



Debating Justice

Damien Camelio

January 20, 2017

Damien is an anarchist arrested on Wednesday, December 7 in Bretagne, charged with attacks against the Chambre of Commerce, a Jaguar dealership, and other targets during a demo that took place on April 14 between Paris' 10th and 19th districts during the mobilization against the Loi Travail. This letter was published on January 7 and was intended as a contribution to a public discussion about how to engage with the justice system, in a bid to break the isolation that it seeks to impose.

When I heard that on January 9 in Paris there was going to be a debate about justice, I wanted to try to contribute by letter, but because I'm not allowed any visits or phone calls, I don't have any details about the subject of the debate. The theme of justice is tied to many issues, like repression, authority, and incarceration, as well as obviously questions of defense or attack, resignation or dignity, inaction or vengeance.

This is a personal choice belonging to each individual and I don't want to lecture about it or present myself as a martyr or hero, which I am not. So I will speak only of my own choice, one that isn't motivated by the specter of revolutionary duty, but by desire, my own

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need to feel more free, more dignified, and more alive than my jailers permit.

My intellectual and theoretical baggage is relatively limited, but my life resembles more that of a delinquent than of an academic, and I've been moving through the hallways of the courthouse since I was 13, and of prisons since 17. These remarks are much more the product of my own very subjective personal experience, rather than any kind of pre-established ideological position. Although I draw from the anarchist current, I wasn't even aware of these ideas when I was first held in investigative detention as a child.

Even when I was young, I was always disgusted by inequality, those who make it possible and who possess everything, and those who defend it. It was only natural that I would learn to rob the former and attack the latter. There is a proverb among delinquents: nine times for yourself and once for the cops. Social war is asymmetrical by definition and so it's inevitable that the even the slightest direct confrontation would be fatal because they are stronger.

The first time I was arrested, I was scared. My friends had managed to escape and I found myself stuck in a dead end by myself. I fought as best I could to get past the cops who were blocking my only route towards freedom, but of course I got beaten down and taken away.

In the cell, I felt like a young wild animal put in a cage after being beaten. I think it must have been an unconscious and natural reaction, but I stopped biting and submitted. I had to enter into their logic, to be as civilized as possible, to show that I was innocent, that I wasn't to blame. I had never felt a moment of guilt, but driven by fear, I hypocritically apologized and expressed regret.

I had to reject myself, reject my free and wild integrity, when confronted with the sacred mission of the civilizing logic. And so

¹ These comments are aimed at the defendants in the Tarnac case and, by extension, the milieu inspired by the writings of the Invisible Committee and similar texts

that day “I stopped seeing myself as myself”, as those grocers who market the insurrection would say, as they try to make us believe that this is a tactical choice born of long reflection in order to mask their fear of repression¹.

In such situations, fear is natural and you must accept and recognize it in order to get past it and get back to thinking honestly. There are no heroes, and even if there were we wouldn't want them. It's still true that those days and the days that followed were the hardest for me. I was ashamed — not of having been afraid, but of having lost my dignity. I felt in the depths of my being that I had denied my free and wild nature in order to submit to the norms of justice, to this society full of inequalities that I didn't understand and that I hated.

When I became aware of this, I vowed to never again submit, to never again let myself be judged and processed like a tame creature, an attraction in the circus of their courtrooms. Since then, my baby teeth have given way to canines sharpened in solitary and the isolation wing, and I can answer blow for blow. For a tooth, a jaw!

In court, I still feel the same fear, but by transforming my fear to hatred, I find the force to not submit and to not allow them to judge me. They are stronger, yes, but that's no reason to give them any legitimacy by accepting their logic of guilt and innocence. I won't take up their repressive logic to build a narrative of victimhood by declaring myself innocent.

Furthermore, it's important to understand what this narrative would entail in terms of solidarity. What kind of solidarity do we want? On what basis and with whom? If I declare myself innocent, and especially if comrades on the outside start organizing around my innocence and not the simple fact that I'm an anarchist, then who would we be speaking to? To democrats? To those who want a more just and truthful republic where the people's justice would only lock someone up after properly considering all the facts? To power?

What then would be the basis of this solidarity built on consensus? What would subversive and revolutionary content would be left, without even speaking of potential? Would the people who engaged with calls for consensual solidarity have participated if someone proclaimed their guilt? What would remain of our offensive capabilities? Wouldn't we be engaging in political recuperation, inviting it, with this consensus around humanitarian and republican values?

The answers to these questions are obvious, and with even a little honesty we can take them as givens that have historically been proven true.

“How can we get out of this dilemma? Quite simply. By always starting from the fact that for us the technical aspect is secondary, and if comrades are accused, imprisoned and in some cases even killed this happens, apart from the objective event that constitutes the element of debate in court and which is of marginal interest to us, because they are anarchists.” — Alfredo Bonanno, Notes on Sacco and Vanzetti²

In this way, even if they choice to declare oneself innocent or to refuse to be judged must be made by each individual for their own reasons, I think that communication around a court case must at the very least be based around this simple principle.

I hope I was able to contribute something to the debate and that you'll let me know how it goes.

Always in solidarity, but especially in complicity,

Damien

² Full text available in English at lib.anarhija.net