

Paul Nizan: Conspiracy and the Contemplation of Crime

Abstract

Paul Nizan (1905-1940) is also known in France as the ‘impossible communist’, for his long-term allegiance to the Party and the abrupt cancellation of his membership, in the late 1930s, following the Nazi-Soviet pact. This paper discusses a number of his writings, focusing particularly on his best known novel, *The Conspiracy*, where a revolutionary cell plans illegal political action. Conflict, nihilism, suicide and betrayal are among the topics stemming from the novel, which will be examined from a criminological perspective. The analysis will primarily address ‘cultural’ aspects of crime and refer to notions such as ‘thrill’ and ‘seductions of crime’ among others. These notions, it will be argued, require some revision in the face of the imagined or actual criminality described in the novel.

Keywords

Conflict, nihilism, suicide, betrayal

Introduction

Fiction can be used as a tool for the communication of sociological meaning and the elaboration of criminological analysis. A legendary figure in criminology, Howard Becker (1995), after leaving us his magnificent legacy around the ‘labeling of outsiders, has studied the social and ideological aspects of literature. He was fascinated by how the boundaries between academic disciplines can be made permeable and fuzzy, as was the author he studied, Antonio Candido, who resisted specialization and mixed imagination and observation, science and art. Some authors have left legal for literary studies to build explanatory bridges between the mentalities of law and fiction (Dolin, 2000). Others have simply used fiction to discuss sociological and criminological notions while ‘telling stories’ (Dow, 1980; Ruggiero, 2003; Forti, Mazzucato and Visconti, 2012).

Encouragement to ‘take stories seriously’ may emerge from the reading of Aristotle (1995) *Poetics*, where we find that the difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes prose and the other verse. The real difference, in Aristotle’s view, is that the former tells what happened, while the latter what might happen. For this reason poetry, and for that matter fiction, are more scientific and serious than history, as they tend to give general truths, whereas history only gives particular facts. By general truth, Aristotle meant the sort of thing that certain types of people will do or say, either probably or necessarily (Bull, 2013). Giambattista Vico (1999) echoes this view, when he equates fiction to the *verisimile*, namely an ideal truth that conforms to the common sense of all citizens.

Fictional characters populate our world and our mind, but they need our solicitude, in the sense that we need to ‘take them in’, and ‘if we don’t appreciate them, they risk disappearing altogether’ (Latour, 2013: 242). They have this peculiarity, then: they become objectively existing beings when we encounter

them and reprise them through our subjectivity. In brief, we complement with our creative work that performed by their creator. Fiction, therefore, is a communicative event bringing people together and eliciting in them the need to weigh, discuss and compare values. This paper is an attempt to do exactly that while analyzing some of Paul Nizan's work.

Conflict

Paul Nizan, a friend and classmate of Jean-Paul Sartre, studies classics and philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. At twenty-two he joins the Communist Party while starting his career as a novelist, essayist, polemicist, literary critic and political journalist (Rubin Suleiman, 2005). Sartre is often mistaken for Nizan and congratulated for the books written by the latter. The two, however, share the view that teaching humanities is teaching the big mistakes of the past (Sartre, 1938). First fascinated by Calvinism, although not believing in god, Nizan is attracted to protestant 'morality' and to communism in equal measure and reaches celebrity with his very first book, (*Aden, Arabie*) at the age twenty-six. In this book, he describes relationships of domination in all their nakedness, and in the undisguised colonialist oppression he understands Europe better, its social evils well hidden beneath a veneer of cultural and personal freedom (Nizan, 1973). Driven by feelings of solidarity, his journey to the Arab countries reveals how 'naked power' renders humans just as naked, and this is what interests him: beyond the linguistic, ethnic or political differences, he seeks human nudity, bare humanity, the others as his brothers or as himself (Allam, 1999). He sees the essence of European capitalism stripped of the thick philosophical veneer justifying its existence and, after laying bare the spiritual and existential poverty of economic and political domination, he returns to France determined to fight. In the final image of the book, with violent surrealist intensity, he sees the defeat of the dominators taking the form of soldiers in black jackets lying motionless on the ground, their arms stretched out, in the middle of a funereal Place de la Concorde.

