

# **On Violence and Rebels**

Luigi Celentano

17 January 2024

# Contents

<b>Profile of the Direct-Action Anarchists</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Attack Against the Estrella del Norte Bakery</b> . . . . .	5
<b>Greek Anarchism, Philosophical Debates, and Political Violence</b> . . . . .	7
<i>A Brief Note on Organized Violence</i> . . . . .	11
<b>Attack Against the Leaders of the Free Bakers Society</b> . . . . .	11
<b>Rebels</b> . . . . .	13
<b>Assassination of Police Captain Pardeiro</b> . . . . .	15
<b>The Lecaldare Case</b> . . . . .	18
<b>Violence</b> . . . . .	20
<i>A Brief Note on Education</i> . . . . .	22
<i>A Brief Note on Anarchist Drama</i> . . . . .	23
<b>Conclusion</b> . . . . .	24

On Wednesday, February 24, 1932, at 1:32 p.m. the car carrying Investigations Police Captain Luis Pardeiro Sontie, driven by the assigned chauffeur José Chebel Seluja, was ambushed at the intersection of Artigas Boulevard and Monte Caseros Street, in downtown Montevideo. The scene looked like mob work: around fifty gunshots fired to assassinate two men. The air smelled of revenge, and no wonder, it was. Capt. Luis Pardeiro was the *bête noire* of Uruguayan anarchists and, as opposed to what could be expected, his death marked the end of direct-action anarchism in Uruguay, for those responsible would fall, in one way or another, into police hands and brought to bourgeois justice. Most of those anarchists active at the time would be incarcerated, some serving decades behind bars. A year earlier, the last bastions of direct action in Argentina had been killed by firing squad.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, Miguel Arcángel Roscigna would be one of the first “disappeared” in the region—an infamous method that would be resurrected and abused during the dictatorships of the 1970s on both sides of the Río de la Plata. Anarchism in the Río de la Plata region would thus dwindle and fall into oblivion until scholars and a new generation of activists breathed new life into it in the mid- to late nineties.

As with Severino Di Giovanni in Argentina,<sup>2</sup> there were men in Uruguay who dared defy all societal standards to push their way forward, with or without a wider organizational approach. Fernando O’Neill Cuesta was himself a man of similar characteristics: an anarchist who served time in prison along with many of the direct-action anarchists of that era due to “some serious acts of bloodshed.”<sup>3</sup> His stint in prison allowed him to establish a relationship with some of Montevideo’s direct-action anarchists serving time, listen to their stories (when they actually spoke about the actions that brought them behind bars), and collect their accounts and recollections of the events in book form, backing up those accounts with newspaper clippings and the actual judicial records of their trials.

## Profile of the Direct-Action Anarchists

Direct-action anarchists<sup>4</sup> tended to be in their late twenties, mostly involved in “clandestine activities” (meaning they had no stable jobs) or some sort of trade (taxi drivers, chauffeurs, bakers, etc.), had only “primary” education (albeit the general level of education in the 1920s and 1930s was rather low),<sup>5</sup> and were mostly single.<sup>6</sup> Also, all of them were men. This is no minor detail:

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Caras y Caretas*, no. 1689 (1931): 86. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional de España.

<sup>2</sup> See Osvaldo Bayer, *Anarchism and Violence: Severino Di Giovanni in Argentina, 1923–1931*, trans. Paul Sharkey (London: Elephant Editions/Ardent Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> By direct-action anarchists we mean those anarchists who “lived their ideal,” whose lives were inseparable from the beliefs they held dear—even though their actions sometimes conflicted with those very ideals, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, particularly fellow comrades.

<sup>5</sup> Yet it is worth noting an increase in literacy among workers in Montevideo at the beginning of the twentieth century. See *Anuario estadístico de la República Oriental del Uruguay: años 1889 y 1900* (Montevideo: Imprenta de la Nación, 1900). See also Carlos Zubillaga and Jorge Balbis, *Historia del movimiento sindical uruguayo, tomo II: prensa obrera y obrerista (1878–1905)* (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1986), 46, acknowledging that part of the rise in literacy was not only the result of schooling but also self-education and self-management in labor organizations and related ideological groups, with “elementary classes” for workers. This push for education was fostered by the Battle y Ordoñez government, which established night schooling for women and men (*ibid.*, 47). This literacy increases also gave rise to the printed press and the spread of ideas, and hence the awakening of a new generation of workers finding truth in “verbal terrorism” (*ibid.*, 23).

<sup>6</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 25–26.

there were no direct-action women in this small universe we are examining. Sociologically, this is very revealing and reflects the situation of the Uruguayan militant woman in the 1920s and 1930s, subject to a markedly sexist cultural context both within and without the anarchist milieu, much in spite of the advancements made in more formal areas such as citizenship.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, there are, however, instances of women who challenged this status quo to break away with the stereotypes attached to them.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, amid world economic stagnation and depression, Uruguay was on its path to industrialization, with a solid economic growth and strong participation by the labor force, propelled by protectionist policies.<sup>9</sup> This rapid growth would last until the post-World War II years, in which the country would sink in a slow and irreversible industrial stall.<sup>10</sup> Although direct-action anarchists did not follow any organizational structure—their actions being sporadic and circumstantial—anarchists in Uruguay did have a strong unifying umbrella that defined their actions: the labor union. Most specifically, the bakers' union. Workers gathered in “resistance societies” according to trade. The bakers' union, hence, was called *Sociedad de Resistencia de Obreros Panaderos*, or Baker Workers Resistance Society. Its leading figure was Abelardo Pita. The *Sociedad de Resistencia de Obreros Panaderos* was the strongest union during the 1920s and 1930s in Uruguay, followed by that of the taxi drivers, with a high adherence among workers of that trade. It is interesting to note that, despite regular incidents, there was a direct relationship

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the first divorce law in the country was passed as early as 1907. Uruguay was one of the first countries in the world to regulate divorce. Despite feminist activism, it wasn't precisely a true political desire on the part of political parties to grant citizenship to women. It was actually a matter of electoral support. The Communist Party, for instance, claimed in 1923 that the feminist struggle for suffrage was rather a bourgeois and aristocratic matter, when there were more pertinent rights to be fought for, like social or labor rights. For the role of women in political circles, see María Laura Osta Vázquez and Álvaro García, “Las mujeres y sus espacios: partidos, derechos y debates en el Uruguay de 1920 y 1938,” *Revista Estudios Feministas* 26, no. 2 (2018): e48711. doi:10.1590/1806-9584-2018v26n248711.

<sup>8</sup> See the cases of Juana Rouco Buena, María Collazo, and Virginia Bolten, to name but a few. The three of them were militant antiauthoritarian anarchist women and together founded *La Nueva Senda* (*The New Path*) in 1909, an anarchifeminist newspaper. They also established the Centro Femenino Anarquista (Anarchist Women's Center), the first libertarian organization composed of women. Their figures have been reclaimed by modern feminist currents. Nevertheless, and this cannot be stressed enough, they were first and foremost anarchists.

<sup>9</sup> This passage by Luce Fabbri, the beloved daughter of Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri, is notable for her vivid account of their arrival in Montevideo in 1929: “Since our arrival, we had breathed an intrinsic liberty, of people and of things, a natural aspiration of the public spirit, reflected also on details, to us unheard of, of the structure: people rented a house and settled in it without a need to register in an office; secondary teaching and university were open to all, and people achieved doctorate degrees without ever paying a dime. There was a broad respect for all ideas. When the national anthem was played in a hall, whoever remained sated (at the time, most of the people), was not frowned upon by those who rose up, and vice versa. Particularly, anarchism, which during the last decades of the past century [the nineteenth century] had been practically, here, the only left, still enjoyed a certain degree of popularity. When we went to file for our identification cedulas, a police clerk recognized my father's name because of the readings he had done and said to him, with a nostalgic sigh, “When I was young, I also had the ideas.” He meant to say, “I was also an anarchist.” Luce Fabbri, *Historia de un hombre libre: Luigi Fabbri*, trans. María Sagario (Montevideo: Editorial Nordan-Comunidad, 2002), 172. (Translation of this and other passages quoted from this book are ours.)

<sup>10</sup> See Rodolfo Porrini, “Clase obrera, sindicatos y Estado en el Uruguay de la expansión industrial (1936–1947): algunas conclusiones y nuevos problemas para su investigación,” in *Estudios Ibero-Americanos* 29, no. 2 (2003): 171–96, at 173. See also M. H. J. Finch, *A Political Economy of Uruguay since 1870* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 170, specifically 45–47, arguing that, despite a lack of reliable data on unemployment rates, the “welfarist” inclination of the Uruguayan government and its social policies made Montevideo more appealing (e.g., a reduction of working hours from twelve to eight, retirement pensions, etc.)—although Buenos Aires offered higher wages and more job opportunities.

between the bakers' union and the bosses, one of a "necessary evil": the union helped unemployed workers find a job, and the bosses turned to the union when they needed new employees. This was, however, by no means a sign of the direct-action anarchists' acquiescence or a relinquishing of union demands about which they were quite adamant.

This commitment is readily evident, for instance, in the correspondence with fellow comrades from Argentina, calls to strike and support of imprisoned comrades (the call for the liberation of Kurt Gustav Wilckens and Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte are most striking—the latter is one of the arrestees for the Estrella del Norte case, which we will address below), and calls for boycott of different bakeries that dared hire workers (scabs) for night-shift work (underpaid and forbidden by the union). Night-shift work was a thorny issue for bakers and bosses, often the ground for strikes and mass gatherings, where women like Virginia Bolten also took part and lectured. The level of organization and dedication of the bakers' union was unique. Yet it would be its militants who would fall in disarray and act on their own, carrying violent actions—including murder—in retaliation for breaching a strike or exploitative working conditions by rival union leaders of the "yellow" —or bosses'—union (such is the case of the attacks against Juan España and Antonio Anido, which we will also address below).

Given that direct-action anarchists were "full time" militants, this required that they have at least some financial resources to cover their basic needs. As O'Neill Cuesta argues, "I am convinced that, in general, it is not possible to engage in highly qualified militant work (from a technical or clandestine point of view) with the limited amount of time left over after a day of work—although we should acknowledge the moral value of those workers and employees who militate in those conditions."<sup>11</sup> This is a common symptom of capitalism and, arguably, one of the reasons why the common worker, overwhelmed by the burdens of a monotonous activity, is incapable of gaining awareness of their exploited condition and actively struggle to emancipate themselves from that system. Not to mention the responsibilities of raising a family, for example. Direct-action anarchists were "free" to dispose of their time and resources, even though some also had caregiving obligations.

