

## **Zapatismo, myth-making, overalls and catastrophic times**

by Wu Ming 1 (of the Wu Ming collective) 12:20pm Sun Oct 21 '01

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We ought to prize our pre-S11 experience highly and use it to challenge the Empire at war. Do not forget that the global movement was one of the main causes of the Empire's crisis of legitimacy BEFORE the twin towers attack, anthrax and so on. The same multitudes are now marching against the war all around the planet. Let's re-think the steps we have taken.

I was supposed to make the following speech at the "Semi(o)resistance" panel of the make-world festival , Munich, October 20th, 2001, <http://make-world.org> Health problems prevented me from attending the festival.

Here it is. [Wu Ming 1]

### TUTE BIANCHE: THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF MYTH MAKING (IN CATASTROPHIC TIMES)

by Wu Ming 1 (Roberto Bui)

It has become a trivial remark, even a ridiculous one, indeed, it is being made by all and sundry: in the aftermath of the demolition of the WTC and the imperial war on Afghanistan, with the amount of "collateral damages" increasing out of sight, we all have entered a new phase of social life and conflict. This phase is heavily affected by paranoia, war propaganda, will to censorship, restriction of such civil rights as free speech, re-embellished mcCarthysm and angry mobs demanding new \*berufsverboten\* in the sinister light of the rhetoric on the "clash of civilizations". Back to the home front. Another Cold War. The Empire asks for it.

However, the events of September 11th have "only" made more apparent and explicit the fact that after Genoa we had entered a \*catastrophic\* realm already. By "catastrophe" I don't mean the end of the world, but a new topology, a space created by an abrupt discontinuity. The threshold was in via Tolemaide on July 20th. There we experienced a sudden displacement. Less than two months later we experienced a second one, like a "fold-in" and "cut-up" of public space. This forced us to re-think our approach. Such a discussion is still going on and there's no rabbit in our hats. All I can say is that none of the phenomena I am going to describe exists anymore, at least not in Italy and certainly not in its original form. As a matter of fact, the only white overalls one sees on TV or on the papers these days are related to anthrax and biological warfare. On the other hand, we are not starting over: there can be no doubt that the multitudes of people who have challenged global capitalism all around the planet are still willing to do it. On last sunday, more than 200,000 thousands people demonstrated in Perugia, Italy, against the US bombings of Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of people did the same here in Germany. The more "collateral damage" the Empire causes on Afghanistan, the less people are willing to accept excuses.

I know, it is harder than ever, but only fools thought it would be easy.

People who are not aware of the peculiar use we the Italian movement have been doing of such words as "myth" and "myth-making" may suspect that this is a mere revival of Georges Sorel's thought and his descriptions of the revolutionary syndicalists' "general strike". As a matter of fact we have tried to keep all that was useful in Sorel's discourse, all the while getting rid of the most out-dated and dangerous elements.

According to Sorel, the general strike was an image that allowed proletarians to "always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph". Such image, or rather such group of images, was not to be analyzed "in the way that we analyze a thing into its elements", indeed, it must be "taken as a whole" as an historical force", with no comparison "between accomplished fact and the picture people [have]

formed for themselves before action" (Letter to Daniel Halevy, 1908). In plain words, the social myth of the general strike was "capable of evoking instinctively all the feelings which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society". The general strike grouped all those feelings "in a coordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, [gave] to each one of them its maximum of intensity [...] We thus obtain that intuition of Socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness - and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously" (The Proletarian Strike, 1905).

Sorel put his discourse in the context of a traditionally heroic, self-sacrificial, moralistic *weltanschauung* which we had better stay away from: of course "accomplished facts" (i.e. the struggle for food, housing, health and dignity here and now, not only after the revolution) were very important for the proletarians. And yet it is true that people do not keep on fighting the present state of things if they are not inspired by some sort of *narrative*.

In the past decades revolutionaries have bounced from alienating "iconophilia" and subalternity to myths (e.g. the cult of Che Guevara as a Christ-like figure) to an iconoclastic attitude which did all but helping people to understand the nature of conflicts. Think of the superficially "post-situationist" stance of many anarchists, according to whom any concrete achievement on the ground of democracy or any penetration of popular culture is "recuperated" and ends up strengthening the so-called "spectacle". As an Italian idiom goes, while getting rid of the bath water we shouldn't throw away the baby too.

