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The Communist Origins of Anarchism

Anarchist Communist Theory and Strategy and the
Anti-Organisational Deviation

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Anarchism was defined as anti-authoritarian communism in the period of the 1st International, during which Bakunin and the majority of member sections of the organisation laid the foundations of anarchist communist theory – organisational dualism, the role of the masses as the only revolutionary forces, the role of the conscious minority as “invisible guides” inserted in the mass organisation, the **International Workingmen’s Association**, and anarchy being the utopistic management of an egalitarian, libertarian society which we seek.

Cafiero described the evidently communist character of anarchism like this:

“it is not enough to state that communism is something possible; we can state that it is necessary. Not only can one be communist; one must be, at the risk of the revolution failing” ... “once we called ourselves ‘collectivists’

*in order to distinguish ourselves from the individualists and from the authoritarian communists, but basically we were anti-authoritarian communists, and by calling ourselves 'collectivists' we thought that this would express our idea that everything must be held in common, without making any difference between the instruments and the materials of labour and the products of the collective labour" ... "One cannot be an anarchist without being communist" ... "We must be communists, because it is in communism that real equality can be reached" ... We must be communists because the people, who do not understand collectivist sophisms, understand communism perfectly" ... "We must be communists, because we are anarchists, because anarchy and communism are the two necessary features of the revolution"*¹

While anarchism was born decidedly communist, it is true that the persecution of the international by the governments of the period led to deviations of Bakuninist theory, deviations which would leave their mark on the history of the anarchist movement, above all on the Italian movement.

Together with "propaganda by the deed" – which was an attempt to push the masses into insurrection and thereby, in effect, substituting itself for them – another current which developed and was fed by it was the anti-organisational current which had its roots in the theorisations of Kropotkin. In Kropotkinist * theory, in fact, the aim of revolutionary action is always a society where "everyone gives according to their ability and everyone receives according to their needs", in other words – communism. But this communism is understood as a natural harmonious state which humanity would inevitably tend towards as a result of two parallel causes:

¹ C. Cafiero, *Anarchia e comunismo*. A summary of the speech made by comrade Cafiero to the Congress of the Jura Federation, in A. Dadà, *L'anarchismo in Italia: fra movimento e partito*, Milan, 1984, p. 187–190.

nized within the mass organisation as having any official standing. It is not and must not be a recognised and institutionalised leadership as a result of which it must impose its solutions and expect to represent the "real" class interests, in the style of the leninists. It is simply a place of confrontation and elaboration where politically homogeneous comrades who prepare and finalise their action and the proposals to their analysis and their ideology, without expecting that it be accepted on the basis of confrontation within the mass organisation. It is simply the place where politically kindred comrades can debate with each other, work out, prepare and set their goals for action and their proposals that are coherent with their analysis and ideology, without expecting to impose their ideas on the mass organisation.

Anarchist communist ideology therefore assigns the political organisation a very precise role as "engine" of the revolutionary process and confers the role of sole revolutionary agent on the masses. In this conception of the role of the organisation can be seen the difference in priority from the marxists on the one hand, but also with the various deviations from anarchist communism.

The former organises all those militants in the mass organisation who share the same theory, the same political strategy and well-articulated homogeneous tactics. It is the task of this organisation to act as a repository for the class memory on the one hand, and on the other to elaborate a common strategy, which can allow the various moments of struggle to be linked within the class, while being a stimulus and guide for this. To quote **Bakunin** in his letter “to the Italian comrades”:³

“if you each operate in isolation on your own initiative, you will surely remain impotent; united, by organising your forces, no matter how few they are to begin with, into one single collective action inspired by the same idea, the same goal, the same position, you will be invincible”

The mass organisation on the other hand is the organisation that the proletariat gives itself for the defence of its interests, and organisation that is therefore heterogeneous, which has as its goal the emancipation of the class through direct action, self-organisation and which practices these methods constantly. The aim of really autonomous mass action is the expropriation of capital by the associated workers, in other words restitution to the producers and to their associations for them of all that has been produced by the labour of the working class over the centuries. The immediate aim is to continually develop the spirit of solidarity between the workers and of resistance against the oppressors, to keep the proletariat in practice through continual struggle in its various forms, to conquer right now everything all the freedoms and wealth that can be taken from capitalism, no matter how little it is.

Even from the very definition of the role of the political organisation and that of the mass organisation, it is evident that the function of the anarchist communist organisation is nothing like that of a leninist organisation. The political organisation is not recog-

³ This document was published by Bakunin in the form of a letter to Celso Ceretti and republished in A. Dadà, *op.cit.*, p. 152–65.

the inborn, natural solidarity of Man and the idea of the basic goodness of the human soul which lead to a preference for any form of spontaneism. Furthermore, once it has been freed from capitalist dominion, scientific progress (which capitalist domination uses to distance Man from nature) will be a potent factor in the formation of a new Man who will be conscious and in harmony with nature.

