

goal: that of urging people to revolt. [...] The important thing is that intermediate struggles must reach a violent outcome, a breaking point, an essential line beyond which recuperation would no longer be possible.” To get there, he needed to be aware of the necessity of generalizing violence and that was the function of the “specific movement”: “we must create the possibility of a specific movement that is capable of encountering the real movement, in places and moods in which the latter’s pulse becomes perceptible to the former” (*ibid*). To the degree that such logorrhea made sense, it sounded bad: the masses were incapable of reaching revolutionary goals without the concurrence of an elite (be it called “specific movement”); if not, its “intermediate” struggles would never reach the necessary insurrectional level. Bonannist anarchism was beginning to concretize as a vulgar adventurist and vanguardist ideology, fairly close in its theoretical foundations to the militarist extremism of the “armed party.” In the following years Bonanno elaborated the basic concepts of the insurrectionalist ideology, setting out from the separation between class struggle and insurrectional struggle, a separation that only a select “specific” minority could help to overcome. His work began to be known outside of Italy and he himself became an infamous figure of international anarchism. His great theoretical discovery—that any sort of action, minoritarian though it may be, was possible and desirable at any time—would invariably mark his path.

In the beginning was the act. The separation of theory and practice reduced one to a simple accompaniment and the other to mere technique. For Bonanno, the “not waiting” of the “specific” anarchist organizations and “passing into action” required a different type of organization, impermanent and defined as “informal”, and he thought he had found it in his affinity groups. Said groups were to elaborate a “project,” product of their analyses and discussions, which would orient and stimulate action. Using the technical language of management and marketing, in one of the articles in *Anarchismo* he described the project as “the site of the conversion of

# Attentat

A journal of collision

Various Authors



attentat

2013

lutely nonexistent and completely useless as well as dangerous for all of us” (*ibid*). In fact, the betrayal of Negri and the collaborators resided in their weird Leninism, which translated everything into terms of separated power. As self-proclaimed representatives of the working class, they were the privileged interlocutors of the State and their salvation was to crudely depict the central question. As a defeated party, they were not going to fight for their freedom, but to negotiate their freedom to take up the struggle again by other means. With their future mortgaged by the agreements with the State, what would that struggle look like? Bonanno accurately indicated that it was one thing to drop your weapons because you had changed your mind and another to do it because the dominant power demanded it of you: “they don’t want your ‘critique’, they want your *mea culpa*” (*ibid*, JW trans. modified). Before the state, no one is innocent: “We are all responsible for our dream of storming the heavens. We cannot turn ourselves into dwarves now, after having dreamed, elbow to elbow, each feeling the others’ heartbeats, of attacking and overthrowing the gods. *This is the dream that makes power afraid.* [...] *No one can be neutral; we are guilty of the planning and preparation of that climate which filled us with enthusiasm and led us along.* Even the most critical of us could not claim perfect innocence. In the eyes of the State, it is precisely this climate that is guilty. We must assume responsibility for this” (*ibid*). But these flashes of lucidity were not enough to shed light on the new panorama of the 80s, with a submissive working class and thousands of people in prison. To search for a balance sheet of the process that led to this disaster in his works is to search in vain. Bonanno only offered us a reaffirmation: “In these times of liquidation and stagnation, we reaffirm that our struggle is a struggle for total liberation, here and now.” Using an inverted Manicheism, he opposed class struggle to insurrectionary revolt, by not considering the latter as a moment of the development of the former, but as an instrument: “For us, intermediate struggles are not a goal but a means that we use (even rather often) to achieve a different