In an interview conducted with some members of the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1974, Michel Foucault made a very clear distinction between the baby and the water. He said: "Beneath the sentence 'There are no heroes' is hidden a different meaning, its true message: 'there was no struggle' [...] Can you make a film about a struggle without going through the traditional process of creating heroes? It's a new form of an old problem."

In Italy, since the early and mid-1990's a whole bunch of comrades have focused their attention on an even newer form of that old problem. They committed themselves to a practical exploration of mythologies, in order to understand whether a non-alienating, libertarian deconstruction, re-use and manipulation of myths was possible or not. The sources of inspiration were ancient legends regarding folk heroes, the language adopted by the EZLN, genre cinema and western pop culture in general, as well as the manifold experiences of media pranksters and communication guerrillas since the 1920's. I was completely wrapped up in such experimentation, since I was a founder and member of the so-called Luther Blissett Project, perhaps the hardest working firm of "cultural engineers" devoted to the mission. "Luther Blissett" was a multi-use pseudonym which could be adopted by anyone interested in constructing the subversive reputation of an imaginary Robin Hood-like character, allegedly the virtual leader of an open community thriving on media scams, myth-making, subversive writings, radical performance art and culture jamming. The LBP started in 1994 and involved several hundreds of people in various countries, although Italy remained the epicenter. At the end of 1995 the LBP published a pamphlet titled *Mind Invaders*, whose first chapter was a declaration of intents as far as myth-making was concerned. It linked myth-making to the life, desires and expectations of a *community*, no matter how "open" and loose-knit it might be, and in a way predicted the rising of the global movement.

I do not intend to go into the details of the Luther Blissett Project, I am not (and will never be) a blissettologist. You can find a lot of useful and interesting material on the net, especially at <[www.lutherblissett.net](http://www.lutherblissett.net)>. I just want to point out that some of "Luther Blissett"'s theoretico-practical findings have been used - perhaps instinctively at the

beginning, then making explicit references - by the "tute bianche" [White Overalls, pronounced too-tay bee-ankay]. This is hardly surprising given that both phenomena were inspired by the zapatistas, but they also inspired each other.

Two "commandments" in particular were passed on:

- 1) You Shall Not Care About Binary Oppositions (for example those between visibility and invisibility, legality and illegality, violence and non-violence, static and dynamic).
- 2) You Shall Separate All Things United And Unite All Things Separated In Order To Create Uncanny Feelings Of Closeness And Distance.

On a famous T-shirt, the slogan "Peace & Love" was associated to pictures of violent confrontation. The "Tute Bianche" often provoked a kind of non-violent rioting, which took place in an intersection of public space that was neither "legal" nor "illegal". The comrades would walk towards the police line, their open hands raised, expecting to be clubbed nevertheless chanting: "Stiamo arrivando / Bastardi, stiamo arrivando!" [Here we come / Bastards, here we come] on the chorus of "Guantanamo".

I know that outside Italy people find it difficult to understand the background and tactics of the "tute bianche". Well, that is because the chain you're seeing is short of three links.

The first link is the evolution of the Italian Autonomia movement, notwithstanding the repression of the late 1970's and the difficulties of the 1980's and the 1990's. Toni Negri may have been the most influential theorist, though he isn't the only one. Recently there was much hype on *Empire*, the latest essay he co-authored with Michael Hardt and has become something of a cult book. I would say that *Empire* is just a summing-up and a popularization of the concepts that have modified our political DNA since the Eighties.

The second link is the direct collaboration with the Zapatistas of Chiapas, and the influence their strategies and language had on the Italian scene thanks to the network of Ya Basta! associations. It is impossible to make a complete account of all those innovations here and now, but I'll make a few examples. Anyway, the most important thing to know is that the Zapatistas provided us with mythological material that had nothing to do with traditional Third-World-fetishism or revolutionary tourism. Marcos was not even a heroic leader, he was just a spokesperson and a "sub-commander", which also implied an interesting approach to myths: according to a popular Mexican legend, Emiliano Zapata is still alive and riding his horse somewhere, in the woods and on the mountains. Some indios even regard him as part of Maya mythology, some sort of pagan semi-god. Contemporary Zapatistas have been able to communicate to society from an intersection between folklore and pop culture. In a way, the *real* Commander (with the capital "a") is still Zapata. It was like saying: "Don't you care about me, I'm not your masked hero, our revolution is impersonal, it is new but is also the same revolution as always, Zapata still rides". This is the real meaning of balaklavas: the revolution is faceless, everybody can be a Zapatista, we all are Marcos.