This instinctive appreciation of social conflict is later sustained by theoretical considerations. Nizan criticizes Durkheim in a long endnote to his *The Watchdogs*, where functionalist sociology is described as an attempt to establish an artificial form of communion among people and pacify them, irrespective of the injustice they experience.

'Whether it be mathematics or collective representation, everything in Durkheim leads to social harmony. Bourgeois philosophy tries very hard to conceal the war raging throughout society, a war it does not dare declare – beneath the celestial veil of an imaginary peace, a peace it is incapable of establishing on earth' (Nizan, 1971: 156).

In a critique of Henri-Louis Bergson (1911), he appreciates that the philosopher addresses the processes of immediate experience and attributes to these more significance than abstract rationalism and science for understanding reality. However, he notes that, after promising to address the concreteness of nature and life, the celebrated philosopher ends up replacing immutable abstractions with new ones, giving the appearance of life to mystical objects and

substituting a vocabulary of movement for one of rest (Nizan, 1967). The watchdogs, in brief, are the professional guardians of the status quo, the intellectuals who never cease to protect and glorify a specific social group, usually their own. Such professional guardians may be pure metaphysicians, like Durkheim, or practical individuals such as judges. The latter sit in their sinister criminal courts, in domestic as well as in colonial territories, and keep sentencing rebels to death or to forced labour (Schalk, 1979). Nizan's invective is primarily focused on philosophy, but his arguments extend to other academic disciplines, all in his view engaged in devising a very sophisticated set of principles and constructs supporting social stability. Some study philosophy, he remarks, without grasping the meaning and direction of what they are studying. Others may be vaguely motivated by the notion that philosophy involves 'good intentions' toward humanity, 'and that through the pursuit of philosophy peace will spread among the men of good will' (ibid: 67). Nizan contends that abstract knowledge, and for that matter intelligence, can be used both for and against mankind. They are 'servants' which can concentrate on eschatological truths or on concrete issues such as, for example, the incidence of tuberculosis in Paris. Philosophers who choose the first path might be endowed with elegance of argument, technical subtlety and high stylistic skills, but live apart from society, having freed themselves from the chains of locality. They are heads without bodies, and by abstaining from reality they become lighter than angels. While providing abstract definitions of liberty, and at the same time by claiming neutrality and abstention from choice, in fact they make a partisan choice, thus participating like everybody else in the impure actuality of their time.

'During WW1 they did what the generals told them to do, if they were too old to be mobilized, they followed with docility the ignorant popular movements and exhorted those who were mobilizable to die' (ibid: 68).

Nizan urges students to stay away from these docile *clerics* of the bourgeoisie and not to wander on to the polished paths and frozen corridors of a spiritualist philosophy. However, he ardently believes in knowledge and intellectual activity, as his teaching and popular journalism testify. The public enemy N.1, in his view, is illiteracy. Culture, however, resembles medicine: it can cure or kill. And in the former case, it can help attain consciousness of the social reality, which in turn can assume an explosive value. Learning possesses a revolutionary significance, and the only obstacles preventing it from turning into a tool for genuine social transformation are erected by the watchdogs and their deceptive philosophizing.

Conspiracy

In Nizan's most famous novel, *The Conspiracy*, a small group of young men of that awkward age between twenty and twenty-four decides to express its aversion to social injustice through the publication of a journal, *Civil War*, and to spread it along with their anger in the public domain. The plot is focused on the lives of five students, Rosenthal, Laforgue, Bloyé, Jurien and Pluvinage, and events take place between July 1928 and December 1929. Their ideas and projects are presented as no more than a series 'of inconsequential gestures' typifying the instability of young men in transition from childhood to manhood, 'young men

whose dependent student status ultimately places them at the periphery of social activity and deprives them of seriousness and credibility' (Scriven, 1988: 151).

Rosenthal believes in the pedagogical properties of political and philosophical literature and is confident that a new journal will ignite the revolutionary spirit of the masses. Laforgue is seized by a desire to rebel against his own wealthy condition and sees society's true contours masked behind the myths of freedom, religious creed and hypocritical brotherhood. He conspires against his own social class, and such an endogenous betrayal is described by Nizan (2011) as something that threatens bourgeois stability more fundamentally than any collective, oppositional, action. Contentious politics, for Nizan, is by now tolerated but ineffective, part of the 'democratic' process, a painless routine. Rosenthal and Laforgue share dreamy ideas and hopes, and their nobility lies in their will to subvert the system. Pluvillage, instead, is a man of action, but his feverish activism 'cannot but end badly, because he is basically concerned only with vengeance and believes in his destiny without any ironic reflection upon himself' (ibid: 18). It is he who suggests that the front cover of *Civil War* should carry a machine-gun.