benefits, and he signed up for the chorus of those who asked for amnesty. Bonanno rightly attacked them in the 1984 booklet entitled *And We Will Still Be Ready To Storm The Heavens Another Time*, which earned him another trial. From the easy defeat of the revolutionaries he drew conclusions that went against those of the surviving anarchist organizations, since they indicated the need for violent action against persons and things that embodied repression, bourgeois justice, technobureaucracy, syndicalism, and capitalism, all of which must “be translated into precise acts, acts of attack, not just in words, but in deeds” (“The Illogical Revolution,” 1984). True anarchists must be in permanent revolt and begin to attack: “We insistently reaffirm that the use of organized violence against exploiters, even if it takes the form of minoritarian and limited action, is an indispensable instrument in the anarchist struggle against exploitation” (*And We Will...*) After years of beating around the bush, finally the step was to be taken. The prison cell discussions and the shameful spectacle of the repentant and dissociated had each contributed something. Bonanno, who we thank for forgetting Spinoza and the “diffuse worker”, pronounces obvious truths that are fortunately not disguised by his pretentious verborrhea: “They will not give us an amnesty. We will have to pay for it.” The price will be the revolutionary spirit, ideas, dignity, bravery. “By accepting the agreement today, tomorrow at best we might perhaps struggle inside the ghetto where power will have parked us... Collaborating means surrendering to the enemy outright.” For the extremist Stalinists: “The reduction of class war to a mere military confrontation carries within it the logical conclusion that, if we undergo a military defeat on this terrain, the class war ceases to exist as such. From this we come to the not just theoretical but practical absurdity that in Italy today, after the defeat of the combatant organizations, there is no longer an actual class war, and that it is in everyone’s interest (and in the State’s interest first of all), to negotiate a surrender in order to avoid the development, or the continued development, of a process of struggle that is abso-

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the delegitimation and criminalization of those who practice the former. *He posed the question so as not to answer it* armed struggle is a respectable option, with which one could agree or disagree, but that no guardian of anarchy could cast out of the temple. It was not all good, it was not all bad; but it was always ethically justifiable. This issue would end up as his specialty, but he was not content with that. Around that time his thinking took on a worrisome degree of confusion and lack of style. Bonanno came down with a case of graphomania. With great confidence, he took on any issue, using a sententious tone that aspired to a sense of profundity and abundant allusions that made it seem he knew more than what he let on—typical tricks to impress less demanding readers. Facts were not of great importance and he rarely appealed to them as a basis for his peremptory assertions. If he mentioned the “real movement,” it was as a simple commonplace of his convoluted rhetoric. He would move from one issue to another between outbursts, topics, gratuitous affirmations, and, once in a while, some truth half drowning in so much phraseology, stringing it all together without the least logical sequence. The end was the beginning: insurrectional action. We can gather examples of his nonsense by the dozen, but it is enough to glance at “The Bathwater and the Baby,” in which he attempted to liquidate his badly digested Situationism, the “movement,” the dialectic, and Marxism, among other things. The fact that Bonanno discounted theoretical activity if it did not lead to immediate and overwhelming action did not save him from becoming one of those (to say it in his own words) “lovers of the pen, who produce analysis like Fiat produces automobiles.” In May 1980, the police carried out a raid against the anarchists associated with the magazine *Anarchismo*. Bonanno and his comrades were accused of belonging to AR, but the set-up failed in the drill stage. The end of the revolutionary movement came about in the midst of an endless stream of informants and reformed repentants. Toni Negri himself was at the head of the “dissociated”, those who promised never to fight the state in exchange for penitentiary

proclaimed in their leaflets and communiqués. At the end of 1977, Bonanno was arrested for *Armed Joy* and, on November 30, 1979, condemned to a year and a half of prison for having written it. Far from cowering or repenting, he made common cause with activist prisoners, such as those of the Red Brigades or the P38, publically lashing out against Amadeo Bertolo and Paolo Finzi, who, in *A Rivista Anarchica*, had gone all out in attacking his review of a book on Emile Henry. It was the first time he had been publically attacked in an anarchist newspaper; they laid into him for showing off in meetings. Bonanno took advantage of the occasion to deal with the question of class violence minus suspicious moralizing: “A terrorist is not one who confronts power with violence in order to destroy it; one who uses violent and cruel means to secure the continuance of exploitation is. That is why, since only a small minority is interested in that continuance (bosses, fascists, politicians of every stripe, union officers, etc) it is logical to deduce that the ‘true’ terrorists are the latter, insofar as they use violent means to perpetuate exploitation. These people’s violence is carried out in the force of laws, in prisons, in the obligation to work, in the automatic mechanism of exploitation. The rebellion of the exploited is never terrorism.” (“Of the Terrorism of some Idiots and Other Matters,” 1979). Assimilating constraints to extreme forms of oppression, he identifies it all with terrorism: “Let us say that a terrorist must be one who terrorizes another, one who tries to obtain something by imposing their point of view with actions that sow terror. Thus, it is clear that power terrorizes the exploited in a hundred ways. They are afraid of not working, of poverty, of laws, of the cops, of public opinion; they suffer from a compact psychological terrorism that reduces them to a state of almost complete submission in the struggle against power. That is terrorism” (*ibid*). However, Bonanno does not end up endorsing armed struggle, still debatable at the strategic level, and even less the necessity of an “armed party.” What he rejects is the contrast, which he considers Manichean, between armed struggle and mass struggle, because it would lead to

