We Worked in Groups of Three?", *E-flux Journal* 3 (February 2009), [www.e-flux.com/journal/view/35](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/35) (accessed June 2009).

apply because such art is completely co-opted by the socioeconomic system that provides its lifeblood.

Perhaps we are witnessing something related to this in recent events in France surrounding the arrest and detention of the so-called “Tarnac Nine” on 11 November 2008.<sup>77</sup> As part of Sarkozy’s reactionary politics of fear (itself based on an overwhelming fear of disorder), a number of activists who had been formerly associated with the group *Tiqqun* were arrested in rural central France by a force of 150 anti-terrorist police, helicopters and attendant media. They were living communally in the small village of Tarnac in the Corrèze district of the Massif Central. Apparently a number of the group’s members had bought a small farmhouse and ran a cooperative grocery store and were engaged in such dangerous activities as running a local film club, planting carrots and delivering food to the elderly. With surprising juridical imagination, they were charged with “pre-terrorism”, an accusation linked to acts of sabotage on France’s TGV rail system. The basis for this thought-crime was a passage from the 2007 text, *L’insurrection qui vient*, a wonderfully dystopian diagnosis of contemporary society and a compelling strategy to resist it.<sup>78</sup> The final pages of *L’insurrection* advocate acts of sabotage against the transport networks of “the social machine”, and ask the question, “How can a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless?”<sup>79</sup> Two of the alleged pre-terrorists, Julien Coupat and Yldune Lévy, have only recently been released from jail and others have been charged with “a terrorist undertaking” that carries a prison sentence of twenty years. Such is the repressive and reactionary force of the state, just in case anyone had forgotten. As the authors of *L’insurrection* remind us, “Governing has never been anything but pushing back by a thousand subterfuges the moment when the crowd will hang you”.<sup>80</sup>

*L’insurrection qui vient* has powerful echoes of the Situationist International and some of the other communist heresies we have examined. The authorship of *L’insurrection* is attributed to the Comité Invisible and the insurrectional strategy of the group turns around the question of invisibility. It is a question of “learning how to become imperceptible”, of regaining “the taste for anonymity” and not exposing and losing oneself in the order of visibility, which is always controlled by the police and the state. The authors of *L’insurrection* argue for the proliferation

77. For more information on the “Tarnac 9” see <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/> (accessed June 2009). See also the commentary by Alberto Toscano, “The War Against Pre-Terrorism: The Tarnac 9 and *The Coming Insurrection*”, *Radical Philosophy* (March/April 2009), [www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel\\_id=2187&editorial\\_id=27700](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=27700) (accessed July 2009).

78. Comité invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient* (Paris: La Fabrique editions, 2007). Available in English as *The Coming Insurrection*, <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/texts/the-coming-insurrection/> (accessed June 2009).

79. Comité invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient*, 107; English translation, *The Coming Insurrection*, 74.

80. Comité invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient*, 83; English translation, *The Coming Insurrection*, 63–4.

of zones of opacity, anonymous spaces where communes might be formed. The book ends with the slogan, “All power to the communes” (*Tout le pouvoir aux communes*). In a nod to Blanchot, these communes are described as “inoperative” or “*désœuvrée*”, as refusing the capitalist tyranny of work. In a related text simply entitled *Call*, they seek to establish “*a series of foci of desertion, of secession poles, of rallying points. For the runaways. For those who leave. A set of places to take shelter from the control of a civilization that is headed for the abyss*”.<sup>81</sup> A strategy of sabotage, blockade and what is called “the human strike” is proposed in order to weaken still further our doomed civilization. An opposition between the city and the country is constantly reiterated, and it is clear that construction of zones of opacity is better suited to rural life than the policed space of surveillance of the modern metropolis. *L'insurrection* is compelling, exhilarating and deeply lyrical text that sets off all sorts of historical echoes with movements like the Free Spirit: the emphases on secrecy, invisibility and itinerancy, on small-scale communal experiments in living, on the cultivation of poverty, radical mendicancy and the refusal of work. But the double programme of sabotage, on the one hand, and secession from civilization, on the other, risks remaining trapped within the politics of abstraction identified above. In this fascinatingly creative re-enactment of the Situationist gesture, what is missed is a thinking of political mediation where groups like the Invisible Committee would be able to link up and become concretized in relation to multiple and conflicting sites of struggle. We need a richer political cartography than the opposition between the city and the country. Tempting as it is, sabotage combined with secession from civilization smells of the moralism we detected above.

