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PROLETARIAN GNOSIS

Gilles Grelet & Anthony Paul Smith[a]

[a] La Salle University, Department of Religion, 1900 W. Olney Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19141, USA, E-mail:

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gilles grelet

translated by anthony paul smith

PROLETARIAN GNOSIS

I present here sixteen points articulated principally using Decision, a form of combative enunciation called upon by Chairman Mao Tse-tung in 1966, the Khmer Rouge in 1975, Guy Lardreau in 2001 and me for the first time in 2006. (The line has been reconstructed with such clear continuity in order to put others at ease – we know how important it is to be gentle with people, to reassure them, and not to rush them.) These sixteen points are worth no more in themselves taken one by one than when they follow one another in a well-linked continuity: they are some principles, not in the sense of an image of the origin, of the beginning, of a source acting as Principle (with an upper-case P), first principle or even principle of principles, but in the sense of elements, laws, or formulas of an apparatus [*dispositif*], and also of the theatre of war, the front lines of an army. Against every discipline sired from difference, let this be a mass order of the last instance.

[1] Proletarian gnosis [*Gnose prolétarienne*] has the same kind of relationship to gnosticism, and religious and learned gnosis in general, as the *Gauche prolétarienne* (the French Maoist organization that existed from 1968 to 1973) had with leftism and the political and ideological left in general. Meaning virtually none.

> [1.1] This term, proletarian gnosis, which has been lingering in my mind for some ten years, designates an apparatus of thought and action, of a thought-act, faithful to the desire for an intensification of existence, of hatred for the world and its sanctity – it is all one, which has animated so many rebellions, rebellions of all kinds but particularly religious and political ones, for which the names Plato, Mani, the Desert Fathers, and Rousseau provide some obscured impressions.

> [1.2] By proletarian gnosis one should understand the engagement, always and forever, of a rebellion that might not be a semblance.

[2] I say: the world is a whorehouse where practice is the whore and philosophy the great madam.

> [2.1] A world reduced to its essential traits and mechanisms is an agnostic world. It is born and perpetuates itself, immortalizing itself and wanting to know nothing of gnosis.

[3] The agnostic world is the self-encompassing set of all the facts, of everything that takes place, it is what determines human existence through and through as having no other horizon, no other meaning except for sufficiency and survival.

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[3.1] The agnostic world – as sufficient totalization fundamentally deprived of an orientation, foreclosed to meaning, proceeding by successive circularities, by encircling – is the empire of facts: *the Empire(cal)*.[1]

[3.2] A place simultaneously of prison and protection, reduced to the strict entanglement of flesh endowed with speech, of the general equivalent and horizontal law; a place that disposes integrated organization for a systematic disorientation or metaphysical "Occidentalization": a whorehouse, how could it be said any other way?

[3.2.1] There is an essential mysticism in empiricism, in the discursive construction that maintains and spreads the empire of facts. It is only because empiricism opposes itself less to idealism and idealism's central features fused with empiricism that they do not constitute together the major modes of spiritualism – spiritualism being the thought for which there is a Principle through which everything is engendered, to which everything is related as to its origin and end, there being some name that receives this Principle, Spirit for example. And with spiritualism, if we push the explanation of it to the point where we recognize the power of self-encompassing or of world-forming by which, over innumerable local masters, it acts as mastery of masters: well then this is nothing other than Occidental philosophy, from Aristotle to Badiou. (For indeed Badiou is a spiritualist, albeit an ultra-progressive neo-Stoic spiritualist, and so is just as falsely Platonic or materialist as he is falsely Maoist. This was already clear enough with the first volume of *Being and Event*; it has become semi-evident now with the second volume, *Logics of Worlds*.)

[3.2.2] A whorehouse, how could it be said any other way? Cave-dwelling culture. Or just culture in general.

[4] Without philosophy the world, as self-encompassing set or sufficient totality, would not form itself nor, *a fortiori*, would not maintain itself within being. Philosophy is that self-encompassing mastery that constitutes the world: *able to shut away, and shut others up with it* [puissance de bouclage, et de faire qu'on la boucle] (for gnosis at least, because for the rest philosophy lets loose the most uncontrollable chatter).