Sartre (1938: x) detects in some of these young men the fatal lightmindedness and the aggressive futility of those who have no duties and are by nature irresponsible. Nothing can really engage them, not even their membership of extremist parties: they are temporary diversions devoid of consequences, as they can 'always return to the embrace of their class'. 'Conspiring' for them is a way of whispering, sharing little mysteries and inventing implausible dangers. Their tenuous intrigues amount to a game, a feverish but abortive game, a form of play-acting whereby they lie to themselves while knowing they are running no risk.

The inclination of the group towards radicalism is not guided by love for humanity or any other mawkish philanthropic feeling, theirs being a natural impulse to revolt. Humanitarianism, in their view, is tantamount to affectation, a thin veneer leading action nowhere. It is not cruelty and oppression they are fighting against, but idiocy, the prime quality of a declining, doomed, system. They are stirred by the dull logic of power more than by its crimes, and their fight is not for the workers, who definitively refrain from imitating them, but for themselves, although the working class is in their mind their natural ally.

Predestined victors of history, they embrace a philosophy of the inevitable, prefiguring a future stage in which society reaches harmony, shuns conflict and bans hypocrisy. Consequently, their mission consists of exposing mendacity, in an ambitious plan to extend Marx's analyses of the fetishism of commodities to all dominant values and principles. Such an extension would construct a universal classification of deception (Redfern, 1972). A modern encyclopedia is what they envisage as their contribution to revolt, one which announces through clear expressive means the big lie embedded in the status quo, unsettles the smug agents of domination and prophesizes their demise. A Hegelian encyclopedia, theirs will, however, seek inspiration from Spinoza, his pantheism embracing in inclusive tolerance all genuine expressions of nature and humanity.

'People are suffocating inside shells of mendacity. We shall tell those hermit-crabs why they are dying. They'll be furious with us, nobody like

truth for its own sake. But Marx said men must be given consciousness of themselves, even if they don't want it' (Nizan, 2011: 42).

This educative programme aims at infusing with an identity people who are dying without one, and includes a project of denigration addressed to all received ideas. It amounts to profanation of what society holds dear: when victorious on a world scale, they will, like Lenin once said, use gold for the purpose of building public lavatories in the streets of some of the largest cities of the world. Nizan displays both denigration and sympathy for these young people, who are not yet aware of how formless the world is, and how hard it is to fight against a 'gelatinous mass with neither head nor tail, a kind of enormous jellyfish with hidden organs' (Scriven, 1988: 149).

After three months, *Civil War* enjoys the support of five hundred subscribers and eight hundred single-copy purchasers, while three publishing houses give the journal paid advertising. But revolution, they realize, requires more than articles, and radical change 'can be measured only by the sacrifices one makes to it and the risks one runs for it' (Nizan, 2011: 48). The reader feels that, finally, the group of young men starts planning practical, risky, action. But the plan is relatively tame. They set up a tiny network of industrial and military espionage, and Simon, an old friend who has joined the army, is asked to conspire with them by stealing the military defense plan for Paris, Area 2, which is locked in the barracks, a little cupboard, rather like the lockers in school dormitories. Simon obliges and rummages among the files marked with 'confidential' or 'secret', finding no difficulty in discovering the only important item, the defense plan for Area 2. It is a notebook which, with extreme baldness, evokes war, revolution, civil strife, and places troops, machine-guns and mortars in strategic city spots. Simon does not steal it but diligently copies its content and sends it to Rosenthal. When he is found out, he excuses himself by saying that he is fascinated by that material and intends to write a novel with it.

