

On a Few Old Topical Questions Concerning Anarchists and not only

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I am certainly not nonviolent. All the same I can understand someone who hates violence to the point of wanting to banish it from their life; someone who would never kill, would never use force in order to be heard; who, because of their character and aptitude, prefers not to have recourse to it. But I can only understand all this if it is a question of individual choice. When nonviolence is presented as a method of struggle, a road to be followed, when individual ethics become morals and a collective project, it seems absolute nonsense to me, useful only to justify lack of action and an obstacle against those who rebel, an absolute value to impose on the weak to allow the strong to forget them in comfort. On the edge of the abyss, with the earth more and more under enemy fire, the invitation to use only good manners can look just like that. Do as you like but don't preach to me. That said, I am not a fanatic of violence either. I don't like those who boast about their own feats in such a context, I don't justify their apology as an end in itself, I detest those who consider it the only solution possible. I consider it a necessity in the struggle against power, nothing more. Like Malatesta, I too don't believe in 'placid sunsets'. I don't believe that the reinforced concrete with which power has covered our existence will melt upon the blooming of the flower of freedom lovingly planted by the spreading of our ideas.

Precisely because I am not nonviolent I cannot stand moralistic condemnation of acts of violence. The hypocrisy makes me sick. But precisely because I am not a fanatic of violence, I also cannot stand any acritical exaltation of these acts. The stupidity of that really gets on my nerves.

Recently there has been a great prominence of actions of attack carried out by unknown comrades, first against the police station of Genoa, then against the Spanish prison regime. Taking for granted the hysterical reaction of the media, the reaction of the police is just as predictable. But what is the reaction of comrades? Apart from the usual idiots given to hindsight, the most common reaction is silence. A necessary silence, to avoid making distinctions between those in favour and those against such acts that would only turn out to be useful to the police investigations. But for too long this silence hasn't limited itself to reigning in the days following the attacks, it protracts itself much longer than that. It is no longer silence in the face of the enemy who would like to know, it is also the silence among comrades who would like to agree. One has passed from the presence of a minimal form of solidarity to the absence of any critical discussion. But why ever should action, whatever it is, not be submitted to critical reflection? Why a should a hypothetical debate on such questions be seen as an obstacle, something aimed at preventing other actions? Why could it not rather be support, a way of clarifying the meaning of what one wants to do, to strengthen and improve action? For me, taking recent events as a starting point I have decided to write and circulate this text. Its anonymous form is not due to fear of taking responsibility for my words, but just a way not to differentiate myself from the other comrades in the eyes of the repression.

Claim yes, claim no

As far as I know, not being an expert on the subject I could be mistaken, to find the first document claiming an attack by a revolutionary organization we must go back to Russia in 1878. It was a pamphlet *Smert' za smert'* (Death for a death) circulated by the group Narodnaja Volja (Will of the people) after the killing of general Mezencov head of the Russian secret police. Thirteen days after the murder the pamphlet claiming it was sent to a Petersburg daily and in the days that followed many copies came out in other cities and were sent to numerous civil servants. At

the time this action made a great sensation – and of course the criticisms were not lacking of those who thought that such means could not take the place of the more important instrument of propaganda of ideas and rebellion among the masses.

From then this scene has repeated itself hundreds of times. The details, obviously, change from time to time but the substance doesn't change. You could almost say that the experience of these Russian revolutionaries became a kind of archetype, an original model whose future manifestations in reality are nothing but filiations or imitations. The only variation within this schema has been brought by the anarchists who have never considered it necessary to politically claim their actions of attack against power. The Russian group 'People's will', in fact, although gathering 'militants' of the most diverse ideas, nevertheless placed itself as a centralized vanguard. Within this organization, as a militant was to remember in her memoirs, there was a discussion as to whether the program to be followed was to be that of 'forcing the government to allow the people to freely express their will to reconstruct political and economic life without obstacles... or whether that organization must first move to take power into its own hands, to then decree a constitution from above that was favourable to the people'.

With such premises one can well see their need to claim, to communicate the reasons for their actions to the masses whom they intended to elevate and to the enemy whose counterpart they believed themselves to be. After all, that group wanted to address the people in that nearly all its members came from the more well off classes, and negotiate with constituted power in their name, to the point of sending a letter to the heir of the Tzar to advise him on what politics to follow. But when one doesn't want to represent anyone, nor places oneself as anyone's counterpart, why circulate communiques? If one thinks that action of attack against power must nevertheless have as a horizon the social revolution, and not be its parody in the form of armed struggle against the state, what can the aim of a specific armed organization be?