[4.1] Self-encompassing is the proper power of philosophy. It is by and through such self-encompassing that philosophy exists omnipresently, beyond the academic discipline that seems to be the only one still pushing the brand. Philosophy envelops man in each place, in each moment of his existence, but, like the devil, philosophy's ruse is that of passing itself off as an insignificant thing, an old tired woman who keeps harping away and who nobody really takes seriously.

[4.2] Encompassing and self-encompassing power, philosophy, madam mother of the agnostic whorehouse, finds its principle of perpetuation in *sufficient s(p)ecularity* or SS, and its machine in practice, a dialectical or transactional essence (rather than prostitutional so that we can cover these procedures with a veil of hypocritical propriety), a matrix of universal semblance and the "*sékommça*" effect.[2]

[4.2.1] Let us pose the quasi-equation unfailingly overseeing and facilitating life: practice = dialectic = transaction = prostitution, I throw the amateurs of nuance back to their vices. (Spitting out these nuances does not, however, mean we can ignore certain subtleties, those, firstly, that consist in admitting the existence of a non-transactional dialectic, a dialectic that is not unified, an absolute dialectic that is another name for the Two, for war as the real of reality. Still, not speaking here of an anti-dialectic seems greatly abusive. Undoubtedly it does not happen by accident that this abuse of language is sometimes the doing of professional philosophers, and not even the worst ones.)

[5] Gnosis is the truth itself, known by the act that establishes it in averting all the facts that deny it.

[5.1] There is an agnostic truth, *relative*, tied to the cut between Being and Thought: "The cut between Being and Thought, that which expresses itself in the series of discourses grounded there, this is the same condition for the bursting forth of the notion of truth. Through this, philosophy and Western science exhaust themselves in affirming that, in grace, the miracle of some adequacy, of some agreement, this gaping void that they have birthed and that erodes their existence disappears, affirming that they have the power to link up what has always been separated" (Guy Lardreau, *Le Singe d'or* (Paris: Mercure, 1973) 185). The agnostic truth is a matter of content and adequacy, it concerns objects and the knowledge that we can have of them: it is the truth of the world, by and for the world, the truth that is world-forming [*fait-monde*] or through which the readymade-world [*faire-monde*] is kept.

[5.2] There is a gnostic truth, gnosis-truth, that is *absolute*. Formal or without an object, it only exists on the cutting edge of a bias, of a decision: it concerns a subject, and the knowledge

[*connaissance*] that it is in person. Weak and infallible (although indefinitely rectifiable), the gnosis-truth or subject-truth is the only truth that merits the name.

[6] In order to be within the truth, one must dare to be decisive and to make a cut, one must dare to take a stand, so that every relation to the truth or rather every relation *of* truth is always in some way a relation of terror.

[6.1] If in order to be within the truth, if in order to not be within illusion or lying, it is necessary to be decisive and to cut, because the truth is both arrow and target all at once and in the same gesture: *the truth separates truth and semblance.*

[7] Contrary to the facts, needing nobody to spread their empire (the facts only sometimes need agents, who in fact being substitutable one for another, are precisely no one), the truth requires a subject in order to establish it, in order to bring about the cut that follows it.

[7.1] The subject of truth, a kind of squat truth that repulses [*révulse*] the world (and even who makes the world), is what the late Lacan means when he says, "I rebel against philosophy [*je m'insurge contre la philosophie*]" (qtd in Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London and New York: Verso, 1999) 250, which I use because this excellent remark is notably qualified there by Žižek as "pathetic").

[7.2] The subject of truth is the anti-philosopher, in the very precise sense that begins with the gnostic determination of truth, that is: the subject of anti-philosophy as rigorous gnosis.

[8] Between (gnostic) truth and (agnostic) world there is nothing in common, no possible agreement – and likewise no more indifference, except when simulated for specific tactical results. In short, a war.