Here we come to the third link, i.e. the work on myth-making I outlined a few minutes ago.

The Tute Bianche were neither a "vanguard" of the movement nor a "current", a "fringe" of it. The white overall was born as an ironic reference to the ghosts of urban conflict then became a tool, a symbol and an open identity made available to the movement. Anybody could wear a white overall insofar as they respected a certain style. One of the

typical soundbites was: "We're wearing the white overall so that other people wear it. We're wearing the white overall so that we can take it off someday", which means: "You don't have to join any army, the white overall is not our 'uniform'. the finger is pointing at the moon, and as soon as the multitudes look at the moon the finger will vanish into thin air. Our discourse is very factual, we are making proposals, the more people will accept them and put them into practice, the less important we will be."

Luckily enough, we decided to call it quits and take off the overall soon before Genoa, for it had become an identity feature and we wanted to merge in the multitudes. Had we been recognizable as "tute bianche" during Friday's manhunt, we'd have even more to be sorry about. Had the white overall really been an "uniform" we'd have many more Giulianis to cry for.

In the Autumn of 1994 the Mayor of Milan Formentini, a member of the racist party called Northern League, commanded the eviction of the Leoncavallo squatted centre and stated: "From now on, squatters will be nothing more than ghosts wandering about in the city!". His description was accepted ironically: during a big demonstration, numberless "ghosts" in white overall attacked the police and rioted in the centre of the city. Ce n'etait qu'un debut.

After that, the "tute bianche" became an organized sub-section of the new Leoncavallo, providing security service at demonstrations and defending the place from other assaults. Yet a strange thing happened: some rhetorically opposed the white overall and the "blue overall" [tute blu, the Italian correspondent for "blue collars", the traditional factory working class], and the former was used as a metaphor for post-fordist labour - flexible, "precarious", temporary workers whom the bosses prevent from enjoying their rights and being represented by the unions. Moreover, white is the sum of all other colors, therefore it was more suitable than the usual rainbow to describe the cooperation and convergence of different subjects. As a consequence, in the course of 1997-98 comrades started to wear the white overall and occupy or picket agencies for temporary jobs. This happened in Rome, Milan, Bologna and North-East Italy.

Then started the Kosovo war. If I am not wrong, "protected direct action" was invented when the social centres of North-East Italy decided to invade the US military base in Aviano. For those of you who still ignore what it was about, it encompassed pads, helmets, gas masks, plastic shields and mobile barricades made of inflated tires and plexyglass panels. In the following months, the "testudo" [turtle] tactic was devised in order to turn against riot squad cops one of their most common practice. Thanks to these inventions, the number of injured demonstrators decreased dramatically. Moreover, manhunt was made almost impossible, for the \*testudo\* encouraged the demonstrators to stand, walk and be clubbed all together. On the contrary, the number of hospitalized cops slightly increased, because they had no specific training to deal with that new kind of strategy. Sometimes the \*testudo\* opened its frontline and let some cops run inside. Of course the latter got trapped in the middle and were joyfully kicked. All this happened in front of numberless cameras, reporters and TV crews. Police defeats were broadcasted and amplified. Journalists were forced to notice that the demonstrators were only marching towards their target, that no stone or molotov cocktail had been thrown, no window had been smashed etc. This aroused sympathy among all kinds of people who had been seeking a way to challenge the state of things but would have never participated in a riot.

The fact that many people put their bodies on the line while feeling no sense of martyrdom also reminded some people of Foucault's (and Deleuze's) analyses on "bio-politics" and "bio-power". Some enthusiastically stated that bodies were back, they were used to challenge the order of discourse imposed upon them, in order to escape control. This might be an exaggeration and it is little bit off-topic anyway.

After a few months of this routine, the most intelligent police officials and the state authorities assumed that the only way to come to terms with these tactics was a strategy of "containment" which might even encompass compromise and minute-by-minute negotiation. We started to see officials waving city maps and uttering strange mixtures of street talk, machiavellianisms and tongue-in-cheek references:

"OK guys, there's no way we can allow you to reach your target, it is our duty to charge you and we're gonna do it, but we can draw back for a hundred metres and let you march until this spot here. If you take one more step we'll react, OK? You guys'd better put the rubber barricades back into the vans, there's no use for them, everything's cool, OK? My men are perfectly in control. Oh, and tell the fucking journalists they don't have to stand in our way, what's this got to do with them? It's between you and us, you are cool, we are cool, so what's the problem?"