The spying activities, in brief, remain chimerical and fail to spark a militant action of sort, rather they signal the beginning of the end of the revolutionary cell. One of the boys commits suicide, and immediately afterwards Pluvineage is suspected by his associates to have reported to the police a generous gentleman who is hosting a member of the Communist Party on the run. When the evidence of the betrayal is undeniable, we learn that what really attracted Pluvineage to the group was the possibility of turning revolutionary ideas into illegal conduct, it was, therefore, the hidden, clandestine, nature of its project. His intense vocation for mystery, unfulfilled by subversive activity confined to the publication of a journal, can now be directed elsewhere: he suddenly sees himself destined for the religion of police work, the discipline of the Special Branch. 'Some great idea must guide spies and informers, if they wish to survive. It is necessary for them to believe in the sacred character even of their treachery' (ibid: 222).

Active and passive nihilism

Social movements scholars may view Paul Nizan's conspiracy as an improbable example of collective action, as despite being based on an informal network of individuals and being engaged in conflict, it lacks the third key characteristic of social movements, namely the capacity to produce and being produced by

collective identity (Diani, 1992). There is no socio-economic homogeneity among Nizan's conspirators, who possess a 'weak' identity and are constantly troubled by uncertainty: they aristocratically distance themselves from the social groups whose aspirations may share some aspects with theirs but, at the same time, identify the enemy of those groups as their own. They are able to shift from denigration of the idiocy of power to allegiance to its formally appointed guardians, as if being inured to conspire they found it easy to engage in conspiracy even against their peers and themselves. Criminologists may refer to relative deprivation and deviant adaptations, mobilize subcultural and conflict theory, or turn to symbolic interactionism to surmise how oppositional behaviours are constituted and enacted. Among them, some would focus on the 'stylized dynamics of threatening or illicit' conduct and modes of resistance (Carrabine et al, 2002: 75). Focusing on cultural aspects, they would explicate the attractions of 'doing wrong', as marginality accompanied by transgression may be exciting, a thrilling experience far more exhilarating than conformism (Katz, 1988; Presdee, 2000; Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2008). Illicit conspiracy can be located in everyday life, a site of drama, tragedy and joy, and captured as a holistic phenomenon, with 'its adrenaline, its pleasure and panic, its excitement, and its anger, rage and humiliation, its desperation and its edgework' (Young, 2011: 84).

Rule-breaking, in this perspective, is seen as a way of manufacturing excitement, escaping boredom, feeling alive and expressing subjectivity. In embryonic form, this view is also detectable as early as the 1970s in the contribution of the new criminology, when Taylor, Walton and Young (1973: 230) suggest that individuals and groups are totally 'determined' by social dynamics and constraints, but are able to react to criminal labels and produce subjective antagonistic behavior. Acts of deviance are described as acts of men in the process of actively making, rather than passively taking the external world. Several forms of deviance, including 'vandalism, individual industrial sabotage and even some sex crime', allude to subjective choices to challenge 'the social structure and the structure of power', but they retain at the same time a distinct hedonistic character (ibid: 271). Hedonism and sensual aesthetics return in Katz (1988), who includes violent behaviour among those illicit conducts replete with seductive significance. Playfulness and excitement, therefore, are seen as the basic traits of offending, which requires investment of energies and provides the sensation of living intensely (Cusson, 1983). Hyper consumerism is part of this sensation (Hayward, 2004), in that it gives the impression that, although illegally acquired, the avalanche of goods available can be enjoyed even by those who have limited possibilities of accessing the market.

'Moreover, hemmed in by the hyper-banalization of over-regulation, excluded from ever greater swathes of public and private space (from shopping malls to schools), the most comprehensively demonized youth are goaded into manufacturing excitement by conjuring up carnivals of crime' (Downes and Rock, 2007: 143).

Sartre (1938: xii) maintains that Nizan's is not a novelist's style, sly and hidden, but a style of combat, a weapon. In *The Conspiracy*, however, combat consists of a merely abstract fight seducing those who limit themselves to planning it. In

Nizan's novel there is no carnival of crime but of inaction, a contemplative posture adopted by the protagonists who seem satisfied with merely savouring their illicit purposes. The thrill for them is not produced by the illegal operations they carry out, rather, it stems from the illegality of the field in which they intend to operate, while their excitement is augmented by the incapacity to make decisions and to act consequently. Nizan's (1973: 2) most celebrated sentence is 'I was twenty: I will not allow anyone to say it is the most beautiful age in life', which conveys a mixed sense of hesitancy, impotence and unfulfilled desire. Criminologists who emphasize the stylistic, spectacular, cultural aspects of deviant acts may want to consider the seductive nature of inertia, procrastination, pessimistic indolence. Transgression, in sum, may just consist of metaphorically choosing one's side of the barricades. But in what way can we interpret inaction as transgression?