[8.1] A war, the basic tenets of which Sloterdijk recently outlined: "[… S]ince Plato, a civil war has been waged over the definition of human society. Some define it as a unity for survival, as the association of those who look to maintain the genetic line. Others say that society must be understood as a confederation of those who seek the Truth. With regard to survival, those in the second camp, often single and close to death without children, have with a certain flippancy distinguished themselves. There is a war between those who seek the Truth and those who sustain the illusions useful for survival, the simulacra that make us want to continue living, beginning with theatre and literature … " (Peter Sloterdijk, "Pour être philosophe, il faut devenir un personnage de roman," interview with Jean Birnbaum, *Le Monde*, 21 May 2010).

[8.2] Correcting Sloterdijk's last sentence, I instead say: beginning with philosophy, which within the metaphysical Occident globalizes control by covering each particular master, philosophy acts as a (transcendental) mastery of all the (empirical) masteries, of all the fabrications of simulacra that fasten man to the world.

[9] In the war of the world and truth, the philosophical arsenal is endowed with a number of first-rate weapons: the reformist intellect, first, by which the two ways, the two parties, the way (or party) of the truth or the way (party) of the world, are said to require (and thus can be) compromise, ceding ground to a progressive compromise; the ideal, then, that substitutes itself for the truth within the framework [*cadre*] of the dialectic of intellect; the event, finally, which takes the place of truth at the moment when conditions ultimately make revolution more preferable than reform.

[9.1] To be intelligent, or to be a philosopher, is to refuse unilaterality (always narrow-minded, or even fanatic, fundamentalist, or downright delirious), it is to be capable of reconciling the irreconcilable via a compromise, an intermediary solution that respects the two part(ie)s by not making them give up anything essential, etc. We all know the speeches and pseudo-virtues that these settlements, be they little or great, drape themselves in: tolerance, liberty, etc. and so on. But there is more: the ceding ground with which it would be necessary and thus possible to dispose of total defeat, either regarding the truth or the world, at the cost or rather *by virtue* of a "win-win" transaction is the very form of intelligence itself, and yet it is in any case the nadir of intelligence.

[9.2] The agreement obtained through that dialectical grace between the truth (meaning what is impertinent to every compromise) and the world (for which compromise is the essential ground and impulse) is a transactional arrangement (a bribe) [*une passe*] where what is called truth is

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in reality the ideal – all of this being just another name for lying (hocus pocus [*tour de passe-passe*]).

[9.2.1] "You have no need of that exalted word *ideal*, when we have that excellent native expression lying" (Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*).[3]

[9.3] Revolution, a procedure systematically rotating a homogeneous world, pivots around an event-of-truth. Revolution is the absolute dialectical weapon which philosophy uses in order to reassure its mastery when the means of harmonization (happiness, intellect, dialogue and correction, this is the quartet of the ideal, whether it is concrete or not is beside the point) or the means of everyday ideological policing have failed.

[9.3.1] There is an ambiguity in this dialectic, driven back into its bunker, which in playing its role as guardrail for the world's eternity must flirt with the Two (cf. §4.2.1). This ambiguity being the way of the devil, of the "prince of this world."

[9.3.2] Here is the formula that Tancredi (Alain Delon) addressed to his uncle, the Prince of Salina (Burt Lancaster), in *The Leopard* (dir. Luchino Visconti, 1963): "If we want things to stay as they are, we have to know how to change everything."[4] This formula crystallizes the full circularity of revolutionary practice, and it argues too that revolution and reaction are in a reciprocal relationship, like the One and the Multiple are in Neo-Platonic henologies.

[10] In the war between the world and truth the ones who refuse to play the crude game of the world (played by refusing the truth, either in that cynical way or in that vitalist way, in the name of the demands of survival, sensual and dominating for the first, or devoted to bustling activity for the second) and who refuse to submit to the ideal (to the travesty of the category of truth in that manner pretending to be compatible with the world's revolutions) are the ones who may rupture with the sphere of the world, rupture with the sphere of the possible, with the sphere of mastery and its rules of imperial composition. These are the ones who can aim at the impossible. To them is given rebellion.

[10.1] The impossible, let it be the advent of this monster: a gnostic world, a world that is in each of its points a negation of the world and its principle of survival, a world that is an anti-world. To make truth and world coincide in the blink of an eye, realizing the systematic return or the conjuring of the world, this is not the ideal but concrete-reality, here and now, of the sequences of rebellion said to be cultural that traverse and punctuate history (culture, cf. §3.2.2, being brought back to the general mastery, of which the local masters are ideological emanations).