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since armed struggle did not represent “the entirety of the revolutionary dimension.” In any case it was unquestionable, since any criticism of it would help “the torturers”: “When we say the time is not ripe for an armed attack on the State we are pushing open the doors of the mental hospital for the comrades who are carrying out such attacks.” And that’s all: a call to have a good time and leave the armed groups be while the Italian proletariat faced the choice of abolishing work or continuing to work. Bonanno, since the pages of *Anarchismo*, had affirmed the generalization of illegal behavior and the pre-revolutionary slant of the moment, but the guerilla organization AR ironized about the purely literary character of the positioning of the “critical critique of Catania” that “will finally clarify what the revolutionary tasks of anarchists are. Given the premises, we should expect this kind of response: anarchists should bring the exploited to revolt. If we interpret that with ill will, this will mean: the old guard, the Leninists, the Stalinists, the workerists, all revolt. Why do anarchists limit themselves to bringing others to do it? Who will push them? Are they not once again outside of history? A well-meaning interpretation: to push the exploited to revolt in the only possible way, that is, to revolt themselves, not with rivers of ink...” (AR, “The Movement of ‘77 and the Guerrilla”). The general strike never happened, so that armed groups and unrealistic elements like Bonanno were more and more isolated. Although the ebb of the movement of 1977 left armed struggle as the only way out for many rebels, there were never the ten, one hundred, one thousand armed nuclei that AR announced in its founding statement. The unions imposed order in the factories and the police imposed it in the streets. The State reinforced itself; illegal acts were harshly repressed. There were waves of detentions; armed struggle dissolved like a sugar cube in water. In 1979, most of the members of AR were imprisoned and, from their cells, announced the guerilla was over. Some went over to the Leninist organization *Prima Linea*, which produced doubts about the ideological steadiness of the former organization, so roundly

egy. Its novelty is not in its content, recuperated from the *Comon-tismo* group (1972–1974) and the writings of the ex-Situationist Raoul Vaneigem (“Terrorism and Revolution”—1972, and “From the wildcat strike to generalized self-management”—1974, which were quite popular in Italy) but in that it brings together and, with a superficial touch appropriate for any and all readers, deals with every issue that could concern rebels who do not particularly like to read and for whom revolution is a kind of generalized open bar party. Despite some disdainful words he has for May ‘68, his language is prositu: *revolution is a festival, never work*; self-management is the self-management of exploitation; struggle is pleasure; play is a weapon, destruction of the commodity, etc. The word *spectacle* is repeated dozens of times, while references to the State, more appropriate for anarchists, are minimal. On some pages, Bonanno feigned, in Vaneigemese, to “oppose the non-work aesthetic to the work ethic.” Although not long before, he had fought for the “autonomous organization of production,” now “The only way for the exploited to escape the globalizing project of capital is through the refusal of work, production and political economy (...) The revolution cannot be reduced to a simple reorganization of work... The revolution is the negation of labor and the affirmation of joy.” Despite having dedicated a book to the idea that the expropriated should reappropriate the totality of the productive process, that is, self-management, now he condemned it as a mystification: “If the struggle is victorious the selfmanagement of production becomes superfluous, because after the revolution the organization of production is superfluous and counter-revolutionary.” Someone looking for an outline of strategy or just practical ideas to face the immediate problems of that revolution which in 1977 was played for double or nothing was not going to find them in the book, always one mystification ahead, including the parts about armed struggle. Besides congratulating himself for violence against the police, bosses, or the journalists of power, and that bit about “hurry to arm yourself,” he warned against making the machine gun sacred,

