Know the Enemy

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Glenn Beck’s rant on Fox News sent *The Coming Insurrection* (2009)\(^1\) flying off American bookshelves,\(^2\) a rare occurrence for a small press like Semiotext(e), which mainly trucks in the margins of French theory. In fact, the book had good publicity all around. While Beck’s call to “know the enemy” no doubt inspired conservatives to purchase—if not read—*The Coming Insurrection*, radical leftists and intellectuals may have been tempted by the timely arrest of its supposed authors, the Tarnac 9, and the petition signed by a number of big-name theorists for their release (e.g., Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek).\(^3\) Indeed, it sold even though free translations of the book have been circulating online since its publication. All of this doubtless added to the aura of the book, which was being typecast as a dangerous, anarchist manifesto.

Lacking the no-press-is-bad-press endorsements of *The Coming Insurrection*, *Introduction to Civil War* (2010)\(^4\) is a more anomalous text, setting out, in aphoristic and impressionistic snippets, what appears to be the conceptual and theoretical foundation of the former. In fact, originally appearing in 2001 in the French journal *Tiqqun*, *Introduction to Civil War* was published first. The reverse order of the English translations thus potentially obscures an important development—namely, that the...
more practically oriented call for insurrection grew out of a committed reflection on thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, Foucault, Pierre Clastres, Carl Von Clausewitz, Emile Benveniste, Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Deleuze, and Guattari.

*Introduction to Civil War* is divided into two sections. The first, titled “Introduction to Civil War,” consists of eighty-five aphorisms, similar in style to Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* or *Human, All Too Human*. These aphorisms are often accompanied by “glosses,” which are nonetheless only slightly more didactic than the allusive aphorisms they seem intended to explain. The particular order of this section feels like a late and rather arbitrary innovation, and there is little reason to suppose that reading it back to front would create a more challenging experience for the reader. One of the virtues of this format, however, is that important concepts like “forms-of-life” gain consistency, not through explicit definition, but through repetition and reworking. Structured like a long, free-verse poem, the second section, “How Is It to Be Done?” makes up only about one eighth of the book and reads much more like *The Coming Insurrection*.

Not surprisingly, given its title, *Introduction to Civil War* institutes and sustains an irresolvable antagonism—that between Empire, Biopower, and hostility, on the one hand, and civil war, forms-of-life, and friendship, on the other. The title is appropriate, as the latter, positive terms are merely introduced here, the better part of the text being taken up by the negative, archaeological work of dissecting Empire and its various incarnations. This negative dimension represents a true advance not only with respect to the wide range of contemporary theoretical sources the authors synthesize, but also because it chips away at some of the “permanent confusion” they claim is vital to Empire’s maintenance (153).

Following and extending Foucault’s work on biopolitics, which they quote repeatedly, the authors provide a thorough ontology of Empire—a difficult feat, if, as they argue, Empire is “possible everywhere” precisely because it is present nowhere (117). According to them, the “two super-institutional poles” of Empire, “Spectacle” and “Biopower” (118), represent completely immanent forms of authority in which the normal distinctions between observer and observed, citizen and cop, are turned “inside out” (116). This process of “omnivorous immanentization” (132) is fundamental to their account of the transition from the order of States to Empire, where the latter describes a situation in which there is, quite simply, no more outside (41, 126, 130).

Echoing a host of contemporary theorists, such as Žižek, Badiou,
and Agamben, but distinguishing
themselves from “deconstruction”
(145–47) and what they call “Ne-
griism” (159–62), the authors assert
that, precisely because nothing is
foreign to it, Empire is the demo-
cratic form par excellence (120). In
Empire, where local norms and
apparatuses have superseded uni-
versal laws and institutions (132,
134, 137), they argue that “we are
dealing not so much with individu-
alities and subjectivities, but with
individuations and subjectivations”
(140), with “molecular calibrations
of subjectivities and bodies” (141).
Thus, “the enemy of Empire is
within” (153) and “[e]ach person is
a risk” (155). The stakes of Empire’s
offensive, therefore, are not “to win
a certain confrontation, but rather
to make sure that the confrontation
does not take place” (170).

Hence, the call for civil war or
insurrection is based on the need to
reclaim everything and anything
that has been incorporated into
Empire’s nexus, right down to the
workings of the soul. For the au-
thors, this is a necessarily localized
practice: anyone anywhere can trig-
ger the “process of ethical polariza-
tion” that is the essence of civil war
(180). What remains then, in the
words of The Coming Insurrection,
is nothing more, nor less, than the
creation of a “certain outlook” (19),
the recovery of a “perception of the
real” (95).

Here, the two books resonate
well with each other and together
sketch the beginnings of what
might pass for a program (though
the title of Tiqqun’s most recent
book, This Is Not a Program, sug-
gests otherwise). While Introduc-
tion to Civil War challenges readers
to “become attentive to the taking
place of things” (211), The Coming
Insurrection astutely observes, “the
impasse of the present, everywhere
in evidence, is everywhere denied”
(28). But a privileged feature of this
extreme situation of denial, the
authors say, is that merely to state
the obvious and not “shrink from
the conclusions” constitutes a revo-
lutionary act (28). Of course, they
warn, “Nothing appears less likely
or more necessary” (96).

In this sense, Introduction to
Civil War may be considered a
revolutionary text, as it provides
a platform where just such a con-
frontation can take place. Maybe
Sylvère Lotringer, general editor
of Semiotext(e), is right when he
says Glenn Beck “never read” The
Coming Insurrection, that he is ac-
tually “incapable of reading it.”
Nevertheless, Beck’s desperate plea
to “know the enemy” causes one to
wonder whether, perhaps, he read
Introduction to Civil War, instead.

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NOTES