[10.2] Contrary to revolutions (which inscribe their relationship to power within the element of a general mastery that they respect, what we might call dialectical ontology), rebellions do not aim at power, to occupy power, but emancipation from power, of every power, of the sphere of the Empire(cal) that conditions every power. "We can speak of an ontological difference between 'rebellion' and 'revolution.' A 'political' position is not necessarily meant by 'rebellion', but rather a slipping outside the lines of political servitude, outside of the world devoted to the masters who subjugate man to desire, to lack, to socialization" (Christian Jambet, "Philosophie angélique" in *Cahiers de L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981) 105).

[10.3] The way of the impossible, the quest for the impossible *straight from the sensible*, of its realization here and now, crosses out all the rules of worldliness. The way of the impossible is the way of delirium. No wonder then that the world takes hold of this argument so that it can splay its blade into the discourse of madness and thereby completely refuse an autonomous treatment. But we are able to consider delirium instead, for *only delirium separates delirium from madness*.

[11] In its time the *Gauche prolétarienne* or GP, both as subjective upheaval and organized action, constituted the last real, not anecdotal, collective effort in France to "mount an assault on heaven" and to "touch people to their very souls," in order to live a life here below in strict adherence to the absolute and with no quarter given to the world, a life of the angel [*vie d'ange*] that would be at the same time an emptying [*vidange*], a purging of the world completely.

[11.1] In a truncated form we could say that its programme was this: *proletarization and militarization*. The former corresponds to the *line of formation* (dozens of militants abandon the intellectual life so they can establish themselves in a factory, there they pursue militant activism and re-educate themselves with the masses, with the

working people); the latter a doctrine of *symbolic violence* in order to change things in their heads and to arouse an uprising of the spirit on the widest scale: "We wanted only a clearing away for a workers' world, rising up little by little, clearing away the bourgeois world and all society, and even the city," wrote Péguy in *Notre jeunesse* (an edition preceded by *De la raison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 232), which is a much-loved citation even by the older members of the GP.

[11.2] Inevitably it was a failure, massive and pathetic, but not a submission to the world: the auto-dissolution took place, sending a message from the real/refusing to bestow the least laurels onto reality.

[12] Proletarian gnosis, being both subject and object within an analogical unfolding (analogy being the only fertile reasoning, the only method of invention within thought), again takes up the programme of the GP: proletarianization through formation and militarization through symbolic violence. Its structure brings together two instances, soul and body, theory and method, (anti-philosophical) canon and (non-religious) organon, within the pulsing interstice of real and reality. With this commitment: *establish a subject and arm it*. Establish it (within the domain of the real, meaning nothing to do with reality). Arm it (against reality, meaning against the Empire(cal), the empire of facts, that which appears and makes the world).

[12.1] Or just as well: *be a saint, without divine guarantee*. (God being understood here as a supreme reality, as a Name for a Principle with an upper-case P. As that by and in which World, Cosmos, Creation consist, *mutatis mutandis*.)

[13] There is necessarily the following quadripartition, which describes the order (of the) real, the order of the last instance: real or (r), real of reality or R, reality of the real or S, reality or I.

[14] Let $(r \geqslant R/S < I)$ be the working formula for proletarian gnosis.

[14.1] (r), root and remainder, the parentheses marking the radical absence of reality, positivity, or the empirical – designates the last poor, solitary to the end, he who remains, without flesh, without words or world, man reduced to his *hickceity* [manance], to his melancholic base, neither immanent nor transcendent, and within which the elementary determination bathes each reality (hence enveloping the formula by parentheses). For, the essence of man, the real-man, the *radical hick* [manant], is not the set of social relations (which, however deep the determination might be, never touches the existence of man, human reality); it is melancholy, which is to man as divinity is to God.[5]

[14.2] $(r) \geqslant X$, for any X whatsoever, designates the determination in the last instance or the proletarianization of X, its establishment within the real element. Yet at the same time it designates the foreclosure of (r) to every reality, that this (r) acts on X, determines it, without being determined in return. Acting as a negative and intensive universal cause, (r) calls for every X to take leave from itself, to divide itself, forbidding it all sufficiency as much as forbidding every pretension to the real.