## editorial

*It must be emphasized from the outset that nihilism is an ambivalent concept with more than one meaning. It is, in one guise, a promise of creative destruction. In another, it can work to the opposite end; turn to sheer destruction, annihilating the very context of creativity. The two-in-one nature of nihilism moves it, in a way, 'beyond good and evil'.*

—Bulent Diken,

(*Nihilism*, 6)

If this project had been completed eight years ago (when it was originally promised), it would have begun with **the word** and all the thinking would've focused on a single point. At that time we still considered anarchist thinking to be unnecessarily positivist and in need of our correction. Some venerable factions still criticize us along the line that we are overly negative, but if they are honest they admit they share our lack of hope. They just call it something else.

At its simplest, this journal explores the collision between anarchist and nihilist ideas. Because the position—with conclusions drawn from direct experience—emphasizes the collision rather than the words, it presents more of an aesthetic than merely a political stance. For too long we have suffered the limitations of words and identities, without gaining the corresponding heft-of-meaning or followers that seemed to be the hallmark of big ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now, unlike eight years ago, we

recognize that the words aren't important *in the same way* as they used to be in past.

While an attentat is indeed an act of political violence, we don't see the word as either a flag or a mission statement. Instead we see an attentat as a leap from one reality to another. As a kind of passionate will to live that we rarely see and cannot imagine today. This is a time of existential alienation, not chestthumping bravery. Today's political violence, much like the political whatever, is just a marketing program of the security state, one that bears no relationship to a life worth living.

So it follows that we don't defend the 19<sup>th</sup> century attentat as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century solution to all that ails us. To the extent that echoes of the attentat exist in the modern world, we understand it as a natural response of an individual under extreme duress to a world that doesn't care about them, their condition, their family, or their future—but an individual who still has the self respect to do something about it. A futile something, sure, but something far different than a protest vote or an argument over the dinner table.

A new definition of attentat would be an act, any act really, that does not concern itself with cause-and-effect but with inspiration: not the inspiration of the song or a revelation of a higher power but of the overloading of a moment with the kind of aggregation of feelings that transforms a moment into a lifetime. The attentat would be the creation, by participation, of these kinds of moments, to imbue the moment with eternity without regard to time or periodization. It is the act of leaping into known unknowns.

steps that came after that—and then a qualitative jump in social tensions put the question of arms on the table.

In the mid-70s the Italian state had weakened to the extreme. It revealed its frailty by recurring to staging terrorist acts that pointed to fictitious enemies with the complicity of the mass media and the Stalinists. The attempts at industrial restructuring aggravated social revolt, which moved from the factories to the street. In Bonanno's words, "the revolutionary movement, including the anarchist movement, was in a phase of development, and anything seemed possible, including the generalization of armed conflict." The existence of a militarized party like the Red Brigades provoked in anti-authoritarian milieus the fear that it would seize control of struggles. The debate on armed libertarian alternatives gave birth in 1977 to *Azione Rivoluzionaria* (AR), "a combat structure as open as possible to the base." The critique of arms, "the only force that can make a project credible" according to AR, was reaching the level of open confrontation among revolutionaries (no longer in the FAI, which, much more interested in syndicalism than revolution, obviously condemned armed struggle). Some saw it as a separated violence that did not lead to class conflict but to the spectacle of conflict, contributing to criminalize the "autonomist movement" and to provoke its repression. For AR the movement would not be taken seriously, and seriously feared, without an armed guerilla. It was logical for repression to follow the revolutionary offensive, guerilla or no guerilla, but thanks to the guerilla's role as lightning rod, throwing itself onto the repressive apparatus, the movement still had its bases, its newspapers, and its radio stations. Bonanno's first response was the text "Revolutionary Movement and Project," followed by the book *Armed Joy*, which had a great impact in its time owing less to breaking militant taboos than to being banned soon after publication (in Bologna close to three thousand were distributed or sold). There was a Spanish edition called *Armed Pleasure*. The book has no analysis of the moment, nor does it seriously discuss weapons: it is a book of principles, not strat-