To better understand the characteristics of direct-action anarchists, it is necessary to delve deeper into their actions. Direct-action anarchists were committed to taking immediate steps toward challenging workers' oppression and exploitation through union reprisal, retaliation, assassination, and murder—in short, violence.

These may seem flagrant and astray from "anarchist morals" but they have everything to do with them. The social and historical backdrop is essential to understand these actions, despite the complexity of the question of violence. Some of these actions were too extreme and incomprehensible—such as the Lecaldare case, in which a man was killed in cold blood for fear of being identified, despite the impossibility of this—yet others were both extreme and rightly justified—like the assassination of Capt. Pardeiro.

## **Attack Against the Estrella del Norte Bakery**

Let us begin with the Estrella del Norte bakery case. The bakery was run by Santiago Español and his sons Eliseo and Luis. According to *El País* newspaper, "Eliseo Español organized the staff of his business without much concern ... for union affairs." These "union affairs," however,

---

<sup>11</sup> O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 14.

were not just a concern: hatred was stirred up among the different workers in that union, many of which were anarchist militants. O’Neill Cuesta tells us that “In the early hours of January 3, 1927, several hooded men entered the Estrella del Norte bakery, immediately attacking—with knives and guns—and wounding the two Español brothers, the ‘peel master’ Julio Balboa, and fifteen-year-old Francisco Grotta, who were all working inside. Balboa and Grotta died in the attack. The Español brothers had better luck, though, and were not seriously wounded. A few days later (around January 11), they appeared at the police station to identify those accused of the attack.” The detained were “known anarchists.”<sup>12</sup> Juan Carlos Cúneo Funes half-heartedly confessed. Rafael Hegües’s confession, however, was in full. He claimed that, while he was at the bakers’ union local with Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte, Juan Carlos Cúneo Funes, and Medardo Rivero Camoirano, Bonaparte suggested the reprisal against the Estrella del Norte bakery, in particular against Balboa, the peel master, who had betrayed or renounced the union’s regulations. Bonaparte had already been arrested and questioned by police in relation to other attacks to bakeries, most notably in 1920.<sup>13</sup>

The plan was immediately accepted by the rest of the group. They drove to the agreed-upon place and committed the attack. The Español brothers, when describing the events of that night, later said that Rivero Camoirano “pointed toward the ceiling” with his revolver, while Bonaparte wanted to kill them all. The crime scene shows a very violent picture altogether.

The question of violence lies at the core of direct-action anarchism, so much so that it may seem to be its reason d’être, violence unto itself. Could this be so? We believe violence is, in the long run, inevitable, and likewise, essential, for revolutionary change. And yet, to what extent could these actions be considered revolutionary? And to what extent could they be labeled as “violence for violence’s sake”? How does that affect the status quo, the establishment, the exploitative grip of the bourgeois order? In the utterly mundane world they lived in, questions of revolution seemed far off, and there is no reason to believe that was the ultimate end. As in the case of contemporary Greek anarchism, the present is more powerful than the past, and theoretical ruminations have no place in direct action, much less moral qualms. Hence the line separating direct-action anarchists from blatant criminality is so thin it blurs itself at times.

Other uncomfortable questions could be raised: what is the cost of engaging in violence? Violence for and against whom? Is it worth it? And who is *willing* to commit violence, anyway? Committing violence is frowned upon. However, violence is everywhere. It’s a violent world. The use of force—in short, violence—is even sanctioned by the United Nations’ Charter, upholding the “inherent right to self-defence.” But we are not abiding by formal documents or governmental decrees, nor are we discussing state violence.

Is there a “good” violence and a “bad” violence? It is the ends that set the difference. And here is where anarchist violence is a step ahead. The world envisioned by anarchists is one of peace, mutual aid, respect, solidarity. Exerting anarchist violence is not an Orwellian paradox to the tune of “War is Peace,” or an oxymoron. The higher classes won’t calmly lay down their weapons because we demand it. Capitalism feeds on division and profits from it. If we are to go against violence, then we would need to tell all revolutionaries off, whatever their stream of ideological

---

<sup>12</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 57, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Juzgado Correccional, Segundo Turno, file no. 187 “Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte (prófugo)—Lesiones” (“Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte (Fugitive)—Injuries”), September 22, 1920. Courtesy of the Judicial Archives of Montevideo. There is even an earlier case against Bonaparte, see Juzgado de Instrucción, Primer Turno, “Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte—Atentado a la propiedad” (Pedro Rodríguez Bonaparte—Attack on Property”), August 14, 1918.

thinking—even our own. Yet we hail popular uprisings and violent revolutions, and the ends seem to justify the means. If not, think of those souls who attempted to assassinate Hitler or Franco, or the partisan killing of Mussolini. Would anyone dare disagree? Certainly, those abiding by law and order, willing to forgo revenge for a “fair trial”... ending in death penalty for crimes against humanity. Violent either way.

There seems to be a secret hypocritical fetish with the whole idea of violence, too. What’s more, there seems to be a tendency to sanitize anarchism for the wider public and even the mainstream media, extricating anarchism from a connection with violence. This precludes the whole aim of anarchism, which is to bring down human exploitation and oppression—by any means necessary.

## **Greek Anarchism, Philosophical Debates, and Political Violence**

Nicholas Apoifis, in his ethnographic research about anarchist history in Greece,<sup>14</sup> points out that Athenian anarchists and antiauthoritarians have “severed nearly all emotional, theoretical and practical links with the region’s early anarchist history” and that many of the respondents were “either ignorant of or indifferent towards the earlier history of anarchism.”<sup>15</sup> Peter Marshall also argues that historically, “[p]hilosophical anarchism has often been despised by militants.”<sup>16</sup> This has a greater significance in that it shows a trend, if you will, among direct-action anarchists both contemporary and from almost a hundred years ago. Apoifis goes on to state that “The social anarchist traditions of anarcho-collectivism, anarcho-communism and anarcho-syndicalism, although rich in history and full of militancy and direct action, are rarely embraced, celebrated or discussed.”<sup>17</sup>

Anarchist activity [in Greece] in the period between 1860 and 1900 was largely limited to organising and writing. This changed in the early 1900s, as a current within the region’s anarchism took on militant, direct action tactics. While some retained the pro-organisational strategies of anarcho-syndicalism, other anarchists were repudiating formal organisational strategies and instead pursuing tactics more in line with the insurrectionist anarchist politics associated with anti-organisational platforms.... There were propaganda campaigns alongside propaganda by the deed.<sup>18</sup>

The assassination of King George I of Greece by Alexandros Schinas celebrates revolutionary strategies based on militant and violent direct action.<sup>19</sup> Schinas assassinated King George I of Greece on May 18, 1913, while the king was traveling in Thessaloniki. Schinas was immediately arrested after shooting the king, tortured, and found dead outside the Thessaloniki police station shortly thereafter. Precedents of anarchists attempting political assassinations abound: in 1892,

---

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Apoifis, *Anarchy in Athens: An Ethnography of Militancy, Emotions and Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Apoifis, *Anarchy in Athens*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–73.

<sup>19</sup> A.G. Schwarz, Tasos Sagris, and Void Network, eds., “Prologos—Chronology: 19th–20th Century,” in A. G. Schwarz, Tasos Sagris and Void Network, eds., *We Are an Image from the Future: The Greek Revolt of December 2008* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010), 5–7.

Alexander Berkman tried to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick;<sup>20</sup> in 1894, Sante Geronimo Caserio stabbed to death President Sadi Carnot of France; in 1900, Gaetano Bresci assassinated King Umberto I of Italy; in 1923, the Spanish anarchist group Los Solidarios assassinated Cardinal Juan Soldevilla y Romero. The same can be said of Kurt Gustav Wilckens, who in 1923 killed Col. Varela, or Simón Radowitzky, who in 1909 killed Col. Ramón Falcón.

David Graeber rather harshly argues that these assassins “almost invariably turned out to be isolated individuals with no more ongoing ties to anarchist life than the Unabomber, and usually about a roughly equivalent hold on sanity.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that these men were individuals with supposedly fleeting connections to anarchism or that their actions were “isolated cases” is a misnomer and an understatement. There seems to be a significant disconnect between the written press and direct-action, and prejudice or bias, even in academic press, seems evident.

Apoifis argues that this historical indifference “may be more closely linked to a rejection of certain tactics, a fenced boundary demarcating a preferred anarchist current” and that perhaps “the historical celebration of insurrectionist anarchists and advocates of propaganda by the deed ... comes at the expense of other anarchist acts ... usually associated with the tactical repertoire of the social anarchist schools.”<sup>22</sup> He also argues that

To begin with, some of the responses reflected the contemporary protest-mantra of “respect for diversity of tactics,” whereby you may disagree with a tactic but you acknowledge that it is part of the spectrum of tactical repertoires.... Such a mantra acknowledges the difficulties, indeed the impossibility, associated with establishing a consensus on violence and non-violence when there are various anarchist tendencies in the mix.<sup>23</sup>

Could it be that this lack of consensus among different anarchist currents sidelines violence and direct-action—or violent direct action, if you will—as out-of-bounds for “respectable” anarchist currents? Could this be where lines are drawn among comrades, where there is no more room for debate?

Internecine warring between rival ideological factions within the anarchist movement is nothing new, be it through violence with actions or with words. The prime example in the Río de la Plata region is the ideological crucifixion of Severino Di Giovanni at the hands of *La Protesta* and its undisputable leaders, Diego Abad de Santillán and Emilio López Arango, the latter a victim of his own poisonous mouth and pen.<sup>24</sup>

As regards violence, and in particular the events related to Severino Di Giovanni and his spat with *La Protesta*, Luce Fabbri, in her biography of Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri—her father—recalls the situation at the time in these terms:

---

<sup>20</sup> See Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York, NY: Mother Earth Publishing, 1912).

<sup>21</sup> David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009), 223. In our opinion, a really harsh statement, which illustrates the kind of disengagement or disentanglement from violence that many of our contemporaries advocate—lest you be associated with it.