Of course the tute bianche always took several further steps, cops were never very cool and journalists always stood in the way. This took real advantage only to the tute bianche, for it allowed them to further improve the strategy and achieve some important goals. The cops' "talkative" approach was exploited in a highly media-conscious way, which never failed to place the tute bianche where the media and the authorities did not expect them to be.

What is more important, the tute bianche staged a Zapatista-inspired narrative of civil disobedience and multitudes "blowing against the Empire". It wasn't at all a thing between the comrades and the police, it was a message to civil society.

The tute bianche usually announced what was their aim and what tactics they would employ at the next demo, in order to "blackmail" the authorities. They said: "There's no secret, we'll do this and we'll do that, this is the framework. We are not responsible for anything that happens outside the framework. It is up to the police to keep things cool. You know our tactics, it is your duty to face them without freaking out!". And yet the tactics were employed in unpredictable ways so that everybody was taken aghast and cops \*did\* freak out but couldn't do much harm. This brought about concrete results in the course of year 2000.

Now I'm quoting from a document which some comrades wrote and sent out soon before Genoa. They wanted to clarify a few points and respond to some slanders and distortions spread by self-styled revolutionaries. At times the English is a bit clumsy, but it is understandable:

<<[...] We achieved a concrete goal in via Corelli, Milan, January 2000, when we clashed with the police and managed to enter a zone that was forbidden even to the press, i.e. the administrative detention center for "clandestine" migrants, which was a real concentration camp. We won the cops' resistance, the journalists could enter the center and describe what they saw. After that, the center was shut down.

We achieved concrete goals after the Mobilitebio demonstrations in Genoa, May 24-26th 2000. We clashed with the police in such an unprecedented way that the media simply couldn't criminalize us. After that, the Italian government was forced to ban GMOs.

During the no-OECD demonstration in Bologna (June 14th 2000) we were attacked by the police, four of us were literally grabbed out of the testudo and got their skulls smashed in. It was a hard clash, as the video footage proves: white overalls lying on the ground with packs of coppers kicking and clubbing them. [The] slanderers say that it was all staged, that there was an agreement with the cops. This is bullshit, and shameful lack of respect for the injured comrades. Anyway, the TV news showed that we were just protecting ourselves with shields, that violence was only on the part of the police.

In the weeks before the G8 summit on environment in Trieste, april 2001, the town was sealed and invaded by thousands of cops. The local press turned things upside down and made the inhabitants expect us to be barbarians, ready to set fire on the town. The demonstration was shielded and ready to self-defense, but it was also pacific, ironic,

culturally diversified. The news media were forced to admit that nothing [horrible] had happened, and the population questioned the authorities about the discomforts the cops' invasion had caused.

In the past two months of preparation for blocking the G8 in Genoa, the white overalls have proved to be able to avoid stereotypes. They forced the media to schizoid interpretations. Hacks were totally unable to label the white overalls either as "good" or "bad". On the other hand, it is partially true that the white overalls have been "over-exposed" to the media, their spokespersons were quoted even when there was no need for it, however [...] the trouble of "over-exposition" can be solved by continually shifting routes:

They say you're violent? You upset the debate on violence and non-violence by proposing tactics that cannot be pigeon-holed. They say you're just a fringe, a tiny minority? You infiltrate pop culture, build consensus, throw ordinary representations into disorder.

They change strategy and try to describe you as "reasonable", while the Black Bloc is "evil"? You throw all your weight in defending the Black Bloc, against all slanders and stereotypes.

They try to describe you as if you're the whole movement, and then try to force you to "negotiate" with the government? You say that there's nothing to negotiate, all the government has got to do is cancel the summit (that's the position we've always held).>>

In spite of the mistakes we made, I still think that the way the tute bianche had organized and imposed themselves to the public attention - all the while avoiding many traps and ambushes in a media-savvy way - not only prevented even fiercer carnage in Genoa, but also played a key role in building consensus around their practices so that almost 300,000 people decided to join us on Saturday and literally save our asses. Errors were made though, certainly we hadn't expect such a sudden increase of the level of repression, nor had we taken into sufficient account the rivalry between police and carabinieri. There's no way I can go into the details now, I'd rather suggest someone else to translate the long testimony given by our spokesperson Luca Casarini before the Parliamentary Committee investigating the events of Genoa, on September 6th, 2001. One thing I know for sure: even in this landscape abruptly changed by discontinuities, we ought to keep all distinctions between the babies and the water, and make treasure of the experiences we have made.

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