One way could be to equate Nizan's conspiracy and its inertia with a form of political *oblomovism*, as superbly incarnated in the novel by Ivan Goncharov (2005). Oblomov would answer 'no' to the question 'to be or not to be?', because incapable of making important decisions or undertaking any significant actions. The son of an upper middle class member of the Russian's landed gentry, he raises lassitude and apathy to an art form; he conducts his daily business from his bed, and when he glances at his slippers he is horrified by the thought of extending his feet in their direction. If he calls his servant, who arrives panting in his bedroom, he forgets why he called him and after shouting 'return to your room until I have remembered' decides that oblivion is preferable. According to conventional interpretations, Oblomov personifies the ineptitude and uselessness of landowners in pre-industrial societies, where innovation and enterprise are discouraged. The novel is deemed a story of non-events, of physical and mental immobility, which are rendered subtly morbid by the slow, obsessive rhythm of the narrative. The main character, chained as he is to inaction, and engulfed in a spiritual paralysis, is said to be the emblem of a tragic and fascinating aspect of the Russian spirit, namely the reluctance to accept the throb of reality. Such reluctance is supposedly rooted in Oriental fatalism and in the typically Asian exaltation of the primacy of contemplation over action.

Another way of approaching inaction could be to praise it for its philosophical proximity to radical criticism of economic activity, a form of atheism addressed to the religion of incessant development. Nizan's conspirators, in this sense, could be regarded as examples of subversive anti-productivity, critics of the concept of economic growth and the sanctity of labour. As Oblomov senses that by devoting his time to action he might only generate useless products and wealth, so Nizan's characters find action repulsive because it does not change things. This leads us to another interpretation.

Nizan's conspirators are conceptual figures, purveyors of skepticism and negative faith. They have lost interest in the world as it is, while perceiving their own inability to change it. Similar to Plato's sophists, they can express one conviction with the same vehemence with which they support its opposite, and like for Hamlet their lack of a sense of self leads them to think of all potential identities as so many optional roles they can play (Cutrofello, 2014). There is no destructive power in their negation, and their revolutionary indecision, which initially contains failure but also potential, will stay with them until they succumb. The type of nihilism depicted by Nizan, in brief, is passive, because real

goals are lacking, as are responses to the real. This type of nihilism is symptomatic of the 'innervation of the will', and because it is impossible for 'the will *not* to will', the history of passive nihilism culminates 'not in the cassation of the will but in a will to nothingness' (ibid: 75).

Hesitation, however, may coincide with awaiting the decline of the dominant values before attempting the creation of new ones. It can be regarded as a strategic choice rather than equated to indecisiveness. Delaying or tarrying is characteristically philosophical, and taking one's time is anti-rhetorical: 'Philosophers conduct their arguments in peace and at leisure [...] Meanwhile, the man of rhetoric always has to speak under pressure of time; for the water clock hurries him forward' (Chappell, 2005: 121). Expressing a similar opinion, Antonio Negri (2001) sees in the culture of grief and nothingness a form of action, a critique of dialectical thought which supposedly unites without generating innovation or ruptures. Delaying, therefore, may be revolutionary, as it hides the silent excavation and subterranean tunneling which, eventually, will allow for conflict to make a sudden appearance. It is what Marx (1996: 546) sees as the invisible preparatory work leading to the fateful rebellions of 1848, which he hails with the unforgettable: 'Well grubbed, old mole!'. The mole may be delayed, but is bound to come to light.

Paul Nizan appears to confirm this view of inaction as transgression when he finds parallels between the age of Epicurus and his own. While in Plato's time it is still possible, Nizan argues, to wish for the collective emancipation of society, during a period of debacle such as that witnessed by Epicurus (341-271 B.C.) one can only remain alone. In the oppressive and violent world experienced by Epicurus, the only possible salvation is that of the individual. Nizan emphasizes a similar doctrine of separation from society, using the word 'secession' to synthesize his views. A wise man will secede from active life, from 'the savage struggles within the Athenian polis' (Schalk, 1979: 70). In this respect, *ataraxia* is the key condition, the state of undisturbed or unbothered soul, a kind of tranquility which is almost identical to pleasure, or to 'thrilling excitement', as it were.