<sup>22</sup> Apoifis, *Anarchy in Athens*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Di Giovanni was publicly denounced by the editors of *La Protesta* for his violent actions, who distanced themselves—and were very clear to stress that detachment and nonassociation—in the harshest of terms, going as far as to suggest he was a police agent. López Arango would be confronted and killed mercilessly by an unknown attacker, although all evidence points to Di Giovanni. See Bayer, *Anarchism and Violence*, 127, 140, 142, 151.



[B]oth Argentine and Uruguayan anarchism were, since a few years back, tormented by the phenomenon of “banditism” or “individual expropriation” that Europe seemed to have overcome and here was in full swing....

Regarding “banditism,” the greatest problem of that time, the rapport both with “La Protesta” group and the Italian group in Buenos Aires, at least on what concerns theory, was complete. However, my father disapproved of the excess that the passion of its readers befell on the paper. The accusation of being complacent to repressive forces was justified, but that of being consciously at their service was not. Such an hypothesis appeared in “La Protesta,” a propos of Di Giovanni, and my father got alarmed, expressing his own disagreement with the style that polemic was taking. He was told, without convincing him, that in previous polemics Severino had thrown the same accusation against “La Protesta.” The whole situation seemed to him unbearably absurd....

And it became more serious, around spring, with the assassination of Arango, the director of “La Protesta.” My father wrote an article about it on the “Italian Page” [the Italian language page in *La Protesta*] filled with pain and indignation, comparing the events to similar ones in Italy, at the hands of fascist bands. In actuality, the first hypothesis he came up with was that those responsible belonged to the Liga Patriótica [Patriotic League] or other far-right formations [in Buenos Aires], that mimicked Mussolini-style systems, which were active in the neighboring country.

As a result of that article, he indirectly received ... a letter from Severino Di Giovanni, demanding explanations and, in case he received no reply, threatening with a visit to Montevideo, adding in reference to “La Protesta” that “If my dignity is not vindicated in the same columns that smeared it, I won’t lay down my weapons. Others will follow Arango. And to wash that evil blood off, I know where to find purification.” This last sibylline statement gets a special color in light of the story immediately following, which ends with his heroic behavior the following year before Uriburu’s firing squad. The letter ended with these words: “As long as I fail to know your clear thoughts, I don’t want to take my chances and greet you, in my belief that it is pointless to do so with whom has called me murderer.” In his violence, this message revealed, besides its obvious psychic imbalance, a strong morel upsetting, coupled—it seems to me—with a fundamental insecurity.

My father replied addressing not him but rather the messenger, with a very measured letter, of which I still hold a copy, in which he stated that he had written the article thinking and hoping that Arango’s assassination was the work of fascists, although now his judgment remained unchanged. He downplayed the accusations, slander, and defamations of the Argentine anarchist press of late “for having been mutual, with an unlimited abuse of everyone involved,” adding that “No one believes in them and no one has lost anything.” He declared himself quite distant from Di Giovanni’s anarchism, of which he believed it had nothing to do with his; he believed it was best that each went their separate ways.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Fabbri, *Historia de un hombre libre*, 177–79.

Aldo Aguzzi, an Italian anarchist who migrated to Argentina in the early 1920s in search of exile and who would later fight in the Spanish Civil War, was a fierce activist against Fascism, publishing several anarchist newspapers and participating in different acts in opposition to it in Buenos Aires. He collaborated with Severino Di Giovanni founding the newspaper *Anarchia* in 1930. However, he was far from participating in his downward spiral of endless violence. In fact, he denounced that violence in the pages of his paper *L'Allarme*, in which he and Di Giovanni had some heated exchanges. According to Luce Fabbri, despite having been placed in a blacklist along with Arango, he “suddenly changed his attitude” and put himself on Di Giovanni’s side, “arguing that they should not be cruel and merciless with those who were haunted by the police.”<sup>26</sup> This last section is quite revealing, and perhaps a cue for our contemporary comrades: *live and let live*. In a sort of unhidden rationalization of political violence, Bayer argues:

Violence as constant, violence as solution, violence as just response, violence as protest. The one attacked defends himself. Injustice and oppression serve as justification for rebelliousness. Rebels have always been the peaceful at heart. Chesterton stated that the earth would be inherited by the violently meek. That is, not the meek and violent. The latter were always direct-action anarchists; the meek and the violent. Rebels who could not wait, for there was no real reason to wait. Wait for what? In “rational” waiting, millions of children perish, thousands of family men are left without jobs. Tyrants do not understand the language of the peaceful just, or of protest signs.<sup>27</sup>

As one of Apoifis’s respondents claimed: “We don’t wait ... we attack.”<sup>28</sup> Violence, in short, is necessary—to counteract the violence from above. How that violence is projected is subject to debate. What is true is that violence is an act of revolt, an act of resistance. Ulrike Meinhof put it succinctly when she argued that “Protest is when I say I don’t like this. Resistance is when I put an end to what I don’t like. Protest is when I say I refuse to go along with this anymore. Resistance is when I make sure everybody else stops going along too.”<sup>29</sup>

So, then, if violence is an act of resistance, why must we feel appalled when it is committed by anarchists in their own right, for their own reasons, in their own particular contexts?

Certainly, wanton murder is not to be condoned, and violence must not be glorified to the extent of desire, but violence *is* necessary because the world laid out for us is inherently violent and no other resource available to us is enough to fight this—as Bayer said, “Tyrants do not understand the language of the peaceful just, *or of protest signs*” (our italics). This was the backdrop for direct-action anarchists during the 1920s and 1930s, and it still is for us, whether we resort to violence or not. An *educated violence*, based on strong argumentative, and even theoretical, grounds—whether we agree with them or not—could be accepted when no other recourse is possible, when all other strategies have been tried and tested, when all other means have been exhausted—and proved to be futile. From the cradle to the grave, we are violented in innumerable ways, why then an aggressive and unmeasured response be even questionable? Why would *anarchist* violence be (still) a matter of debate?

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>27</sup> Osvaldo Bayer, “The Ever-Present Violence,” epilogue to O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 328.

<sup>28</sup> Apoifis, *Anarchy in Athens*, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrike Meinhof, “From Protest to Resistance,” reprinted in Karin Bauer, ed., *Everybody Talks about the Weather, We Don’t: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 239.

Each of the cases that follow could be repudiated or condoned, as could, say, CNT anarchist violence. But why negating it instead of embracing it as a part of our anarchist history?<sup>30</sup>

## ***A Brief Note on Organized Violence***

Before its excision in two factions in 1963, clearly influenced by the Cuban experience of guerilla warfare, there were strong debates around the subject of violence and pacifism among the ranks of the Federación Anarquista Uruguaya (FAU—Uruguayan Anarchist Federation). “Pacifism, from a philosophical point of view, was not rejected by us. Anarchism’s fundamental tenet is building a society without coercion, and this cannot be built upon violence. However, there is no authentic social revolution without violence. The system cannot be dismantled through pacific means and the mechanism it offers.”<sup>31</sup> A faction of FAU aimed at adapting the organization to the times, defining a strategy toward revolutionary change, and articulating violence as an inherent element of that strategy.

A letter by FAU of July 22, 1970, discusses violence from an organizational point of view, stating that it may serve as a strategy in the (then) current situation in the country. Among the variations of this type of strategy, they mention “direct action in support of union conflicts and mass movements,” “propaganda,” and “military-type” operations against “enemy targets or forces.” It is worth noting that this took place in the preamble to the military dictatorship that plunged the country into darkness during the 1973–1985 period, in which FAU militants sought refuge in clandestinity. There was also a strong commitment to keep the degree of violence within strategic boundaries, avoiding a “militaristic” turn.<sup>32</sup> “The use of different types of violence was contemplated within a long-term framework, in which armed struggle had to accompany but never substitute the development of workers’ awareness.”<sup>33</sup>

## **Attack Against the Leaders of the Free Bakers Society**

Let us move along to our next case, the attack on union leaders Juan España and Antonio Anido in 1931. This event took place at a time when direct-action anarchists were at their prime, filling newspaper front pages with their exploits. Such was the case of the escape from the El Buen Trato coal yard, right in front of Punta Carretas Penitentiary, through a tunnel that connected the prison shower stalls with the coal yard across the street. The prison held some of the most prominent direct-action anarchists, who fled in spectacular fashion under the noses of the police.<sup>34</sup>

The *Sociedad de Panaderos Libres* (Free Bakers Society) was a yellow union organization, or bosses’ union, directed by Juan M. España Cotelo and Antonio Anido, president and secretary,

---

<sup>30</sup> For a contemporary discussion on violence versus nonviolence, see Shon Meckfessel, *Nonviolence Ain’t What It Used to Be: Unarmed Insurrection and the Rhetorics of Resistance* (Chico: AK Press, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> María Eugenia Jung and Universindo Rodríguez, *Juan Carlos Mechoso: anarquista* (Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce, 2008), 56, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Juan Carlos Mechoso, *Acción directa anarquista: una historia de la FAU*, vol. IV (Montevideo: Ediciones Recortes, 2009), 189, 192.

<sup>33</sup> Jung and Rodríguez, *Juan Carlos Mechoso*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> Bayer, *The Anarchist Expropriators*, 108ff. See also *Caras y Caretas*, no. 1695 (1931): 83. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional de España.

respectively, and was strongly opposed to the bakers' union, which was run by anarchists. Violence against España dated back to 1922, when a bomb was thrown against the Free Bakers Society local. España was claimed to be a "shaker" (police informant), and he had even collaborated with the police in the capture of the anarchist bakers who attacked the Estrella del Norte bakery in 1927.