tionary thought by clinging to Bakunin, an insuperable exponent of Hegel's influence. His critique of syndicalism repeats something known since May '68: "Old-style capitalism has given way to a new managerial version. It is perfectly well aware that its best friend and ally is the trade union" ("A Critique of Syndicalist Methods," 1975). The rest does not differ from what councillist Marxists used to say (he even cites Pannekoek); he just extends it to anarchist unions. However, he does not bother with workers' councils, assemblies, committees, and other forms of horizontal coordination, since Bonanno is not interested in the working class "in itself", but rather how anarchism is articulated in its self-organization. Anarchists are not to inject their ideas into the masses from outside, through propaganda: "[The revolutionary anarchist project] starts from the specific context of actual struggles... Above all this cannot be the product of the minority. It is not elaborated by the latter inside their theoretical edifice, then exported to the movement in one block or in pieces... It is necessary to start from the actual level of the struggle, from the concrete, material level of the class clash, building small autonomous base organisms that are capable of placing themselves at the point of concurrence between the total vision of liberation and the partial strategic vision that revolutionary collaboration renders indispensable" (Bonanno, "Fictitious Movement and Real Movement"). In 1975 Bonanno thought (and he was right) that Italian society was in a prerevolutionary phase, so the fundamental thing was the autonomous organization of workers, for which "autonomous base nuclei" or "autonomous worker nuclei" were necessary: these were just "small autonomous base organizations dedicated to the radical struggle against the present structures of production" ("A Critique of Syndicalist Methods"). These nuclei would be the place where anarchists met the proletariat. He distrusted larger structures such as workers' assemblies, since they restricted the autonomy of groups and could be easily manipulated by bureaucrats and demagogues. He did not say much about the

## Art of nothing

### Laying Plans

1. The art of nothing is of vital importance to the stateless.
2. Nihilism is a balancing act between living and despising life (as life is circumscribed by unacceptable conditions and defined by a lack of social power).
3. The art has five factors: amorality, timing, the ground, agency, and method and discipline.
  - Amorality is both a conscious disconnection from the moral fabric of the existing order and the flexibility to become connected when it's appropriate to do so. Values, beliefs, and ethics are systems of control that obscure reality behind a veil of affective participation. You broke it, you bought it. To be amoral is to play. Abandoning the field, or the board, without a moment's notice or on a whim, and never looking back.
  - Timing is the capacity to dance. To do comedy. To know when to jab and when to cross.
  - The ground is something real. Nothing has an address, a location, a range between one thing and another, open ground and narrow passes; a chance of life-and-death.
  - Agency is a will to power; a capacity to be sovereign. It is a decision to be and to act without a third eye or hesitation. It is the capacity to measure oneself and others, and to accept the consequences of capacity and desire.

- Method and discipline: the general comprehension that there are very few techniques by which to achieve ends, therefore mastery of them is of utmost importance. Resources, actors, and logistics. What's left are the relationships that don't require conscious methods to do agreed-upon actions (aka relationships of trust).
4. Those who understand the use of these five factors will have success, in conflict and in generalized moments of repose.
  5. Who is trapped in moral codes? Who knows the ground and terms of engagement? Who knows how to dance or when to stop? Who has achieved coherence and discipline? Who has most access to resource and talent?
  6. This obsession with considerations is a howl against passivity. Nihilism is about playing rough. A bruising, hostile, rigorous game. A lack of consideration about trifles like victory, means we play harder.
  7. It also means we don't play State games. Our games look more like a potlach—an oddly symmetric consuming of resources, or like an orgy—an oddly symmetric consumption of pleasures.
  8. These games, as it turns out, don't lay along the same grain as the State. This is less of a problem that it may appear.

## Waging War

1. War is the logic of civilization, statecraft, and the ideology of capitalism. Its ultimate aim is to disappear the things that have come before it. Through the lens of war opponents become enemies, become history (or possibly historical curiosities).

signing his name to an article entitled “I Killed Chief Superintendent Calabresi.”<sup>1</sup> For this sense of humor and courage, in October of 1972, he was awarded a sentence of two years and two months for “defense of the crime.”

