

Being-the-Street: Paris after the 13th November, 2015. ISIS, Sociology and the *Avant-Gardes*

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*On n'est pas là pour se faire engueuler
On est venu essayer l'auréole
On n'est pas là pour se faire renvoyer
On est mort, il est temps qu'on rigole¹.*

Boris Vian, *On n'est pas là pour se faire engueuler*, 1954.

Much has been written and said about the ideology of ISIS. References to the imagination of the monster, the enemy and the villain have been deployed to explain to Westerners the causes of the attacks that have bloodied Paris. They have stained forever its aura of *ville-lumière*, of a romantic city, the queen city of loitering, of *coups*, “cafés” and terraces. For some observers, the Islamic State is the specter that haunts, from the

¹ We are not there to get yelled at / We came here to try a new halo / We're not there to get sent back / We are dead, it is time to have fun.

outside, the happiness of our democracies; for others, it is only a perverse by-effect that we ourselves created as senior advocates of the good, true and fair. What if that organization is also something else?

SOCIOLOGY OF ISIS

In many ways—and this is a provocation in order to encourage other interpretations of this problem—we are facing a group of *wise sociologists*. French sociologists enjoy using hoaxes to discredit their colleagues at the same time that a great number of them are updating the inclination of Pierre Bourdieu to see sociology as a “combat sport” (2001); they wage academic wars to perpetuate their power, while French Prime Minister Manuel Valls discredits the discipline. Though he rejects any “sociological excuse” for terrorism (response to a question from Senator Christian Favier, the Senate, 11.26.2015), those infamous terrorists prepare their atrocities with a surprising sociological insight. As bitter it may be to admit—to stay in the realm of provocation--those infamous terrorists show that they are good *sociologists*.

As good *sociologists*, they have realized that the beating heart of our societies--if there still is one--is no longer situated within political, economical or intellectual institutions. They have understood that it lies elsewhere. In that sense, the Charlie Hebdo killings on the 7th of January, 2015, were not simply revenge against the insults to the Prophet Muhammad by a magazine cover. It was also and even more aggression against a collective behavior becoming increasingly widespread. It targeted a “transpolitical sensitivity” (Susca, de Kerckhove 2008), to use words dear to Baudrillard (1997, 2004): the fact of acting through avoidance, diversion and derision of power.

Charlie was and is a symbol of a political disenchantment whose corollary is what Michel Maffesoli calls “the re-enchantment of the

world” (2007). It is a return of mysticism, magic and excitement within everyday life in its sensitive dimension, but also in its fantastic dimension, as well in its ordinary aspects and its most extraordinary sides, from *cafés* to digital networks, in flesh and in pixels.

If he had been consulted by the French national government, a good sociologist might have suggested that if they wanted to attack our culture, assaulting Charlie, and even erasing him, would not be enough for terrorists. The French *être-ensemble*, including the city of Paris, cannot really quite be summarized within the pages of this newspaper: it was, it gushed, it vibrated above all in the *street*. Thus, the *milicias* and the sociologists of ISIS chose well their target when they unleashed their strength against the streets of the XIth arrondissement. They were a playful, musical and societal Mecca of French festive culture, the latest incarnation of the Parisian spirit, that has been celebrated over the last two centuries by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, André Breton, Boris Vian, Guy Debord, Serge Gainsburg and Daft Punk.

This is where the sensitivity that is taking over today is stirring at its highest point. It takes the succession of the historical vanguards that marked the early twentieth century, while at the same time exceeding them (Susca 2016). However, they are not any longer movements with artistic and political objectives committed to the conquest of the future. Instead, they are groups, tribes, scenes and networks anchored in the present, the here and the now. Before, they were called crowds, masses or publics ... now they have become vanguards.

They are vanguards of pleasure, because their *être-la*, their being within the world is not anymore focused on a commitment or on the principle of creation, and even less on the construction of a project for the future. It is rather focused on presentism and on *carpe diem*, consumption and consummation: on recreation and re-creation (Bardainne, Susca 2009). In a nutshell, as manifestations of an extraordinary life, their aim is no longer about understanding the world

or mastering it, but on the contrary to inhabit it here and now, in a form of unproductive expenditure (Bataille 2003) for which the expression of the self, and even more of the “us,” corresponds to the loss of the subject into something greater than itself.