Suicide

If the culture of nothingness may amount to a strategy of delay, how can we situate suicide in the political framework drawn by Paul Nizan? Positivist criminologists attribute to individualistic political offenders, like those portrayed by Nizan, a form of congenital criminality associated with vanity, megalomania and intermittent geniality. Mystical figures, they embrace a dogma and are capable of impressing their followers with acts which may cause their own death. In fact, they are happy to die (Lombroso, 1894; 1902; Lombroso and Laschi, 1890). Nihilists are seen as obsessed by the differences between the wealthy and the destitute, and regicides such as Luigi Lucheni, who murdered the Austrian Empress, are described as philanthropic killers who expect, in turn, to be killed.

'Lucheni thought he would be sentenced to death, and when he realized that in the region in which he was tried, the death penalty had been

abolished, he was extremely upset. He wrote to the president of the Republic asking to be sentenced' (Lombroso, 1902: 223).

Positivists, in sum, suggest that the true aim of conspirators is 'indirect suicide' (Ruggiero, 2006).

Decades later, the Black Panther Party develops this positivist notion in a somewhat surprising fashion. In December 1969, at 4.55 in the morning, the police raid an apartment in Chicago occupied by nine members of the party, including its chairman Fred Hampton. Heavy gunfight is heard, eight rounds or more, lasting over a period of ten minute. When it stops, two young men, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, are dead, while other occupants of the premises are seriously injured (Wilkins and Clark, 1973). The officials responsible for planning the police operation and the officers executing it are said to have acted with wanton disregard for human life and the legal rights of American citizens. The wildly excessive use of gunfire seems more suited to a wartime military raid than the task of a search warrant. There is no shoot-out: the police do all the shooting and most of it blindly. Faced with this execution without trial, the Panthers feel that the range of options available to them is drastically narrowed and self-inflicted violence is one them. This is when Newton (1973: 4-5) distinguishes between reactionary and revolutionary suicide. The former is described as the reaction of persons who take their own life in response to social conditions that overwhelm them and condemn them to helplessness. There are many suicides among young black men, who have been 'deprived of human dignity, crushed by oppressive forces, and denied their right to live as proud and free human beings'. At the heart of the concept of revolutionary suicide, conversely, there is the belief that 'it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them'. Revolutionary suicide is, therefore, the price of self-respect, and does not imply a death wish. It entails its opposite. 'We have such desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible'. One has to 'move against' the official forces inflicting death, even at the risk of death (Ruggiero, 2006: 124).

Contemporary suicide missions, in this sense, are not as new and unique as we might think: they have been enacted by those who feel that their 'right of combat' (to use a Durkheimian term) has been restricted to acts of self-injury. Self-inflicted harm, then, represents the control and triumph over one's fate when such fate is being decided by others. Levinas (1987) argues that the distinctive feature of classical tragedy is the hero's ability to commit suicide, as in the face of horrifying predicament, and when everything else fails, what rebels have got left is their power to die. In Durkheimian terms again, the suicide of one of Nizan's conspirators is not of an 'egoistic' type, namely it does not signal low levels of integration in a social group nor lack of identification with collective life and social pursuits. On the contrary, it is 'altruistic' suicide, marking the bonds the conspirator believes to have established with its natural ally: the working class. Ultimately, it is hard to assimilate this 'altruistic' self-annihilation into the 'thrill and seduction' paradigm, as this form of extreme transgression, while creating and inhabiting a web of meaning, excludes hedonism and playfulness from the feelings of those performing it. To paraphrase and upturn Sartre's observation that communists cannot write a good novel because they have no right to become accomplices of their characters, we might say that criminologists cannot

write good books unless they become complicit with the subjects they study, not only when they enact carnivals, but also when they commit suicide.

Betrayal

Betrayal can be regarded as a form of moral suicide and is the second option available to unsuccessful conspirators. Jean-Paul Sartre (1973) includes it among the manifestations of radical impotence that failed revolutionaries transmit to younger generations when, defeat after defeat, rather than their wisdom and the fruits of their experience, all they have to teach is their past mistakes.