It doesn't seem to me that anarchists in the past distinguished themselves by claiming actions. The anarchists who sacrificed themselves by carrying out individual deeds like Bresci and Caserio didn't do it for obvious reasons. Neither did the comrades who had intended to undertake more continuous activity such as Ravachol or Henry, nor those who united themselves with them and others in armed action: Di Giovanni didn't do it, neither did Durruti or Ascaso. And the reason must have been quite obvious. Desiring a revolution from the base, not imposed or thrown down from above, all of these anarchists considered it opportune to act in the shadows keeping themselves away from everything that could take them into the limelight. They preferred the reasons for their actions to come from the base, that it was the movement itself to express them, rather than take advantage of the clamour raised to spread them from above, like the official message of those who had made a revolt to those who hadn't. The significance of an action, if it is not made clear by its social context could be found in leaflets, newspapers, reviews and within theoretical debates developed by the movement as a whole, not in the communique of one single organization. I'll give an example: if the movement is able to express its theoretical critique of prison, when someone then passes to a practical critique there is no need to write a communique explaining the reasons for it. The reasons for its gestures are clear already comprehensible. When someone wants to claim one's responsibility it is only because they want to put themselves on show. The attack on the Genoa police headquarters, for example, was so significant (for the choice of objective and the moment) as to make all words superfluous. Why was a communique circulated that said nothing but banalities? It is true that the Angry Brigade constitute a kind of exception, still being a question of anarchists claiming their own actions. Not by chance, precisely that experi-

ence seems to constitute a kind of model for many comrades who are attacking power today. Yet, unless one wants to throw oneself into attitudes of emulation, the example doesn't seem repeatable to me. On the one hand it is impossible not to bear in mind that the Angry Brigade should be inserted into the historical context within which it matured, that is in the 70s. In an era in which numerous Stalinist groups were seminating terrible ideological bricks to propagandize their own political project and were lending themselves to taking over the dimension of armed attack, it doesn't seem strange to me that some anarchists wanted to distinguish themselves by not running the risk of involuntarily working for others. From the choice of name to that of objectives, to the style of the communiqués, everything tended to distinguish itself from the mess around them. But once the whole Stalinist ideology had been surpassed, why characterize oneself in the anarchist sense, what is the point in continuing with this self-representation? Perhaps in countries like Spain, where all the actions, including anonymous ones, are immediately attributed to the Eta, but certainly not here in Italy. In fact for years actions of attack did not produce any communiqués, except sometimes something very brief and simple and that refused the use of any acronym of identification. It should be superfluous to explain the reasons for this: an action can only belong to everyone if nobody attributes it to himself. As soon as it is claimed and given an identity, a kind of separation is created between those who carried it out and everybody else. Moreover, it should not even be necessary to remember the danger inherent in any claim. It is dangerous to consign it, to send it, and above all it is dangerous to write because the more one writes the more indications one gives to the police (all anything but hypothetical danger, given that there exists at least one negative precedent that struck anarchist comrades). An anonymous attack does not allow anyone to emerge and does not facilitate the police's repressive work.

If the reasons for anonymity have been expressed more than once, those against it haven't. For a few years now things have changed without there having been any debate on the subject. In any case it is very difficult today for an action not to be accompanied by a beautiful communiqué, followed by slogans and signatures. Why? Silence... And so, carrying on like this, doesn't one end up in vanguardism? The risk is so evident that among the very authors of claims there are those who proclaim themselves to be against vanguardism, in the hope that it will be enough to say so in order to be so. But 'to excuse yourself is to accuse yourself'. It is the method itself that is vanguardist and, sometimes, also the explicitly declared contents (as demonstrated in the afflicted communiqué of the ARA following the attack on Palazzo Marino). It matters little if the slogans incite social war rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat. It matters little if the signatures change continually. That just demonstrates that anarchist 'vanguards' are more elastic than the Stalinists, but nevertheless feel the need to distinguish themselves from the rest of the movement.

It is not enough to take the Angry Brigade as a starting point to resolve the problem. I know perfectly well that the Angry Brigade affirmed 'We are not in a position to say whether any one person is or isn't a member of the Angry Brigade. All we say is: the Brigade is everywhere. Without any Central Committee and no hierarchy to classify our members, we can only know strange faces as friends through their actions.'

