

Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*

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One of the difficulties Nietzsche bequeathed us was the difficulty of thinking politics without the categories of good and evil. Or, better said, that is one of the difficulties for those who take up the challenge, and refuse the politics of the crusade that marked the past ten years. One alternative offered was through Nietzsche's predecessor and mentor-at-a-distance, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Emerson, all politics was the politics of affinity. We move in life by identifying, encouraging and extending like-mindedness. "I will have no covenants but proximities," he writes. No covenants – no commandments of right and wrong and duty – but only the association of ways of life. "If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly, but humbly and truly." I will not call you good or evil. I will not resort to morals that have no ground in the world. I will not even give human society the dignity of norms formed on chaos. Simply, the task is to learn to follow associations, to teach others how to do so, to abandon that which does not, and to abandon yourself to that which does.

In *The Coming Insurrection*, Tiqqun began a program of establishing such modes of association as a politics: "Communes come into being when people find each other, get on with each other, and decide on a common path. The commune is perhaps what gets decided at the very moment when we would normally part ways. It's the joy of an encounter that survives its expected end. It's what makes us say we and makes that an event. What's strange isn't that people who are attuned to each other form communes, but that they remain separated." The commune ruptures the train of associations that dominate our lives. Emerson called this conformity; Tiqqun speaks of it as "counter-revolutionary." Against this is aversion, or, the commune.

If the program is then one of coming together, why does it so often take place under the name of "civil war"? Precisely because the fact of association means that there are those with whom one will not associate – those whom Emerson tells to "cleave to your companions." What Tiqqun opposes, in fact, is not those who have different companions, but those who refuse to be addressed as the companion of anyone. This is the anonymous one, or they, or some one – a generic conformist. This general situation is what they call "hostility," a word whose Latin etymology signals a seemingly inexplicable variety of terms: guest, host, enemy, foreigner. The link they posit is that in all of these

situations the other is treated as generic – either as generic other in the discourse of foreign policy, or generic subject-of-care in the sense of human rights. They suggest, "The only way to reduce the sphere of hostility is by spreading the ethico-political domain of friendship and enmity." This Carl Schmitt-derived vocabulary of friend/enemy seems an unfortunate rendering of singularities which face each other, and either associate or do not. And the oddity of the vocabulary forces them to various redefinitions, such as civil war, "simply means the world is practice, and life is, in its smallest details, heroic." And practice? That everything "takes pace within its own limits, within its own immanent signification." And that again is to say, civil war names the fact that we need to develop an ethics of responsiveness to the processes by which we learn who we are and what we associate with. (Emerson again: "The difference between men is their principle of association.")

In certain segments of American culture, Tiqqun, or its wing under the name the Invisible Committee, came to attention after Glenn Beck read about them in the *New York Times*. He pronounced them the truth of the left, as a violent insurrectionary movement. More recently, he said the various worldwide occupations proved that the coming insurrection was here. To the extent that these have been largely non-violent movements, he is right. Tiqqun's position, after all, is that "the militarization of civil war is the defeat of insurrection." It ensures that there is a battle that can be won or lost, and the true play – the openness to the processes of forms of life which results in communization – will not come to pass. And it is also worth noting the proximity of their assertion, "An authentic pacifism cannot mean refusing weapons, but only refusing to use them," with Gandhi's statement, worth the length: "Nonviolence cannot be taught to a person who fears to die and has no power of resistance. A helpless mouse is not nonviolent because he is always eaten by pussy. He would gladly eat the murderess if he could, but he ever tries to flee from her. We do not call him a coward, because he is made by nature to behave no better than he does. But a man who, when faced by danger, behaves like a mouse, is rightly called a coward. He harbors violence and hatred in his heart and would kill his enemy if he could without being hurt himself. He is a stranger to nonviolence. All sermonizing on it will be lost on him. Bravery is foreign to his nature. Before he can understand nonviolence he has to be taught to stand his ground and even suffer death in the attempt to defend himself against the aggressor who bids fair to overwhelm

him" (I owe this reference to a recent talk by Norman Finklestein on the potentials of Gandhian politics for Palestine). The proximity and distance here is interesting, for these thoughts of Gandhi are often lost, as much as the real interest in peace in Tiqqun goes unseen. Perhaps this explains some of the choice, and the danger, of the vocabulary of civil war.

If my reading of *Introduction to Civil War* is largely sympathetic on conceptual grounds, it runs into a limit in the figure of culture that haunts the book. Taking a page from their mentor Agamben, himself building on a tradition going back at least to Hegel, they privilege and bracket a category of thought called "the West." (And though this is an old tradition, its current leverage seems to date from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where the gamble on the table is this: if we can name our culture as some thing, we can prove that it is constructed, and therefore malleable.) They attempt to follow the politics of this invented entity, and pose their solutions as responses to it. So, for example, if the West names the rise of the order of the modern police state, then there is a European history to that which we can uncover and unwork. But the failure of this strategy is noted by Tiqqun themselves: "Every attempt to grasp a 'people'...as race, class, ethnicity, or nation – has been undermined by the fact that the ethical differences within each 'people' have always been greater than the ethical differences between 'peoples' themselves." Tiqqun is thus ultimately unable to think, or to perform the difficult task, of thinking through a truly universal politics, even though the concepts of association and its lack, and of exposition of form-of-life and its failure, seems within their grasp. They are thus reduced to such facile statements as, "Decolonization was an important moment in the establishment of Empire... Decolonization means: the elaboration of new forms of horizontal, sub-institutional power that function better than the old ones." Nkrumah, among others, standing on the precipice of the failure of decolonization, called this "neo-colonialism." Why Tiqqun would think that a movement for liberation should be collapsed within their conceptual category of Empire and not within the general framework of the attempt to name and negotiate forms-of-life is perhaps explainable by their general sense that the West, and Western politics, controls and dominates the world. Whatever truth there may be in this assertion, it is hard to see how international forms of coalition building are to be formed on the basis of such distrust and re-imperialization of categories and practices.

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