## Conclusion – the politics of love

But what follows from this? Are we to conclude with Gray that the utopian impulse in political thinking is simply the residue of a dangerous political theology that we are much better off without? Is the upshot of the critique of mystical anarchism that we should be resigned in the face of the world's violent inequality and update a belief in original sin with a reassuringly miserabilistic Darwinism? Should we reconcile ourselves to the options of political realism,

81. Invisible Committee, *Call (Appel)*, [www.bloom0101.org/call.pdf](http://www.bloom0101.org/call.pdf) (accessed July 2009), 57, italics added. *Call* was an earlier text by the Invisible Committee circulated anonymously in 2004. For a useful discussion see Patrick Marcolini, “Situationist Inheritors: Julien Coupat, Tiqqun and the Coming Insurrection”, NOT BORED! (trans.), Anarchist news dot org (May 2009), <http://www.anarchistnews.org/?q=node/7488> (accessed July 2009). Marcolini's French text was originally published in *Le Tigre* 30 (March/April 2009) [Eds].

authoritarianism or liberalism? Should we simply renounce the utopian impulse in our personal and political thinking?

If so, then the consequence is clear: we are stuck with the way things are, or possibly with something even worse than the way things are. To abandon the utopian impulse in thinking is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible, however small, fleeting and compromised such a world might be. In the political circumstances that presently surround us in the West, to abandon the utopian impulse in political thinking is to resign oneself to liberal democracy which, as we showed above, is the rule of the rule, the reign of law that renders impotent anything that would break with law: the miraculous, the moment of the event, the break with the situation in the name of the common.

Let me return for a last time to mystical anarchism and to the question of self-deification. Defending the idea of becoming God might be seen as going a little far, I agree. To embrace such mysticism would be to fall prey to what, in his book on St Paul, Badiou calls the obscurantist discourse of glorification.<sup>82</sup> In terms of the Lacanian schema of the four discourses that he borrows (master, university, hysteric, analyst), the mystic is identified with the discourse of the hysteric and contrasted with the anti-obscurantist Christian position that Badiou identifies with the discourse of the analyst. Badiou draws a line between St Paul's declaration of the Christ-event, what he calls "an ethical dimension of anti-obscurantism", and the mystical discourse of identity with the divine, the ravished subjectivity of someone like Porete.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, to acquiesce in such a conclusion would be to miss something vital about mystical anarchism: what I want to call, in closing, its politics of love. What I find most compelling in Porete is the idea of love as an act of absolute spiritual daring that eviscerates the old self in order that something new can come into being. In Carson's words, love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty and engage with its own annihilation: to hew and hack away at oneself in order to make a space that is large enough for love to enter. What is being attempted by Porete – and perhaps it is *only* the attempt which matters here, not some theophanic outcome – is an act of absolute daring, not for some nihilistic end, but in order to open what we might call the *immortal* dimension of the subject. The only proof of immortality is the act of love, the daring that attempts to extend beyond oneself by annihilating oneself, to project onto something that exceeds one's powers of projection. To love is to give what one does not have and to receive that over which one has no power. As we saw in Landauer, the point is not to kill others, but to kill oneself in order that a transformed relation to others

82. See Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, R. Brassier (trans.) (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

83. *Ibid.*, 51–2.

becomes possible, some new way of conceiving the common and being with others. Anarchism can only begin with an act of inward colonization, the act of love that demands a transformation of the self. Finally – and very simply – anarchism is not a question for the future, it is a matter of how one lives now.

Is such a thing conceivable and practicable without the moralism, purism, immediacy and righteously self-enclosed certainty of previous experiments? To be honest, I don't know.

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