I also know that their participants did not consider themselves an organization or a single group 'but an expression of rage and discontent...'. But all that just shows the good faith of these comrades, their preoccupation not to present themselves as a vanguard, but it doesn't demonstrate whether they actually succeeded in their intentions. A signature that wants to be a symbol of generalized anger doesn't make sense. For everyone to be able to recognize himself or herself

in it the actions and the words explaining them must be understood and shared by everyone. You can't offer a general collective identity and claim that each one renounces their individuality. That can only be done if the actions realized and the words spoken remain at a level that is so low as to limit dissent as far as possible: very simple exemplary actions accompanied by maximalist slogans. All that – given that it might be worth it – can only work for a brief period, after which other factors intervene that are a part of any process that makes the continuation of the experiment impossible: there are those who want to move on to more powerful instruments, who want to strike more selective objectives, who want to express more precise concepts... Even the ALF, who struggle for a motivation that is basically simple and univocal such as animal liberation, saw their first defections as soon as they began to expand. Some other animal liberation groups – tired of the confusion of the project, the minimalism of the objectives, the declarations of the spokespersons – formed. Not only, but, it is the worst aspect, all of these groups saw themselves forced to give themselves a new name to avoid being included automatically in the main cauldron. Because the instrument of claiming is a strictly political one, with all the harm that that implies as long as one remains in anonymity one can do what one wants, without involving or exploiting others. But as soon as some emerge, they also force the others to come out so as not to be considered mere army columns. This mechanism of identification/assimilation can only be avoided through anonymity, the diversification of means and fantasy in the choice of objectives, otherwise, no matter how many precautions one may take, one could never prevent the media from putting it into act (so much more than with the communiqués that one sends precisely to them).

What objectives?

The vanguardist logic is rigid, as soon as one adopts it, it is applied everywhere. It is enough to think of the choice of objectives, the depressing road that throughout the years has led from an anonymously slain pylon to a letter bomb – with letter included – sent to the television. In the first case they want to sabotage an enemy, jamming the functioning of its system by putting a peripheral structure out of use. It is a question of a practical action of attack, perhaps a little fastidious to bring about, but without putting anyone at risk. In the second case one just wants to be talked about, make publicity for one's own firm, and that is why they turn directly to the doors of the Rai [Italian equivalent of BBC].. It is just a symbolic action, far easier to realize, and if the risk of being wounded falls to some unfortunate postal worker or TV employee... who cares. It seems that it is not only the Jesuits who think that the end justifies the means but also some anarchists. And concerning letter bombs...

I have been unfair. I said that those who send them just want to be talked about. I forgot to add that, self gratification aside, they also want something else to be talked about. For example the prison conditions of some anarchists and rebels imprisoned in Spain. The Russian revolutionary socialists in 1878 had a similar preoccupation. In one of their famous documents they wrote: 'If the press don't defend the prisoners, we will'. Today there are the groups of the 5C [one of the informal Fai groups]. Anarchists, not revolutionary-socialists. Anarchists like May Picqueray who in 1921 sent a parcel bomb to the American ambassador in Paris to protest against the silence that weighed upon the incarceration of Sacco and Vanzetti. The action was very successful because the abuse committed by the American government finally became publicly known, launching a

struggle that had had difficulty in taking off. But after taking act of the similarity between past and present, one must have blinkers on not to see the colossal differences. The Russian socialists killed the chief of the secret police following the death in prison of one of their comrades: a death for a death, exactly. The French anarchist, to make public the infamy of American justice, struck the maximum representative of the American government present in France. Today, the anarchists of the 5C send their presents no less than to the workers of the Rai or the secretaries of Spanish travel agencies. The difference should leap out at us. Of course, those materially responsible for the penitentiary regime that is being imposed on the comrades are far away and probably too well protected to be reached, whereas the interests of the Spanish State are everywhere and can therefore be struck. But are these interests embodied in the employees working in travel agencies? And because one insists on making an impact on the media, how can one ignore the fact that the great means of communication only amplify the words of the rebels if they can distort their meaning? And how not realize that such actions make this operation of distortion all too easy? By sending incendiary letters left and right one will undoubtedly make them talk about the comrades detained in Spain, everybody will talk about them, but in what terms? In the terms imposed by the media, of course, who will rush to reinforce the idea already implanted in many that, after all, if these prisoners have such unscrupulous champions, perhaps they deserve harsh regimes. The trouble is that those who think that they are further ahead, more radical than everybody else, think so for a very precise reason. This consists in the use of certain instruments: those who talk just chatter, those who attack with weapons are acting. All those who support armed struggle are in love with their instruments, they love them to the point that they cease to see them as such and to see them as an end in themselves, their reason for being. They don't choose the means best suited to the end they want to achieve, they transform the means into end in itself. If I want to kill a fly on the wall I use a rolled up newspaper, if I want to kill a mouse I use a stick, if I want to kill a man I use a revolver, if I want to demolish a building I use dynamite. According to what I want to do, I choose the means that I consider most adapt from all those that I have available. The armed-strugglist, no. He doesn't think like that. He wants to use his favourite instrument, the one that gives him most satisfaction, that makes him feel more radical, that allows him to bask in his media celebrity, and he uses it independently of the aim he has given himself: he shoots flies, machine-guns the mouse, dynamites the man and if he could, would use a nuclear bomb to blow up the building. For the armed-strugglist the radicality of the struggle does not consist of its extension and depth and its capacity to question social peace. For the armed-strugglist, radicality is only a question of fire power: a calibre 22 handgun is less radical than a 38, which is less radical than a Kalashnikov, which is less radical than plastic explosives. That is why, thirsty for fame and rendered obtuse by his own technical idolatry, he sends incendiary letters to simple employees to combat the Fies prison regime. He does that because it is the only thing he knows how to do; technics do not accompany intelligence but take the place of it, and so one doesn't even stop to ask for a second whether the means is suitable for the end one wants to attain. As far as scruples are concerned, he doesn't have any for the simple reason that in his head everything is split up into black and white, without nuances of colour. On the one side there is the State, on the other the anarchists. There is no one in the middle. If one isn't anarchist one belongs to the State, so one is an enemy. The exploited are responsible for the conditions that they put up with just as much as the exploiters who impose them on them: they are all enemies, so that's their problem.