He probably read a lot in the hole, because in 1974 he published some pamphlets on the State, abstention, and revolution. Around this time he seems to have believed he had thrown the decisive weight of his thought on the theoretical scales of justice, compiling an anthology entitled *Self-Management and Anarchism* at his own expense. The following year he had the book printed (and also made available in Spain), made cut-and-paste style while he continued writing articles for the bi-monthly theoretical magazine *Anarchismo* that he had founded in Catania. He justified the rejection of dialectical method on the grounds that it goes hand in hand with “authoritarian” forms of thought that correspond to authoritarian forms of action (“Economic Crisis and Revolutionary Possibility”). Marx is not useful for Bonanno, not even as a critic of economics, since his thought is philosophical, Hegelian, and therefore “smells like metaphysics.” Allergic to philosophical terminology, he dares to describe Marx’s work as “a program that has its roots in the Protestant mysticism of the Middle Ages” (“After Marx, Autonomy”) which could be considered an opinion if it were not for the fact that Protestantism has nothing to do with mysticism and did not take place in the Middle Ages. Bonanno always has the problem of those who have to discuss everything, whether or not they know what they are talking about, and ridiculous slips appear frequently in his extensive work. He could have easily appreciated the role of classical German philosophy in the formation of revolu-

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<sup>1</sup> There may be some confusion here on Amorós’ part. Bonanno was jailed in October 1972 for an article in *Sinistra Libertaria*, but the Milan Police Command was bombed in 1973, so the article in question would have been published later—presumably after Bonanno was free. Additionally, the article Amorós seems to be referring to bears the significantly different title “I Know Who Killed Chief Superintendent Calabresi.”

new class society with which to orient struggles against the new form of Power. The Situationist International, which had an Italian section, had ended up embodying the figure of “historical evil” for the officials of the FAI, ideologues of a certain “anarchism” that was perfectly compatible with a modern class society. The tension between the officials and an oppositional sector in constant ferment that accused them of bureaucratism and ideology and that advocated a critique of everyday life, spoke of workers’ councils or defended violent methods, provoked a paranoid sort of defensive reflex among the former. The FAI bureaucrats felt themselves infiltrated by mysterious Situationist agents and reacted by calling for a congress, the tenth, in Carrara, April 10, 1971, dedicated entirely to combatting the phantom of the SI. The congress decided to exclude the “anarchosituationists” to prevent their example from spreading to local groups and federations. The insignificant FAI, obsessed by what were ultimately just the antibureaucratic effects for the first stage of proletarian autonomy, remained blind before the true danger: the instrumentalization of the anarchist movement by the secret services of the Italian State. Indeed, the police blamed the fascist bombs in Milan (April 29 1969) and Piazza Fontana (December 12 1969) on anarchists. One of them, Giuseppe Pinelli, was thrown through the window of a police station; another, Pietro Valpreda, was chosen as the scapegoat of the attentats. The issue went beyond the libertarian media and had the entire society in a state of tension. To aggravate people’s morale even more, in May of 1972 the anarchist Francesco Serantini was beaten to death by the police at a demonstration, and Chief Superintendent Calabresi, the one responsible for Pinelli’s death, was executed by a commando unit a few days later. The FAI, alarmed by these events, did not hesitate to distance itself from violent responses to repression, even condemning the attentats and bombs against the police and the magistrature. Bonanno, who had condemned the bombing of the Milan Police Command a year earlier, had the opposite attitude, as documented in the pages of his publication *Sinistra Libertaria*,

2. The relationship between war and genocide is a sympathetic one.
3. War thinking treats existential conflict like a game: revolution is a matter of changing a few rules, victory is measured in terms of medals on chests and pensions. Public relations is merely part of the arsenal.
4. In our current condition of total war most human experience is foraged upon by an occupying army. Our innovations provide new terrains for warfare. Our failures are opportunities for constraint and punishment. As long as they hold the whip, occupiers usually speak in terms of peace.
5. There is no People’s war. If the capacity of a generalized *people* exists, which it doesn’t, it doesn’t form itself into the shape of disappearing other people. Conflict and violence are, of course, definitional to the human experience but war is not.
6. The more difficult relationship to parse is the one between economics and war. On the one hand we understand that an occupying army makes living more expensive. On the other we can imagine an exchange without violence or terror.
7. Put a different way, war has erased the memory of human-intercourse-without-exchange-relationships. Until something unforeseen occurs we will never greet a stranger with an open hand again (if we seem to, it’s a ruse).
8. If war is policy plus technology applied against the population then counter-war (aka resistance) has three lines of response: policy, technology, population. Policy must be questioned and criticized in several tenors. Technology must be strained through sabotage and infrastructural compromise.