[14.3] R designates the instance of nothing or the void, the respective immanent and transcendent dimensions of the *Dispierced*, that is the cleaved identity of dispersion and the pierced, of war and love, of despondency and enthusiasm, of horror and beauty within which the real of reality consists. This radical Two, rather than a radical absolute, is theory, soul, subject without form or substance, without body or flesh: nothing but a whirlwind of immense energy, a can(n)on reaching towards the heights or settling much lower than the earth, giving its brilliance to reality and pulverizing it, robbing it of its splendour.

[14.4] S designates the instance of the symbolic or form, body and method: organon. Formula, law, institution, scene, screen, boat … the reality of the real is such that, by and through it, a subjective circumscription can take place, an antidote to the empirico-transcendental circles of this hell-world, even of philosophy. This non-worldly circumscription is the invention of a line finally opened onto infinity, of a body whose very violence of finitude at once and in the same gesture forms a blockage or screen to the world and conditions access to the infinite.

[14.5] X/Y, for any X and Y whatsoever, signifies the articulation-division or montage in truth of X and Y. When X = R and Y = S, we speak of the *canonization* of S by R and of the *militarization*

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of R by S. The subject (as real of reality, or soul) and its symbolic arsenal (as reality of the real, or body) are distinct, separated, but the first term only truly exists supported by or montaged with the second. Hence "/" designates the operation of truth, recalling the Christic statement, "I am the way, the life, and the truth." Truth that, therefore, is the arrow and the target.

[14.6] I designates the instance of the imaginary or of auto-realizing substance. Mixture and movement, fusion of flesh and spirit, of imagination and the understanding, physical and mental, experience and representation, phenomenality and s(p)ecularity, it is the life of the world, even the worldly.

[14.7] X < I, whatever the degree of humanity or real in X, designates its realization, worlding [*mondanisation*] or s(p)ecularization, the enriching and making the world eternal through the vampiric devouring of what is always the blood of man.

[15] The armed subject of proletarian gnosis is a soul symbolically militarized, established by (r), that which is alone, abandoned, poor and rebellious within the incessant revolutions of reality: (r), soul [*âme*] and weapon [*ârme*] – an *a(r)me*.

[15.1] For this form of GP as for the other, where there is rebellion, there is the subjective proletariat (the truth in an *a(r)me*, the eternity of truth that slices, that imposes a division between those who are scared by death and everyone else); and so where there is the objective proletariat, the factual proletariat, there is not necessarily rebellion.

[16] How can we be neither living (client or agent of this whorehouse-world), nor dead (or too quickly lethal, particularly for oneself)? Proletarian gnosis offers a solution to this problem: be a living-suicide. A saint without any glory except some ravaged intensity much like the sovereign in his act of being. Go to the sea.



notes

1 The original French has *Empir(i)*e, which contains both *empire* (Empire) and *empirie*, which refers to empiricism. I've tried to capture this pun in English as Empire(cal). All notes are the translator's.

2 This term was coined by Lacan and became a major concept for Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet in their *L'Ange*. It's a homophone for "c'est comme ça," which could be literally translated as "that's how it is," which is used in everyday French to denote a kind of realist fatalism in a way similar to the English expression "what are you gonna do?"

3 Translation slightly modified to match the French.

4 Translation slightly modified to match the French.

5 Here Grelet is playing on a neologism of his creation *manance*, which is the adjectival form of the noun *manant*, normally translated as yokel or low-born. Manance also plays on the *manence* of Proclus, as that which remains or is radically present and individual, and thus is closely related to the Latin *haecceity*, and so I have tried to capture both Grelet's stylistic performance and meaning with the pun "hickceity" and have translated *manant* as "hick."

Gilles Grelet
E-mail: gillesgrelet@hotmail.com
Twitter: Twitter@GillesGrelet

Anthony Paul Smith
La Salle University
Department of Religion
1900 W. Olney Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19141
USA
E-mail: smithanthony@lasalle.edu

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