On the night of Sunday, December 6, 1931, at around 9:00 p.m., España and Anido were talking on the sidewalk a few meters away from the Free Bakers Society local when they were fired upon by two men who immediately fled in a "double phaeton"-type car, which was waiting for them nearby. Witnesses at the scene saw two men flee, one of them wearing a "peaked cap" and the other a "gacho" or fedora (a very popular item of male clothing at the time).<sup>35</sup>

España Cotelo, "recovering from the wounds he received," spoke to the police saying that he knew his attackers were Abelardo Pita and Florentino López Naya, "whom he knew from a while back and with whom he had had some issues" (likely, union related).<sup>36</sup>

He had remained silent on this because he feared the possibility of a new aggression during his internment at Maciel Hospital. España claims that López Naya was the shooter, but that Abelardo Pita was also wielding a revolver, "in case López failed in his attempt." Once on the ground, España claims, he "pretended to be dead" to avoid being shot at again. Seeing him down, one of the aggressors told the other, "He won't bother us anymore." Anido, seeing the aggressors flee, "ran and took cover next to a grocery's door, shot at them twice, but missed."<sup>37</sup>

The "grudge" (and quite a significant one indeed) against the leaders of the Free Bakers Society was a collective one—the whole of the anarchist bakers' union. To illustrate this group complicity, it is worth mentioning that Pita's coworkers at the Genovesa bakery deliberately lied (as it is the duty of good militants) to "cover" for him. He certainly could not have been working at the time of the attack, as he claimed to the police, though he did arrive later for his shift.

Pita was immediately arrested in his home, where a loaded .32-caliber revolver was found. This was December 21, several weeks after the attack. He denied any involvement in the event, claiming that he was working at the Genovesa bakery at that time—a fact confirmed by his coworkers. The bakery's owners stated that "there was no control regarding workers' entry and exit from the premises." Police suspect Pita "could very well have gone back to his shift at the bakery after the attack"; thus, this alibi was of great significance. O'Neill Cuesta argues that:

In general, the press reports of this attack against España and Anido coincide with the facts, and there's no reason to doubt that Pita and López Naya were involved in the aggression, although allegedly other comrades from the bakers' union may have participated in the planning and decision or, at least, were aware of it, for it would be absurd to imagine that Pita and López Naya would have shot España due to a "personal grudge."

Two days after the attack, López Naya's wife files a report regarding his husband's disappearance. She shows up at Investigations Police headquarters explaining that her husband had been

---

<sup>35</sup> *El Plata*, December 7, 1931.

<sup>36</sup> O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

absent from her home for “two days,” ever since he left for work at 5:00 p.m. on December 6 in his taxi. She hasn’t heard from him since. They were married only a few months ago and get along well, which leads her to suspect his absence might be related to “some abnormal event.” She further states that, two years ago, her husband worked at the Genovesa bakery, the same bakery where Pita works. O’Neill Cuesta states that direct-action anarchists’ female comrades displayed a “get used to’ attitude” toward their partners’ actions, which allowed them to “sense danger and take on a reserved posture in those circumstances, without knowing the compromising details of their husbands’ actions.”<sup>38</sup> *Machismo*, prevalent as it was at that time, permeated the realm of the direct-action anarchists as well.

Abelardo Pita and Florentino López Naya were arrested and imprisoned for five years and two months for their involvement in this attack.

## Rebels

In *The Rebel* Camus tellingly identifies the rebel as an individual of altruistic aims, regardless of his actions:

An act of rebellion is not, essentially, an egoistic act. Undoubtedly it can have egoistic aims. But you can rebel equally well against a lie as against oppression. Furthermore, the rebel—at the moment of his greatest impetus and no matter what his aims—keeps nothing in reserve and commits himself completely. Undoubtedly, he demands respect for himself, but only in so far as he identifies himself with humanity in general.<sup>39</sup>

This “identification with humanity in general” is, to our understanding, the identification with all those values that are dear to anarchism—anarchism being the most humane ideal of them all. The very act of oppression to himself or to others is enough to cause the rebel to take up arms, to speak out, to stand up, to fight back. The same applies to direct-action anarchists: through propaganda by the deed or through “insurrectionist” acts of violence, they made a stand and demanded a stop to exploitation, state violence, bourgeois oppression. Discussing their methods without understanding their context, focusing on them while failing to understand their aims and motives, is to fall into an ideological trap, which prevents us to see clearly the true core of their reasons.

Their struggles were real and encompassed their daily lives. The bakers’ struggle is a case in point: the bakers’ union were against nightshift work and made that understood. Scabs were dealt with, along with speculative bosses. The union was strong, and its class-struggle went beyond rallies and militant correspondence. They acted on their beliefs.

What is striking about these cases is that, while debates on violence and other topics (i.e., free love) were heated and spread across all continents, there were individuals who had no time for debate, the urgency of their lives and of the circumstances pushed them to action lest they become cannon fodder and a mere footnote to anarchist annals. Often, as in the infamous case of Severino Di Giovanni, their actions clearly reflected their ideas put on paper.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 4.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the articles published in *Culmine* (1925–1928), though Di Giovanni also delved into some theoretical aspects of anarchism.

Questionable as some of their actions were, their violent means should not be disputed. Passing judgment on other comrades' actions leads to opinionated bias, which precludes a serious and productive discussion on anarchist violence. Instead, violence should be seen as a tactic, which we may or may not choose, but which we should not scoff at. As much as we'd like to hail and praise the most peaceful side of anarchism, it is not limited to unassuming philosophical questions. The world we carry in our hearts won't be served to us on a plate with the silver spoon of philanthropy.

This is not an "ode to violence" nor a simplistic justification, much less a condoning of it as a mere source of defense. Violence is an inevitable means for revolutionary ideals, and anarchists have not been exempted from it. It is, along with education, the tool and means that will help pave the way for that envisioned world of anarchy. Anarchists have used it—and abused it—but isn't it *the only way* to trigger, defend, and sustain rebellion in the face of state, bourgeois, and capitalist violence? We may argue that the acts of violence portrayed herein lacked even an inch of revolutionary characteristics, but that is far beyond the point. Bayer, speaking of the anarchist expropriators, argues that:

During that short decade of violence during which they were active, the expropriator anarchists were progressively sucked into an increasingly narrow vicious circle. Today their fight looks like a pointless effort, a needless sacrifice. Their violence served more to assist in their own destruction than to bring about the success of their ideals. They carried out armed raids and counterfeited money to meet their movement's needs, secure the release of their prisoners, and look after the families of fugitives. But in those actions, more than one would find himself going behind bars (if not killed): the ones who were left were in turn sucked into the same deadly spiral and so on and so on.... Those who were not killed and who managed to survive the prison regime [...] returned to their old trades as bricklayers, textile workers, or mechanics, toiling hour after painful hour in spite of their years. To put it another way, we may question their ideal and the methods for which they opted, but we cannot question their attachment to that ideal, which they embraced through thick and thin.<sup>41</sup>

This is true on both sides of the Río de la Plata. Neither the adversities of a life in clandestinity and police persecution, nor a life behind bars, could kill their most valuable asset: their ideas. O'Neill Cuesta describes Uruguayan society's character of "multiclassist 'solidarity'" in the 1930s, "which dictated attitudes of indignation against all those who broke the order or value system accepted by everyone, or almost everyone."<sup>42</sup> He goes on to state that:

Uruguayan sensitivities of that era were a trifle "villagey," understood as a sentiment of social cohesion, of a group of "neighbors" who do not remain indifferent to an aggression suffered by any one of them; on the other hand, on an individual and masculine level, there was a marked tendency to react violently to any threat or under duress.... The passage of time has certainly modified these sensitivities. Montevideo has developed and, somehow, its population has acquired the features of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Bayer, *The Anarchist Expropriators*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 159.

great metropolises, an indifference to or fear about intervening in that which does not strictly concern the individual interest.<sup>43</sup>

The author further explains that *machismo*, as we have noted, reflected the society direct-action anarchists lived in. He speaks of the “‘macho’ character of their habits.” This conduct was certainly not exclusive to them; rather, it was a feature of Uruguayan society up to and including the 1960s, when “women (happily) began to occupy a more important place in all walks of life, even on political militancy. Most of these anarchists were formally ‘single,’ and there are no references to their relationships with the opposite sex.”<sup>44</sup> This is another revealing fact that goes on to show the ghost-like presence of women in anarchist underground circles: they were there, but not *there*. Exceptions abound,<sup>45</sup> but their presence, knowledge of their partners’ activities, and participation in them seem unknown, and they remain so, nameless, bodiless, presence-less, identity-less: “We guess that, in this regard, the custom of frequenting brothels must have been usual for these men.”<sup>46</sup>

## Assassination of Police Captain Pardeiro

Political assassinations in the Río de la Plata were not restricted to Argentina (as is the case of Wilckens or Radowitzky); these also took place in Uruguay: Bruno Antonelli, aka “Facha Bruta” or “Ugly Face” (from the Italian, *faccia brutta*), Domingo Aquino, José González Mintrossi, aka “El Chileno” (“the Chilean”)—who was also involved in the Lecaldare case (see below)—Leonardo Russo, and Germinal Regueira—were all charged with the assassination of Capt. Pardeiro and his driver, José Chebel Seluja.

Responsibility for the attack lies mostly on Antonelli, or Facha Bruta, who died just as he had lived, violently, in a prison beating in Rosario, Argentina, many years after the fact.<sup>47</sup> Confessions were, as usual, extracted and signed under torture. Suspects were brought to justice (Russo, Aquino, González Mintrossi), while another commits suicide in jail (Regueira), and yet another remains on the run (Antonelli). This was an affront to the state and had to be harshly punished: between twenty to thirty years behind bars for Domingo Aquino, José González Mintrossi, and Leonardo Russo.

Except for Russo, who was eventually released in 1943 (and was not directly involved in the case),<sup>48</sup> and Antonelli, who fled to Argentina and escaped from the clutches of the police, Aquino and González Mintrossi served most of their sentences; they would, however, after a myriad of appeals, eventually be granted “early” releases. There are reasons to believe that Aquino was not involved either, despite his indictment and sentence. The same cannot be said of González Mintrossi.<sup>49</sup>

This is the most important of all cases dealing with the direct-action anarchists, not only because of its magnitude—the assassination of a police captain—but also because of Pardeiro’s

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 181. See, by way of comparison, fn. 9.

<sup>45</sup> See fn. 10 above.