Strangely this typically militaristic logic is gaining ground among certain anarchists, among whom there are even some who support the Palestinian kamikaze. Incredible if one thinks that such levels of abjection were far even from the Russian revolutionaries at the end of the nineteenth century: vanguardist authoritarians yes, but with a rigorous ethic, ready to kill an exploiter but without touching a hair of any of the exploited. And if the authoritarians took this care, think of the anarchists! The examples in this sense are many: even Schicchi, well known also for his fiery language, was capable of going back to where he had left a bomb in order to defuse it when he realized that some passerby might have been wounded.

But the image of the anarchist of the past, the perfect gentleman, is too goody goody, not very gratifying for some anarchists of today. There are anarchists who only manage to give a sense to their lives if they feel they have been struck by public contempt. The more something is condemned, the more they are attracted. The more the newspapers and the judges depict anarchists as unscrupulous people, the more they rush to fill this role. Devoid of any prospects of their own, they let themselves be told by their enemies what they are and what they must do.

Another consequence of what is happening is the total overturning of the meaning of the term 'insurrectionalist', which today is coming to be used as a simple synonym for 'violent' or even simply beyond dialogue with the institutions. Anarchists who put bombs are insurrectionalists, anarchists who break windows are insurrectionalists, anarchists who clash with the police are insurrectionalists, insurrectionalist are the anarchists who contest the demonstrations of the political parties and so on. Not a word about ideas. In a certain sense one is repeating exactly what happened at the beginning of the century with the adjective 'individualist'. Once there was the conviction that anyone who supported violent individual acts was an individualist, then this term came to be applied more or less everywhere and often out of place. In the frenzy of events, who stopped to clarify the confusion that was spreading? Recourse to individual violence is not at all a typical characteristic of individualism, so much so that there were also pacifist individualist anarchists (such as Tucker) or nonviolent (like Mackay). And again, was Galleani an individualist perhaps? Yet he was a supporter of individual actions... as was Malatesta in certain circumstances. And there have also been communists in favour of individual acts. Unfortunately the equivocation became rooted to such a point that there were even those who declared themselves individualist even though they were not at all (as did Schicchi in the Pisa trial). Misunderstanding, incomprehension... it is better not to add to such confusion. That the media do it is quite obvious and comprehensible. But why should we do it too?

Insurrection is a social event. It is not the challenge, a singular duel with the State launched by those who believe that the mass are just sheep waiting to be sheared. Recourse to violence is inevitable and necessary in an insurrectional project, just as it is before (because the social aspect of insurrection can never be carried to justify waiting). Therefore, also now. But this violence cannot separate itself from the rest of the project, it cannot take its place. It is violence that is one instrument at the service of the project, not the project that is in the service of violence. Whoever thinks that an insurrection isn't possible, having lost (or never had) faith in the possibility that the exploited will rebel, should realize the distance that separates them from any insurrectional project. If he wants to fight his private war against power, because that is what it has become, let him do so, but without passing this off as social war. If he wants to go down in history for his actions, because this is a question of pure self-gratification, then let him sit under the glare of the media, but without claiming to have the whole movement behind him.

It's obvious that anybody is free to do what he or she likes. Someone who thinks that they are above criticism and should be applauded, understood and followed without even having bothered to explain the reasons behind their methods, is a lot less so.

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