THE BATACLAN GENERATION AND THE STREET

Contrary to what may have been said by those who do not know what a party is and always has been from an anthropological and sociological perspective, for those who have not read, for example, the works of Jean Duvignaud (1984, 1986), or others that have more recently addressed the updates of the subject (Attimonelli 2008 Joron 2012 Pourtau 2009), the praise of the ephemeral ritual happening every evening in the Parisian hot spots is not the equivalent of general welfare or a collective recklessness. On the contrary, you just have to listen to the songs of Eagles of Death Metal, the band playing at the Bataclan when the terrorists burst inside on November 13, 2015, to have the proof that these interstices celebrate a vitalism nourished by the tragic sense of life, where eroticism (Bataille 2007) and societal erotism (Maffesoli 2012) reveal their intimate relationship with death.

Since this generation is the only and the last true power of a world in decline, one might even say that its greatest virtue lies in dancing on the ruins of this world rather than trying to build anything. It is targeted by the strategists, militias and *sociologists* of ISIS. If there is a war, as has been repeated obsessively, we are witnessing a war between two vanguards. One of which, *stricto sensu*, is equipped with weapons and animated by a strategy of power, and the other--the Bataclan generation--is not thinking of war and does not seek to rule the world.

It does not go down in the street to demonstrate, as did its politicized predecessors, *it is the street*. Facing terrorists, it would not answer--

unlike established powers that are supposed to represent it, but are completely and increasingly estranged from it--with guns. It would continue to listen to music, to drink, to celebrate its festive being togetherness without other purpose than being there, being together, being on the street, being the street. Here is its tragic joy.

By the way, artists, designers and sociologists experience it every day. Novelists, photographers and film-makers draw endless inspiration from it. Trendsetters, architects and advertisers have understood it for a long time. The sparkle of fashion, underground or luxurious, is its echo chamber. The most important changes in culture, emotional vibrations and societal milling of the beginning of this millennium have happened in the street. The success of *nuits blanches* and urban parades, from Love and Techno parades to Gay Pride, are the evidence of the festive aspect of the street. The vitality of markets, car boot sales and flea markets, as well as the comeback of shopping streets at the expense of shopping centers, underlines the synergy secreted between the commerce of affects and that of goods. The proliferation of street food, picnics, dinners in white and other ways of eating while walking turn the street into an open-air table. The triumph of street art, hip hop and rap are the obvious signs of its aesthetic power, between love of life, anomy and subversion. Geolocation, social networks and "street views," as well as all innovations related to the augmented city, extend and amplify it.

The street has always been a place of meeting, a public space, yet it is also more and more a private place, as it penetrates, in various forms, our interiors. The street is the ultimate stage of everyday life, a total place where everything converges: wealth and poverty, crime and leisure, beggars and drug dealers, madmen and preachers, jugglers and politicians, prostitutes and hipsters. It is a laboratory where fashion renews itself, a territory where social energy moves, a space where the freedoms of the night are revealed, as well as the tragedy of life and the ordinary purchase of the day. The street is the theatre of a world where

works of art and spectators, subjects and objects, cities and bodies, elites and masses, intimacy and public life, can mingle.

This applies to all the cities of our planet, but most of all to Paris, the "capital of the nineteenth century" (Benjamin 2003), where strolling, *la flânerie*, was born as a form of distraction and escape from the high-powered (Shin 2014), rational and productive rhythms of modern life. Baudelaire labelled the expression "modern life" from his experience of the French capital (2010). Indeed, since a long time ago, Paris, along with other European capitals like London and Berlin, has lost its centrality in the context of world culture.

However, despite the development of more dynamic and dense metropolitan areas from a demographic point of view, such as Seoul, Sao Paolo, Tokyo or New York, Paris remains a key laboratory for understanding and grasping contemporary culture as a system where a different way of that we experienced in modernity, of being, of being there and being in the world, is deploying itself. New cultural vanguards loiter, chatter and still live in these bloodied streets. Now more than ever, they teach us how to face, beyond art, politics and economy, the crisis as well as terrorism.

Carnavalesque wisdom: these vanguards are not there to, have no desire and no force to, respond to terrorists—and even less to do so using their means and their ways. They are not there to restore a system that has fallen a long time ago. They can be slaughtered in the other carnages, their freedoms can be reduced using the pretext of security, but no one can prevent them from dancing, from being together, *from being the street*.

On n'est pas là pour se faire assommer
On est là pour la fête à mon pote
Si tout le monde restait toujours tout seul
Ça serait d'une tristesse pas croyable

Ouvre ta porte et sors des verres².

Boris Vian, *On n'est pas là pour se faire engueuler*, 1954.

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² We are not there to get beaten / We are here to celebrate my buddy / If everyone always stayed alone / It would be an incredible sadness / Open your door and get out some glasses.

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