<sup>46</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 181

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 248, 263–64, 266, 269.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 271.

infamous notoriety as state torturer. There were suspicions that he had been involved in cases of corruption, most notably related to customs and alcohol smuggling. There are reasons to believe that he was also a Freemason.<sup>50</sup>

On the day he was killed, February 24, 1932, Pardeiro was being driven home by his assigned driver, Seluja. When they arrived at a level crossing, there were men waiting for him hidden behind a “little ditch.” The men surrounded the car, one in front, another positioned behind, and the other on the side, and began firing their pistols at them. The driver managed to throw himself out of the moving car, while Pardeiro lay agonizing with his skull crushed. He also had a wound on his chest and another on a lower extremity. It is presumed that the latter was caused by a bullet going through the body of the car. Seluja received two shots to his chest. “No less than sixteen bullet marks were found ... on the Ford’s body and on its windshield, which was perforated by a projectile.... The travel direction of the bullets is front to back, counterclockwise, and to the sides, which shows that the ... officials were covered in a semicircle of gunfire.”<sup>51</sup> The attackers—and this is evidence of the improvisation of the attack, or at least a lack of contemplation about the escape—ran away on foot. “The police (and the press) were nonplussed by the lack of an escape car in the planned attack. Those who planned it had to walk ‘eight blocks’ to find a getaway car.”<sup>52</sup>

The initial inquiry determined that Pardeiro received a gunshot wound to the head, leading to a “loss of brain matter,” with an exit hole on the right side. He also had a gunshot wound “on the left ankle.” The driver had “two wounds by the same caliber weapon on the left side of the thorax.”<sup>53</sup> The judge ordered an autopsy be performed by two medical examiners. After the judge’s inspection, the “death scene” was examined. “Several high-ranking police officials” were present. It was determined that the vehicle sat “over the eastern sidewalk of Artigas Boulevard.” The top was sunk at the end of its left side, “as a consequence of the violent maneuver by which it stopped after the driver lost control of the vehicle.” The car presented several bullet holes: one on the left side of the top, which

on the inside, corresponds to the position of Captain Pardeiro’s head, since he was traveling on that side of the car.... Another one at the center of the taillight assembly, and another one slightly to the right; two on the back side of the trunk, toward the right and to the left of the spare tire; and another one slightly lower, to the left.... On the left-hand side of the car: one bullet hole on that side’s tail lights, which are broken; a friction on the upper side of the door; another [bullet hole] at its center, and another in the area between the front and back doors; another one at the upper center of the front door; one on the front windshield; one on the front seat; two on the metallic plate behind the front seat; another on the inner side of the right front door, and another on the back seat’s backrest. All these bullet holes present a left-to-right trajectory. [There was blood and] brain matter [on] the left side of the back seat.’<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> For a brief note on the links between Freemasonry and anarchism in Uruguay and elsewhere, see fn. 61 below.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–161.

<sup>53</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 153.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



This event was unprecedented in Uruguay. It is believed (at least by the *El Día*'s reporters) that the perpetrators were likely linked to the customs smugglers case. The Pesce case was mentioned, "which was believed to be a smugglers' vendetta"<sup>55</sup> against Pardeiro. This is another remarkable case of hubris and utter violence from direct-action anarchists, yet it also goes on to show that the idea of killing Pardeiro was solid: They were determined to exert revenge on the *bête noire*. On May 27, 1931, Argentino Pesce is ambushed and shot from behind with a shotgun, his arm cut in half (they hit Pesce by confusing him with Pardeiro). Note the location of the attack: Pardeiro was killed barely six blocks—at Monte Caseros Street and Artigas Boulevard—from the place where Pesce was shot; perhaps their logistics and intelligence were not accurate enough to pinpoint the place where Pardeiro might have passed with his car, or perhaps they were and they simply mistook this poor fellow with the torturer of anarchists:

Pesce was walking on the eastern sidewalk of Monte Caseros Street, heading south. As he arrived at the intersection with Mariano Moreno Street, he heard a car's brakes squealing as it came to a stop. There was a simultaneous explosion, which he assumed to be a tire bursting, but he immediately felt a pain in his right arm. When he turned around and looked toward the car, he saw it was driven by a young thin man, wearing a light-colored cap. There was another person in the vehicle, who "dropped rapidly in the seat," preventing Pesce from seeing his face. Believing the gunshot could have been unintentional, "an accidental discharge," he yelled at them "not to leave him like this, helpless," but "the chauffeur, who seemed to hesitate after looking at him for a few seconds," eventually drove away at great speed. The victim believes he was mistaken for someone else, since he has no enemies. There were no eyewitnesses. The wound was inflicted by a shotgun projectile.<sup>56</sup>

In an interview published in the weekly *Marcha* in 1971,<sup>57</sup> however, Pedro Boadas Rivas, one of the participants in the Cambio Messina robbery in October 1928,<sup>58</sup> spoke about the treatment Pardeiro gave to him and his comrades when they were captured for the first time in November 1928 after the robbery. It was rather benign, with neither beatings nor torture, although Pardeiro tore off a fake moustache Boadas Rivas used to wear.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 161.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>57</sup> José Weiner, "Los recuerdos de Pedro Boadas Rivas: evasión modelo 1931," *Marcha*, no. 1561 (September 17, 1971): 22.

<sup>58</sup> Bayer, *The Anarchist Expropriators*, 21; O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 75ff.

<sup>59</sup> After this incident, Pardeiro made the signs of Freemasonry to him, because César Batlle (a journalist of *El Día* newspaper and a politician) had told Pardeiro that Boadas Rivas had visited the *El Día* offices and that he had been invited over for dinner with Batlle (Batlle Sr., former president of Uruguay.) Because of all this, Pardeiro assumed Boadas Rivas was a Freemason, but he replied to him that he "did not accept anything from Freemasonry or the Mafia." This is another interesting fact about the high echelons of power, the very structural foundations of Uruguay and Montevideo in particular, and the kinds of reasonings Pardeiro could make with regard to a seasoned anarchist like Boadas Rivas. See O'Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 270.

The link between Freemasonry and anarchism has long been debated, and much evidence exists of the participation of the great theoreticians of anarchism in secret lodges, alliances, or brotherhoods. As interesting as it is—a shared quest for higher knowledge and the upholding of humanistic ideals—it escapes the purpose of this article. A simple walk around downtown Montevideo however reveals, at Plaza Matriz (or Constitution Square), the typical symbols of Freemasonry found on its fountain—namely, the square, the hammer, the sickle, the beehive, the compass, serpents. Even the name—and number—of the revolutionary cluster of men that paved the way for Uruguay's inde-

O’Neill Cuesta’s appraisal of the subsequent trial for the Pardeiro assassination is noteworthy:

[W]e are of the impression that the prosecutor, the judge who pronounced sentence on the first instance, and the Court of Appeals that confirmed it acted as a sort of “war tribunal” ... before the anarchists accused. In other words, they felt these ... men were “enemies” of the social order and, therefore, whether guilty or not, had to be punished for the very serious crime of Pardeiro’s death, as a social “lesson and example,” a message especially directed to all those who questioned the status quo.

Pardeiro was a torturer ... a true “state terrorist,” as they are called nowadays.... We believe that a torturer, when his actions are protected by a uniform or civil position within the structure of the state, destroys in his victim something much more important than his physical existence (for, sooner or later, this one ceases to be), which is his dignity as a person, that set of conditions that distinguish a human being from an animal. And this crime is so deep and repulsive that it *deserves stringent punishment*.... On the other hand, we know ... that torment may force out valuable information, and so these “excesses” are forgiven to Captain Pardeiro.... Before this situation of “de facto” impunity, we must acknowledge the fact that Pardeiro’s death was, put simply, an act of direct justice, the reassertion of a legitimate right (inexistent in literature, albeit certainly present in the people’s sensibility) upon the unpunished arrogance of a state terrorist.<sup>60</sup> (our italics).

## The Lecaldare Case

A few months later, on May 27, 1932, the grimmest of all cases related to direct-action anarchists in Montevideo took place, the attempted expropriation of Cambio Fortuna currency exchange, which ended with the brutal killing of its employee, Roque Lecaldare, for fear that he might later identify the vehicle used in the operation.

The idea to rob Cambio Fortuna was Gerardo Fontela’s. Fontela was a taxi driver with a stop at 18 de Julio and Río Branco streets and had links to the Chauffeur Workers Union, where he met Tomás Derlis Borche, “El Chileno” González Mintrossi, and Germinal Regueira—the last two involved in the Pardeiro case. Through Borche and González Mintrossi, he also got acquainted with Adolfo Carlos Pagani, Argentine, a “weaver” by trade, who in turn introduced him to someone known as “El Italiano” (Domingo Aquino, “the Italian”). Borche had already introduced him to “El Brasileiro” Álvaro Correa do Nascimento (“the Brazilian”) and Rudecindo Rodolfo Musso, Argentine, aged twenty (cousin of Correa do Nascimento’s wife). A few days later, El Brasileiro asked him to buy him a pistol, giving him money to do so, to which Fontela complied.

Fontela, who had surveilled the movements at Cambio Fortuna, suggested to Correa do Nascimento and Musso that the shop be robbed during the evening or before closing time, around 1:00 a.m.; however, Correa do Nascimento didn’t think the operation seemed feasible. Unimpressed,

---

pendence has relevant significance: Thirty-Three Orientals. For further research with regard to the relation between anarchism and Freemasonry and its symbology—like the Circle-A—see, for instance, Erica Lagalisie, “Occult Features of Anarchism,” in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos and Matthew S. Adams, eds., *Essays in Anarchism and Religion: Volume II* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2018), 278–332, doi:10.16993/bas.i. Lagalisie, however, argues that “Not every anarchist was a theosophist or enamoured with the occult.”

<sup>60</sup> O’Neill Cuesta, *Direct Action in Montevideo*, 272.

they mentioned the project to Pagani, and the four of them set another watch on the shop. Pagani also disliked the whole endeavor. Despite the two opposing opinions, a few nights afterward, the group returned to the scene, where this time they watched the employee's exit close to 1:00 a.m.

According to Fontela, on the night of the event, Musso informed him that Correa do Nascimento was leaving for Buenos Aires, stating to put off the operation while he was away.

The action took place, nonetheless. The next morning, Musso arrived at Fontela's stop and told him about the operation in detail, including the death of the kidnapped employee, about which he said, "That's their business; I've got nothing to do with it." Fontela told Musso off for not following El Brasilerero's advice, but Musso said "he had followed" Correa do Nascimento's instructions to the letter and suggested that Fontela raise his objections to Correa do Nascimento himself.

The following evening, on Saturday, May 28, Fontela, Musso, and Pagani gathered at Fontela's stop and discussed the event (which Musso had already told Pagani about, with limited details). Pagani, according to Fontela, "condemned the exchange office employee's death." In the end, and despite the disagreements, the three of them went to "drink cocoa" at a bar on Rondeau and Uruguay streets.<sup>61</sup> The loose—and seemingly cold-blooded—attitude of those responsible for this action is quite shocking, especially the almost vulgar and bizarre cocoa-drinking business.