As communism represents the inevitable result of human history, as long as it is reached spontaneously as a result of certain inescapable factors such as Man’s own inclinations and the laws that govern nature, there is a total absence in Kropotkin of any trace of political strategy. In fact, for Kropotkin and his imitators, every form of organisation, political or union, must be rejected as both are ways of channelling spontaneity which is intrinsically good and leads automatically to communism.

For anarchist communists, on the other hand, organisation is at one and the same time necessary for our struggles and a guarantee of the revolutionary result of these struggles.

For the insurrectionalists,² organisation is “a bourgeois phenomenon” which, by compressing spontaneity, carries us further from the final result and impedes the development of the goodness of human nature and its tendency towards positive self-organisation. As the most important thing is the purity of the doctrine in its harmonious vision of the world, in other words the goal that Man desires to reach, the class struggle is at most an instrument to be used in order to reach this goal. In this way insurrectionalism distances itself from the historical path of anarchist communism (understood as a theory for the emancipation of the oppressed classes and therefore inseparably linked to the class struggle) and becomes instead a theory that is valid for everyone. This leads to a rejection of the class struggle,

² As the term “anarcho-communist” has a specific meaning only in Italy, it has been replaced throughout this text by the more generally-used term in the English speaking world, “insurrectionalist”, except * where the term was removed without the replacement – APA Ed.

seen as limiting a theory that is valid for ever, which relies only on the eternal aspiration of personal liberty of every human being; an accent is placed only on the relationship of “power” and not on the relationship of exploitation.

Then again, those who see in the class struggle only a useful instrument for the emancipation of humanity become disappointed by the slowness and discontinuity with which the workers’ movement responds to the call of social justice, for its constant need to win day by day better living conditions within this society. Insurrectionalists of this type, therefore, are prone to a deep distrust in the inevitably reformist masses, affected by economicism and incapable of wider prospectives. From these premises, two forms of political behaviour are derived which are very close and often mixed, but which however represent a degeneration from the principles of anarchist communism.

In the first, the only result is indiscriminate ideological propaganda designed to win more people over to the theory, a sort of educationism where it is expected that others will sooner or later come to understand the intrinsic beauty of the ideal.

In the second case, the action of revolutionaries is substituted for that of the masses in the belief that the heroic act will provide the spark for a spontaneous insurrection and that any action, even one which is not part of a planned strategy, can represent a further stage towards harmonious communism, simply because it is coherent with the aims and the conscience of the revolutionary. If the revolution must be armed and destroy the State, understood as the centre of oppression, then revolutionaries must concretely practice armed struggle against the State as of now. In consequence, this second tradition has historically been willing to engage in adventurous practices, which do not necessarily exclude the possibility of terrorism, and to link itself to the propagandists of individual action who do not have to answer to any type of mass organisation. Neither does their action, unlike that of the anarchist communists; have to form part of the process of political growth of the

working class and its allies, directed at the re-appropriation of the capacity for self-organisation of the struggles and of society. In fact, anarcho-communists would have us believe that it is enough to break the chains of power in order for this capacity to develop spontaneously, as it is held to be an intrinsic element of human nature and not a slow, laborious process. When all is said and done, insurrectionalists have only their own consciences to answer to.

Starting from these premises, insurrectionalists charge themselves, as conscious revolutionaries, with breaking the chains of humanity, without bothering about the process of the proletariat’s re-appropriation of knowledge, in the conviction that the fall of the State will provoke (with no previous preparation) the spontaneous embarkation of freed humanity on the road to communism.

After the decline of anarchism at the end of the last century into an isolationist period of terrorist acts, in many countries it re-discovered its mass base through anarcho-syndicalism, in other words in those workers’ organisations which slowly brought anarchism back to its communist roots. It was not by chance that strong anarcho-syndicalist organisations (such as the **UGT** in France, the **FORA** in Argentina, the **CNT** in Spain and the **USI** in Italy, to name but the best-known) in the first two decades of the century were flanked by decidedly anarchist communist organisation such as the *Fédération Communiste Revolutionnaire* in France, the *Federación Anarquista Iberica* in Spain and the *Unione dei Comunisti Anarchici d’Italia* (which later became the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*) in Italy.

Let us now try to summarise the distinctive features of anarchist communism, which even today distinguish us from the other tendencies of anarchism.

Referring back to Bakuninist theory, anarchist communism clearly distinguishes between the class political movement (the revolutionary minority) and the class economic movement (the mass organisation).