Pluvinage is Nizan's traitor and his father is chief clerk for burials in the Préfecture de la Seine. Close proximity to cemeteries, mortuaries and death compounds the deep sense of humiliation and resentment he harbours for his lowly social situation. As a student, he experiences both shame and inferiority in the presence of Rosenthal and Laforgue, who loaf in the superior social condition of their family. People like me are only capable of being loyal to winners, he confesses. Pluvinage, a loser by birth, cannot remain loyal to a party of losers (Scriven, 1988).

Pluvinage has a great classical precedent, a member of the 'group of five' in Dostoevsky's (1971 [1872]) *The Devils*. The violent conspiracy of this group ends when Lyamshin locks himself up in his room for hours; he seems to attempt suicide, but does not succeed. He then rushes off to the police, crawling on his knees, sobs and shrieks, kisses the floor, crying that he is not worthy to kiss the boots of the high officials who stand before him. They calm him down and speak nicely to him. He tells them everything, absolutely everything: all the facts, all he knows, anticipating their questions, giving them information about things in which they are not interested and they would never have thought of asking him. The thrill he has long associated with the clandestine activity of his group returns now in his conspiracy against his former conspiracy partners.

Albert Camus (1981) turns betrayal into an act of violence which purportedly erases the violence previously perpetrated by revolutionaries and missionaries alike. He highlights the continuity in the core attitude of conspirators in spite of their apparent drastic shift. In *L'Exil et le Royaume*, the Renegade, a former missionary, undertakes to convert with violence a notoriously cruel people. He is instead converted by them. When he hears the news that a new missionary is to arrive, the Renegade steals a gun and waits in ambush to murder him. In his symmetrical behavior, he has not changed. The thrill experienced in the previous allegiance turns into the thrill to cause harm to those who continue to be seduced by their own transgression. Seductive, in this case, is desistance from previous acts, a return to 'normality' or conformism. Criminologists emphasizing culture, therefore, may want to explore the thrill provoked by desistance, the passionate subjection experienced by Pluvinage, Lyamshin and the Renegade as a novel form of transgression.

The criminological literature on desistance only partly and rarely captures this mechanism, and when it does it attributes a crucial role to the variable 'imagination'. A 'respectability package' is referred to as a major influence on offenders' desistance, a package formed of job stability and marriage (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). Other key personal resources cited in the

process are cognitive skills (Paternoster and Pogarsky, 2009), self-mastery (Maruna, 2001) and the ability to form high-quality social bonds (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Often associated with personal determination gained through family ties, desistance from crime is also linked to more general forms of social capital (Coleman, 1988) and to religious affiliation (Adorjian, 2012). In other contributions, the situational coping mechanisms are investigated used by desisters to overcome barriers to change and achieve meaningful lives. The self, it is suggested, emerges from a sense of temporal continuity between the past, the present and the future, and as humans possess a strong future orientation, they strive to understand the 'wherefore', namely the potential trajectory of their lives. In this sense, 'the desistance process is also characterized by the active pursuit of a desired future self' (Healy, 2014: 874). Ex-offenders, therefore, must experience an internal shift which prepares them for change, and this is determined by the presence of new social networks opening up to them which promise the construction of a new identity. This shift may be simultaneous with an experience of 'emotional mellowing', which reduces the attractiveness of crime and enhances the ability to manage emotions (Giordano, Schroeder and Cernkovic, 2007). Desisters, on the other hand, may adopt a redemptive attitude and display the wisdom they have acquired through their past experiences, but in order to do so they have to 'imagine' themselves as new individuals. This new image of themselves may take shape even during incarceration, which limits the offenders' ability to creatively build a non-deviant identity. In this case, the event of incarceration has to be viewed as a transformative period leading them to desistance from criminal activity (Soyer, 2014). The thrill of conformism, in other words, may also be experienced while in custody: 'Despite evidence to the contrary, narratives of current and former prisoners emphasize the deterrent effect of incarceration and describe their experiences in prison as motivation to turn your life around' (ibid: 91). Although imprisonment is unlikely to create opportunities for positive change, inmates end up 'imagining' their future self as conformist individuals. Subjection and conformism, in them, cause the same thrill experienced by Pluvillage, Lyamshin and the Renegade.