On the night of the attack, the victim was followed closely from behind. The passage is worth reproducing in its entirety, given the bleak account O'Neill Cuesta gives of the events of that night:

The victim turned on Uruguay and then on Rondeau, continuing down this road until Agraciada Street toward the Legislative Palace, his pursuers right behind, with some of them chasing on foot, and others in the car. Then they all get into the car, pass the victim from behind, and pull over on Hocquart and Agraciada streets. There, Musso, Borsche, El Italiano, and Manfredi get out, and El Chileno and Regueira remain in the vehicle. They approach the employee, threaten him with their weapons, take away his keys, search his clothes, and force him into the car. Musso and Manfredi immediately head on foot toward the currency exchange while the vehicle, with the kidnapped employee inside, speeds away.

Musso explains that one of the keys seized is for the shop's metal shutter and the other is for the safe. Manfredi breaks into the shop while Musso "keeps watch." Five minutes later, Manfredi reappears, telling him he could not open the "iron safe," and only took some "cigars" and coins from a drawer.

They both walked to Yaguarón and 18 de Julio, and once there, they were picked up by Regueira, who drove "outward" toward some barren grounds, where they pulled over. Suddenly, El Chileno appears "out the darkness of the field," and Manfredi tells him that the heist had failed and that the "iron safe must have had two keys," that it was useless to frisk the kidnapped man again, since he likely only carried the keys they had taken from him. So—Musso goes on—El Chileno said they had to kill the kidnapped man, and "the deponent and Manfredi stayed silent." For his part, Regueira said "he thought the exchange office employee might identify the car and had to be killed, to which Manfredi agreed, with the three of them consenting to it."

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 273–75.

(This somber passage seems very convincing, just like the rest of Musso's deposition, but, allegedly, the deponent omits El Chileno's grounds for his terrible judgement, which must have been the same as Regueira's; that is, to erase the possibility of having the vehicle identified.) "El Chileno then asked Manfredi for his .45 Colt, but the deponent anticipated and handed him his own, a .38. With the pistol (in hand), El Chileno went into (the barren grounds) again, and the deponent witnessed that, after a stretch, he walked past Borche and El Italiano, who were heading back to the car. At that instant, a muffled shot was fired, and El Chileno returned and got into the car." Regueira asked El Chileno "if he was sure to have hit him," to which he replied positively, and immediately the car left for downtown, with the six men inside. At some point, El Italiano (Aquino) got out, and the rest continued to Manfredi's house, "where they split what they had stolen—three pesos each—with Manfredi keeping the cigars."

The same day of the events, Friday, May 27, at night, all the perpetrators, with the exception of El Italiano, got together at a milk dairy in Pérez Castellanos (Ciudad Vieja), where Manfredi told them that "should someone be arrested, he ought to first deny (his participation in the events), and if he squealed (under possible torture), he ought to avoid snitching on the others."<sup>62</sup>

O'Neill Cuesta further mentions "the irrationality of the whole operation, since if they assumed the existence of another key in possession of either the owner or someone he trusted, it is inexplicable that they did not limit themselves to simply robbing the employee... Certainly, our commentary has nothing to do with our assessment of his murder, utterly shameful."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it was. This is the fine line his book addresses when narrating direct-action anarchists' activities in Montevideo. A line that is sometimes blurred, or crossed bluntly and completely. A line that separates violence from outright "criminality."

In his deposition, Borche claims that he "and Regueira were outraged because the currency exchange employee was terminated." O'Neill Cuesta, however, argues that "This is a sheer lie; no one got outraged, much less Regueira, who was only concerned about the possible identification of his car. Nevertheless, it is fair to acknowledge that Borche and El Italiano (Aquino) did not participate in the decision to kill Lecaldare, although they knew it because they were told about it and passively acquiesced." Borche further states that, "after the murder, Manfredi and El Chileno 'argued that the young man's death was the best guarantee for impunity."<sup>64</sup>

Needless to say, this may be one of those cases where the savagery of violence blinded the minds and confounded the ideas of otherwise idealist men of direct action, a tactical and despicable blunder in which ideology had no room whatsoever.

## Violence

The etymological roots of the word *violence* date back to the thirteenth century, from the Latin *violentia*, meaning "vehemence, impetuosity." Isn't it with vehemence that anarchists fought for their ideas? Isn't impetuosity what's needed to counteract the external force of oppression,

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 278–79.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 281.

whichever its forms? *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* defines it as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.” Aren’t we abused and damaged by the very system we live under? Aren’t we injured and *destroyed* by the state and its law enforcement agencies?

Errico Malatesta states that “Unfortunately, among the acts which have been committed in the name of Anarchy, there have been some, which, though wholly lacking in Anarchist characteristics, have been wrongly confounded with other acts of obviously Anarchist inspiration. . . . For my part, I protest against this confusion between acts wholly different in moral value, as well as in practical effects.”<sup>65</sup>

Is it possible to *separate* “legitimate” violence from that other violence, the one that is inflicted in the heat of the moment, without much thought? We believe it is not. Yet who is to judge? How can a distinction be made between “the heroic act of a man who consciously sacrifices his life for that which he believes will do good,” “the almost involuntary act of some unhappy man whom society has reduced to despair,” “the savage act of a man who has been driven astray by suffering, and has caught the contagion of this civilised savagery which surrounds us all,” “the *intelligent act* of the man who, before acting, weighs the probable good or evil that may result for his cause,” and the “thoughtless act of the man who strikes at random” (our italics)?

Certainly, direct action was composed of anarchist acts of those who desired “to destroy the obstacles that stand in the way of the reconstitution of society,” yet these very acts were not “authoritarian acts” of men who intended to terrorize society.<sup>66</sup> Isn’t enough justification for such acts the will of that individual who, in utter despair or cold calculation—or both—engages in violence against a system that oppresses them? How could anyone, from a comfortable and judgmental position of righteousness, be even able to define such acts? We may condone or repudiate violence, and yet we must acknowledge that it is context and circumstances that lead such individual to act or to stay put and lower their head into submission. Indeed, the acts of violence committed—examined herein—were, for the most part (except for the Pardeiro case, which was called for), purely avoidable (Pesce), unnecessary (e.g., Lecaldare), while others (Estrella del Norte) were expected consequences of bourgeois violence itself. Still, those who act are judged and crucified and left to their own fate: ostracism from ideological comrades, prison, or death. On the other hand, these very individuals are, on many occasions, simultaneously *romanticized* in the anarchist imaginary, painted like unholy Robin Hoods, ingenious in their own ways, yet despicable because of their actions. These actions are despised, lest we—and the whole idea of anarchism—be associated with them.

Graeber argues that “Acts of violence can be—indeed often are—acts of communication. But the same could be said of any other form of human action, too. It strikes me that what is important about violence is that it is perhaps the only form of human action that holds out the possibility of operating on others without being communicative . . . Violence may well be the only way in which it is possible for one human being to have relatively predictable effects on the actions of another without understanding anything about them.” However, “when one side has an overwhelming advantage, they rarely have to actually resort to [it]. The threat will usually suffice. This has a curious effect. It means that the most characteristic quality of violence—its capacity to impose very simple social relations that involve little or no imaginative identification—becomes most

---

<sup>65</sup> Errico Malatesta, “Anarchy and Violence,” *Liberty* 1, no. 9 (September 1894): 71; and no. 10 (October 1894): 79. Courtesy of the British Library.

<sup>66</sup> Errico Malatesta, “Anarchy and Violence,” *Liberty* 1, no. 10 (October 1894): 79. Courtesy of the British Library.

salient in situations where actual, physical violence is likely to be least present.”<sup>67</sup> This shows the inherent imbalance in power between anarchists and the establishment, hence violence being the only way to *communicate* with it.

## ***A Brief Note on Education***

To counteract the *hubris* of violence,<sup>68</sup> we would like to underscore the life and work of Luigi Fabbri, a contemporary of our direct-action anarchists in Montevideo from 1929 until his death in 1935, who dedicated his life to anarchism through the fundamental resource to (r)evolution: education.<sup>69</sup>

Luigi Fabbri’s ideas were always measured by reason, especially in terms of nonviolence. Luce, his beloved daughter, writes:

In my father, the tendency toward rebellion, the thirst for freedom allied themselves, without contradictions, with his essentially “pacific” character, not in the sense of quietism but rather that of zealous respect for life and the spiritual independence of others, in the sense of love for the species. It is precisely for this love that it was necessary to struggle, and the struggle was dragged by the same adversary to the arena of violence. The ineluctability of the insurrectionist phase of the revolution presented to him as a truth that imposed a duty. More than once he stated that, should an insurrectionist movement come about, something that throughout his life seemed imminent on several occasions...he would prefer to occupy the riskiest place of surveillance or assistance, as long as he could avoid wielding a weapon. His hand had never been armed; he never learned to use a pistol and never had one in his possession. His repugnance for violence had something of a physical feel. Despite that, he was a revolutionary.

[However] [v]iolent action continued to be a popular right to him and, in certain cases, a necessity. Yet, his humanity and zealous love for the liberty of all, which dwelled in him, rebelled against the empire of reason, grounded on the study of history.<sup>70</sup>

We believe both violence and education are essential tools and one could not be without the other. Just as the workers who passed on flyers and pamphlets advocating the ideal of anarchism at the factory or at union meetings, or the anarchist hobos who, like migrating swallows, carried anarchist publications on their bundles (*monos*) to leave or exchange them at different points on the road, education is essential.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> David Graeber, *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Art, Violence and Imagination* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 48–49.

<sup>68</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> Fabbri was an Italian anarchist and educator. He collaborated with Errico Malatesta in *Umanità Nova*. He escaped the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, eventually establishing in Montevideo, Uruguay, along with his family. For a more detailed record of his life, see Fabbri, *Historia de un hombre libre*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

<sup>71</sup> See Osvaldo Baigorria, *Anarquismo Trashumante* (La Plata: Terramar, 2008), 26ff.

This was also acknowledged, quite succinctly, by the editors of *Tribuna Libertaria*, edited by the Centro Internacional de Estudios Sociales (CIES—International Center of Social Studies): “The education of working classes must forcefully precede their emancipation, because never has an ignorant class or one more backward than others risen above or liberated itself from its abjection. The foremost task of working classes, their most urgent and imperious need is that of educating themselves. All must be sacrificed for this holy duty.”<sup>72</sup>

The CIES (1898–1928) was a gathering hub for artists and activists, a center for education and artistic-cultural training. Among those who frequented the place were anarchists of the likes of María Collazo, Virginia Bolten, and Juana Rouco Buela, as well as a wide array of intellectuals, writers, and poets of that era who sympathized with social issues and the anarchist cause.<sup>73</sup>

## ***A Brief Note on Anarchist Drama***

The question of violence was not only reserved for life. Art also imitated life and reflected this thorny issue. *¡Mártir!* (1901), by Antonio Mario Lazzoni, set in an Italian village, tells the story of an anarchist dubbed “Martyr” for having killed the Italian king (an allegory to the assassination of King Umberto I). It is apologetic of violence as a revolutionary method. According to Vidal,<sup>74</sup> it is “an example of anarchist drama, understood from the continuity between doctrinaire discourse and artistic discourse. There is no aesthetic production there, understood as the production of *artistic thought* different from the thought conveyed by language. The artistic discourse is subordinated to the political-doctrinaire discourse.” The author of the play claims it is nothing but a “scream from conscience, the protest of a rebel heart, which reverently greets sacrifice and curses the infamous rulers of Italy and the oppressors of the whole world.” The play provoked a fiery debate on the subject.

Although an obscure source as the above, the drama depicted in the unpublished play by Uruguayan anarchist playwright Florencio Sánchez is more than telling. The story of *Los Acosados* (*The Hunted*)—ca. 1910—is that of Elías, an anarchist worker who has just killed his boss, stabbing him in the chest. He comes back home, tells his wife about what he’d done, and discusses with Alberto, a fellow anarchist comrade, about the incident and his personal luck.

Elías accuses Alberto and other anarchists of snitching on him to the police. Alberto attempts to defend himself but Elías counteracts, arguing his reservations about anarchist solidarity and reflecting on the act he committed:

Elías. ...Tomorrow you will all have a fancy pretext to perform an act of solidarity. The “pro prisoners” committee will jump into action, and my woman and kids will get a ten monthly pesos subsidy to sustain themselves. I’ll be a martyr of the cause,

---

<sup>72</sup> See “A los trabajadores,” *Tribuna Libertaria* 1, no. 1 (April 29, 1900): 3 (our translation), reproduced in Zubillaga and Balbis, *Historia del movimiento sindical uruguayo, tomo II*.

<sup>73</sup> For an interesting analysis of the CIES, culture, and violence, see Daniel Vidal, “Intelectuales, periódicos y autoridad en el Centro Internacional de Estudios Sociales (Montevideo, 1897–1928),” (n.p.: n.d.). <https://anaforas.fic.edu.uy/jspui/handle/123456789/46370>.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Vidal, “*¡Mártir!*: la obra de teatro de Alberto Mario Lazzoni que estalló en la interna libertaria. Libertad y censura en el anarquismo cultural montevideano del ‘900,’” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional* 1, no. 1–2 (2008): 241–255, at 246. <http://bibliotecadigital.bibna.gub.uy/jspui/handle/123456789/50645>. See, in particular, 245–46, where coincidentally—or not so much—anarchists of the time made similar arguments about violence than the ones exposed in this article.

I'll be defended by propaganda journals, I'll be quoted as model, but that model will not be picked up by anyone except another poor devil like me who, in despair and hunted by the pack, turns around and bites.

...To you, to you the same thing happens and will happen... You have a sweeter blood... You don't protest and tell on me...

Alberto. You liar!

Elías. You don't tell on me but glorify me, which is pretty much the same... For the rest, brother, that's logical... Those who worship something is because they are convinced to be incapable of doing it.

The incident showcased a strong confirmation in real life: the anarchist-terrorist never utters a word, we barely have a name, a nickname, their anonymity, and never an explanation of their action through their own voice.<sup>75</sup>

As with other anarchist plays of the time (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), in both *¡Mártir!* and *Los acosados*, violence is not problematized but incorporated to the plot, where characters justify it or turn it into a debate, respectively.

Although most of the acts depicted in this article refer to events without much theoretical support, we must acknowledge that most anarchists now and then have an intellectual inclination—which does not preclude the resort to violence. With this, we mean that the *anarchist intelligentsia*, if you will, has always been the voice of reason within the movement. And that is an inherent trait of anarchism, the resort to self-education and the education of others (the working class, fellow comrades).

What if we, already tainted by capitalism, educate our children with the ideas of anarchism? Wouldn't they be able to bring about that world anarchists have—violently and nonviolently—struggled for a hundred years or more sidestepping violence altogether? Could that be a feasible possibility? Only time will tell.

Uneducated masses make for perfect victims, easily agitated toward the fires of right-wing extremism by primal fears and ignorance, whereas the *educated* worker, toiling through the grind with a brighter horizon in mind, can easily recognize the discursive traps, the shady dealings, and exploitative inclinations of those in power—and act in consequence. Be it educating others, or by propaganda by the deed, or by attacking the very system that oppresses them. Or at least attempting to. Even if that means the use of force, the use of violence, collectively or individually, openly carrying the flag of anarchy or acting silently and anonymously in the night.

We should not forget which side we are on lest we forget which side we want to be when that world we have dreamed so much about comes to be.

## Conclusion

Anarchist violence in the context described in this article was neither performed by stupid nor meek but rather cunning, determined, and at times desperate individuals who saw no other possible means to *communicate* and define their position than with the violent might of the knife, the bullet, and the gun. Their lives were tainted in blood, some found solace in death, while others

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 249–50 (our translation).



redemption in a life out of prison and old age. None spoke proudly of their acts, at times a source of shame, other times oblivion, but neither regret.

It is hard to decipher what goes on an individual's mind when the ultimate moment of truth comes up, when pulling the trigger, throwing the bomb, or plunging the knife seals their fate and changes history, theirs, and society's as well. Yet we should acknowledge that anarchist violence is not a stain but rather another spot on our rich and rugged coat of ideas.

We should be able to bridge the chasm that divides those who advocate violence and those who reject it (and its actors, condemned to ostracism or romanticized) because of a fear of being labeled violent or for fear of having anarchism be linked to violence, just as we should be able to bridge the gap between those advocating propaganda by the deed, direct action, and those calling for collectivism, communism, and so on. How is that anarchist revolution we strive for going to come about if not without *violence*? Or are we so naïve to believe such transition—if it ever occurs—shall be peaceful, painless? There is a price to pay, though. And here's where the true rift appears: who is willing to sacrifice their lives for our current society, a society marred by capitalism's excess? More so when there are comrades willing to openly criticize and cut ties with those other comrades on the line. In legal terms, that would amount to treason. The question of violence, then, is seen under another light. It takes another form. Who is really living anarchy, anyway? There is still a long road ahead, and we shouldn't be shy of resorting to different tactics and means to achieve that much sought-after ideal. Internecine struggles are certainly not the way.

Arguing that violence is committed by desperate individuals in desperate circumstances is oversimplifying the issue, for context frames that violence and grants it validation. There should be no qualms in reasserting that violence, in reclaiming it, and acknowledging the fact that, without it, our ideas would be just that, mere ideas—or as the establishment would have it, a utopia. But we should first educate ourselves, collectively, on why violence is to be accepted as part of anarchism, and then educate others on both our ideas and aims, and why *our* violence is truly liberating. This is not to say that anarchism can only find a conduit through violence; rather, that it is but another form in which anarchism is expressed, alongside mutual aid, solidarity, and so on. Education could also be *violent*: we could *destroy* this system of oppression if we can read between the lines and see what's hidden from the layman's eye to reveal the truth, the injustices, and offer a solid alternative, one based on human ideals.

Furthermore, we should honor those anarchists that leave their common lives behind to engage in violence and in a one-way path toward revolution rather than condemn them to oblivion and ostracism.

Emma Goldman put it succinctly when she stated that,

How many thousands of Socialists, and above all Anarchists, have lost work and even the chance of work, solely on the ground of their opinions.... And what happens to a man with his brain working actively with a ferment of new ideas, with a vision before his eyes of a new hope dawning for toiling and agonizing men, with the knowledge that his suffering and that of his fellows in misery is not caused by the cruelty of fate, but by the injustice of other human beings—what happens to such a man when he sees those dear to him starving, when he himself is starved? Some natures in such a plight, and those by no means the least social or the least sensitive, *will become violent, and will even feel that their violence is social and not anti-social, that in striking*

*when and how they can, they are striking, not for themselves, but for human nature, outraged and despoiled in their persons and in those of their fellow sufferers. And are we, who ourselves are not in this horrible predicament, to stand by and coldly condemn these piteous victims of the Furies and Fates?*<sup>76</sup> (italics are ours)

She provides some justification: “But, it is often asked, have not acknowledged Anarchists committed acts of violence? Certainly, they have, always however ready to shoulder the responsibility. My contention is that they were impelled, not by the teachings of Anarchism, but by the tremendous pressure of conditions, making life unbearable to their sensitive natures.”<sup>77</sup>

We believe this offers a sort of middle-ground, in that anarchist violence is committed by anarchists, though not in the name of Anarchy. But just as a word has many meanings, so does anarchism. For many people and many *anarchists*. The thin line between theory and practice conflicts with the blunt impact of reality and circumstances. After all, “Compared with the wholesale violence of capital and government, political acts of violence are but a drop in the ocean.”<sup>78</sup> And yet, there is a serious ineluctable crossroads we should acknowledge: Can we debate violence from theory written a hundred years ago, in and for different circumstances and peoples? Are those theories still prevalent in our current times? Are we able to make a renewed reading of these philosophies, or should those ideas be laid to rest as mere historical foundations? More importantly, can we judge that violence with our modern eyes? It’s hard to fathom such level of comprehension. Even if we could, that judgment would be biased at best. Camus writes:

Absolute non-violence is the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence: systematic violence positively destroys the living community and the existence we receive from it. To be fruitful these two ideas must establish their limits. In history, considered as an absolute, violence finds itself legitimized; as a relative risk, it is the cause of a rupture in communication. It must therefore preserve, for the rebel, its provisional character of effraction and must always be bound, if it cannot be avoided to a personal responsibility and to an immediate risk.<sup>79</sup>

As per him and Graeber, we must recognize the *communicational* character of violence. Political violence contains indeed a message. Whether its receptors can catch its meaning, its call to arms, or not. Much like the Brigade Rosse in Italy, who spoke of “strik(ing) one to educate one hundred,” the writing is on the wall.<sup>80</sup>

Violence as strategy can be controversial and counterproductive, yet that has never prevented direct-action anarchists from executing it, *performing* it, *communicating* it, to the point of risking their own lives along with it. The very act being liberating. The unchained effect, unspeakable.