Paul Nizan is obsessively loyal to his Party and eulogizes his membership as the only option open to him as an intellectual. His journalism is an act of communist militancy and when, in *The Conspiracy*, we encounter a member of the Party who is wanted by the police generously hidden by a benefactor in his house, we feel that the relationship between the two is not comparable to that the man on the run has with his fellow party activists. His comrades are closer to him even when they are far away, because 'Party loyalties are more powerful than the loyalties of death and blood' (Schalk, 1979: 54). Nizan, however, leaves the Party in 1939, when the Nazi-Soviet pact is established, and when in his view nobler coalitions could have been forged. He is against forming a united front with anybody who comes along, and even when the Party joins the large Popular Front alliance, he remains skeptical about cooperating with the Catholic Left. The doctrinal differences between the two groups are, in his view, 'irreducible'.

Perhaps, unlike André Breton, his dreams are not populated by hordes of Cossacks on their horses occupying Place de la Concorde, but still believes that the French should fight alongside the Soviet army to defeat fascism, hence his 'impossible communism'. He cannot accept that the prosaic struggle of the

Popular Front erases from the political agenda the scenario of social revolution. And it is for this reason that the Party brands him as a traitor and a coward, trying to undermine his reputation and, later, to obliterate his memory completely. 'The communists', writes Sartre (1973: 8), 'do not believe in Hell; they believe in nothingness'. Nizan's decision to distance himself from the Party is difficult and painful, as Sartre comments, and the existential void produced in him only ends with death just a year after his defection. But, as a cruel insinuation has it, his vivid description of betrayal is due to his being a traitor himself.

Conclusion

Crime may cause joy, excitement and pleasure, and even violence may be morally and aesthetically motivated: actions that would be wrong in one culture are right and even obligatory in others (Fiske and Rai, 2015). Such actions can be regarded as 'virtuous' in that they constitute and perpetuate social relationships and identities while cementing amicable bonds. Cultural analyses of deviance and crime contain a phenomenological element, in the sense that the events described appear to take shape in the heads of real individuals in specific moments in time, individuals who through action constitute and ground their own life world. Action is spontaneous, creative, the result of vitalism, a life-force which is at the core of human existence, led by incessant desire and affect. Events, therefore, can only be captured as meanings which make sense in the face of what Husserl (1931) describes as the things around us dancing like shadows. Affect as feeling, emotion or yearning is bound to lead to action which, while consolidating a notion of 'us' versus 'them', we can assume, will create forms of collective identity and genuine amity. From a Weberian perspective, we may infer that the cultural study of crime expresses an implicit refusal of naturalism and advocates an interpretative understanding of the subjective experience of social actors. Looking at the meaning actors give to themselves is indeed a cultural enterprise and rejects 'neutral' observation supposedly conducted by natural scientists. Schutz (1963) may not be the founder of cultural criminology, but his arguments show some assonance with this criminological version of vitalism. The world of nature, as explored by natural scientists, does not mean much to the molecules and atoms forming it. The reality as observed by the social scientist, conversely, has meaning and relevance for those who live, act and think in it.

The life world and the life-force presented by Paul Nizan in *The Conspiracy* bring to light a variety of aspects which require further cultural exploration. Conspiracy is thrilling, but contemplative, and its deviant nature may well reside in a plan, an exhilarating plot that will never be put in place. The prospect of eventually or potentially committing crime can suffice for those seduced by illegality. Their pleasure may be the mere result of an aesthetic admiration of imaginary crimes. Inaction, but even apathy, therefore, deserve equal analytical efforts for their role in promoting or hampering criminal activity. Inaction, however, may resemble a Marxist mole, which restrains life-force while digging tunnels and building opportunities for future outbursts. A culture of nothingness, as we have seen, characterizes passive nihilism, but as Negri suggests can disguise radical alterity. In Nizan's novel we also find that radicalism, on the

other hand, can be expressed through suicide, in its turn deserving of specific cultural analysis, although a thanatological element is required within the vitalism of current analyses. The deviance of Nizan's conspirators does not cement amity but inspires the infliction of harm upon envied, competing, friends. Finally, defection, betrayal and, in criminological terms, desistance are crucial manifestations of thrilling experiences and the excitement they cause is as relevant as that generated by deviant festivals and carnivals.

In sum, cultural analyses of crime may look at the work of Paul Nizan and enrich its arguments through the appreciation and assimilation of his counter-arguments.

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