Violence is not necessarily an act of bodily aggression only, nor is it executed by anarchists alone. The violence we suffer every day under the yoke of the state, corporations, religions, capitalism, and the old patriarchy model—is it possible to extricate it peacefully? It does not speak the language of banners or protest signs, but that of repression, clampdown, poverty, and death. It is

---

<sup>76</sup> Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 84–85.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–92.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>79</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 233.

<sup>80</sup> See Chris Aronson et al., *Strike One to Educate One Hundred: The Rise of the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1960s–1970s* (Chicago, IL: Seeds Beneath the Snow, 1986).

not about extreme ways, selected by extreme individuals, under extreme circumstances, although sometimes the means are indeed the ends.<sup>81</sup>

Political violence has put an end to tyrants, murderers, oppressors ... Avenging violence by anarchists should not be shunned, but neither glorified. Rather, it should be studied, just as the rest of our rich history has been, to avoid the mistakes of the past and apply those teachings to our present and future.

Neither violence for violence's sake, nor indiscriminate violence. Those whose actions carried the burden of the sadly, so-called collateral damage, have owned up to their actions, bore responsibility for them, and have probably carried the mental punishment of reliving that moment until their own deaths—likely at the hands of the state (violence). We should not and cannot judge them for what they believed was the appropriate choice in their own eyes. Nevertheless, there are acts of regrettable or despicable violence (Lecaldare, Pesce) whose reasons are beyond comprehension.

Malatesta argues that:

We understand how it can happen in the fever of battle that some people, naturally kind-hearted but not prepared by long moral training—very difficult under present conditions—may lose sight of the goal to be reached and may regard violence as an end in itself and let themselves be swept along to savage excesses. But it is one thing to understand and excuse, and another thing to recommend. Those are not the kind of deeds that we can accept, encourage, and imitate. We must, indeed, be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to go beyond what is absolutely *necessary*. We must be like the surgeon, who cuts when he must but avoids causing needless suffering. In a word, we should be guided by love for mankind, for all mankind.<sup>82</sup> (our italics)

So, if for Camus, the rebel engaging in violence, by the very act of violence itself, extricates himself from humankind, for Malatesta, it is humankind that guides those very acts. Davide Turcato notes that Malatesta's words merited a response by Émile Henry in *L'En-Dehors*, in which Henry "argued that nobody had the right to judge the deeds of a fellow anarchist."<sup>83</sup> Henry would be later guillotined after the bombing of Café Terminus in Paris in 1894. In his statement to the judge, he argued that

Of course, I am under no illusions. I know my deeds will not yet be understood by the masses who are unprepared for them. Even among the workers, for whom I have fought, there will be many, misled by your newspapers, who will regard me as their enemy. But that does not matter. I am not concerned with anyone's judgement. Nor am I ignorant of the fact that there are individuals claiming to be anarchists who

---

<sup>81</sup> See John Brady Kiesling, *Greek Urban Guerrillas: Resistance and Terrorism (1967–2012)* (Athens, Greece: Lycabettus Press, 2014), 236, "[Today, speaking inside the prison with] old fellow combatants from those days, [they] remind me how I used to fight the cheap Machiavellianism of the party apparatus, 'the end sanctifies the means,' with my insistence that 'the means are the end.'" For the original source of the quote, see Dimitris Koufodinas, Γεννήθηκα 17 Νοεμβρη (Born 17 November) [in Greek] (Athens, Greece: Livanis, 2014), 51, "Σήμερα, μιλώντας μέσα από τη φυλακή με παλιούς συναγωνιστές εκείνων των χρόνων, μου θύμιζαν πώς πολεμούσα το φτωχομακιαβελισμό των κομματικών μηχανισμών «ο σκοπός αγιάζει τα μέσα», με την επιμονή μου ότι «τα μέσα είναι ο σκοπός»."

<sup>82</sup> Errico Malatesta, "A Bit of Theory," trans. F. A. B., *Freedom* 37, no. 411 (October 1923): 52.

<sup>83</sup> Errico Malatesta, *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader*, ed. Davide Turcato (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014), chap. 15, "A Bit of Theory," 158, n. 57.

hasten to disclaim any solidarity with the propagandists of the deed. They seek to establish a subtle distinction between the theoreticians and the terrorists. *Too cowardly to risk their own lives, they deny those who act.* But the influence they pretend to wield over the revolutionary movement is nil. Today the field is open to action, without weakness or retreat.<sup>84</sup> (our italics)

Malatesta, though rejecting violence as opposed to the freedom of anarchy, understood that context, and violence as a response, should not be opposed in the end: “[V]iolence is *not in contradiction* with Anarchist principles, since it is not the result of our free choice, but is imposed upon us by necessity in the defence of unrecognized human rights which are thwarted by brute force” (our italics).<sup>85</sup> In fact, he seemed rather ambiguous—and somewhat reluctant—in this sense: “Since historical antecedents have driven us to the necessity of violence, let us employ violence; but let us never forget that it is a case of hard necessity, and in its essence contrary to our aspirations.... We cannot, and we ought not to be either avengers, nor dispensers of justice. Our task, our ambition, our ideal is to be deliverers.”<sup>86</sup>

In the case of Luigi Fabbri, his efforts were centered—as was the case with many other Italian émigrés—on the fight against fascism and the burgeoning German Nazism from their position in the Río de la Plata Region. “Fascism leads to war,” he said, “and war leads to Fascism.”<sup>87</sup>

The issue of revolutionary violence was an ineluctable point of debate. Fabbri had “predicated all his life about the need for popular insurrection against the yoke of the state and against the repulsive injustice of the capitalist system.”<sup>88</sup> Ever since he started frequenting anarchist circles, he had always maintained an internal struggle regarding violence, always refrained to the personal realm. He loathed violence so much he felt a common bond with the enemy in humanity, and he reacted against his weakness and inclination toward violence, deeming it an inferior trait in the struggle and maintaining traditional positions within the revolutionary movement in that regard.

Luce Fabbri claims that “Malatesta had a similar issue.”<sup>89</sup> “None of them got even close to non-violence. No pacific resistance could defeat Fascism. And my father felt an anti-Fascist popular insurrection was despairingly necessary to prevent the war. The problem remained—and to me it still does—open and is ever more tortuous.”<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> See Émile Henry, statement before the judge, defense speech, April 1894: “Certes, je ne m’illusionne pas. Je sais que mes actes ne seront pas encore bien compris des foules insuffisamment préparées. Même parmi les ouvriers, pour lesquels j’ai lutté, beaucoup, égarés par vos journaux, me croient leur ennemi. Mais cela m’importe peu. Je ne me soucie du jugement de personne. Je n’ignore pas non plus qu’il existe des individus se disant Anarchistes qui s’empressent de réprouver toute solidarité avec les propagandistes par le fait. Ils essayent d’établir une distinction subtile entre les théoriciens et les terroristes. Trop lâches pour risquer leur vie, ils renient ceux qui agissent. Mais l’influence qu’ils prétendent avoir sur le mouvement révolutionnaire est nulle. Aujourd’hui, le champ est à l’action, sans faiblesse, et sans reculade” (*Gazette des Tribunaux*, April 27–28, 1894, trans. George Woodcock). See also, George Woodcock, ed., *The Anarchist Reader* (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977), 196; Émile Henry, *Coup pour coup*, ed. Roger Langlais (Paris: Éditions Plasma, 1977), 149–50.

<sup>85</sup> Malatesta, “Anarchy and Violence,” *Liberty* 1, no. 9 (September 1894): 71.

<sup>86</sup> Malatesta, “Anarchy and Violence,” *Liberty* 1, no. 10 (October 1894): 79.

<sup>87</sup> Fabbri, *Historia de un hombre libre*, 201.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 207–8.

One may argue that the violence they referred to was, more often than not, related and marked by a resistance to fascism. True, but their ideas are still applicable to all other forms of violence. Fabbri argues that:

Today, violence unleashed daily across so many places around the globe washes away any subtleties, in a historical perspective, to those isolated episodes of individual rebellion.... But the issue of violence, which tormented the mind of Luigi Fabbri throughout his life, remains open like a sore even today on all those who seek to fight injustice with means and ends of freedom.<sup>91</sup>

There must be an acknowledgement among anarchist circles that political violence serves an end—emancipation, revolution, and the *end* of exploitation, bourgeois violence, and oppression. Most importantly, there must be a refrain from easy judgment. Respect should prime above defamation. It is another aspect of mutual aid. We should cooperate with one another, rather than compete against each other on who is more anarchist or whose anarchism is purer.

The road to freedom—and anarchy—is not one of nonviolence or of peace-loving deniers of reality. It is one of action. How that action is engaged, depends on each of us.

~

*Luigi Celentano is a professional translator, proofreader, and copy editor based in Buenos Aires, Argentina specializing in sociopolitical issues. He has worked with publishers such as AK Press, Haymarket Books, and Cambridge University Press, as well as with academics from Italy, Spain, Lebanon, and Argentina. He has also collaborated with the International Center for the Promotion of Human Rights (CIPDH–UNESCO) in Buenos Aires and is currently the translator and part of the editorial collective for The Abolitionist, Critical Resistance’s newspaper on prison abolition. He has recently participated in the First Gathering of Historians and Researchers of Anarchism(s) held in Montevideo, Uruguay (2023), with an abridged version of this essay. You may contact him at undergroundletters.com and luigicelentano [at] gmail.com.*

---

<sup>91</sup> Fabbri, *Historia de un hombre libre*, 42.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Luigi Celentano  
On Violence and Rebels  
17 January 2024

Retrieved on 16 April 2024 from [anarchiststudies.org](http://anarchiststudies.org).

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)