Population must become inscrutable with enemies and allies indistinguishable apart from brief moments of outrage.

9. Mostly, we have to challenge war and war thinking orthogonally. The alternative is to either lose war/victory games forever, to be annihilated, or to put it another way to become leftists.
10. This is likely to mean a patience entirely in contradiction to our times. It could be that our mission will be merely to move forward knowledge of the terrain and of methods for our progeny to act upon. Just as likely, the time to act could have already occurred and we've missed it. It is possible that the only thing left to do is watch all of this slowly unwind. To watch ash slowly settle to the ground.

## Attack by Stratagem

1. In the postnuclear era war is rarely fought with arms. Because the capacity to destroy vast quantities of human life now exists, thinking in terms of ratios of conflict is no longer relevant. All positional military thinking is about surrounding and capturing rather than engaging to acceptable or unacceptable loss.
2. *Attack by stratagem* is also called politics.
3. Politics is the art of breaking resistance without conflict. The masters of politics tend toward mastery without reward; martyrs, commentators, leftists, and priests.
4. The nature of politics is strategic, a slow, grinding, methodological, inexorable approach that moves the goal line as it succeeds.
5. Resistance to politics tends to be pointal rather than rhizomatic. Individual actors speaking truth to power or an

small organizations at the base independent of any political or union structure, such as the Autonomous Movement of Turin Railway Workers—the ideal means for anarchist intervention in struggles. Bonanno affirmed: “We are partisans of organization. [...] But organization cannot be a thing in itself, isolated from the struggle, an obstacle to be overcome before gaining access to the area of the class clash” (*ibid*). However, the question that most separated the older libertarians from the youth was that of revolutionary violence. At a time when the Italian bourgeoisie was experimenting with terror, the problem of a violent response was impossible to ignore, and armed struggle or attentats were but facets of this problem. The official militants not only avoided getting involved in such debates, but also tried to isolate them, using calumny and manipulation against anyone who suggested that they needed to happen. A moment had arrived in which what brought young anarchists together with the FAI was much less than what distanced them. The splits were not long in coming. The breaks began in 1969; some impatient people joined Lotta Continua or Potere Operaio, while others set up the Federated Anarchist Groups and published *A Rivista Anarchica*, which for years was the magazine of “alternative” anarchists. An interesting contribution that they made was the critique of “technobureaucracy” and the new “managerial” capitalism, a sort of carbon copy of John Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution*, which Bonanno studied and popularized in later writings. A third current was made up of those inspired by the Platform of Arshinov and Makhno, like the French ORA, advocating an even more rigid and above all more vanguardist organization, a guardian of the principles of an old and protected anarchism.

However, splits aside, the main problem for the FAI from 1968 on seems to have been Situationist ideas, those true solvents of stereotypical militant slogans and anarcho-syndicalist/antimarxist commonplaces that cemented together a stagnant and paralyzing ideospace, incapable of realizing a unitary and radical critique of the

all the way down to the libertarian rank and file. He also translated classics such as Rudolf Rocker or the suspect Gaston Leval. When the waters of Italian anarchism began to toss as a result of May 1968 and the strikes of the “hot” autumn of 1969, our protagonist was sufficiently ensconced in ideology to position himself clearly “on the left” in a generational debate. The young libertarians did not want to limit action to propaganda and proselytizing; they wanted to participate effectively in real struggles to contribute “to the growth of revolutionary consciousness in the masses.” The organization of glories past and its followers, on the other hand, were more concerned with meetings and congresses than with the struggles themselves and aspired only to “join the greatest number under one acronym or banner,” not worried about “attack[ing] Power: [rather] they try to disturb it as little as possible in order to conserve the tiny spaces they find themselves struggling in—or believing they are struggling in.” It was, then, a movement that “has inherited ideas, analyses and very specific experiences, but it does not have any direct relationship with struggles” (“Fictitious Movement and Real Movement,” Jean Weir trans.) [modified to accord with Amorós’ text]. The tangle of agreements and organizational procedures allowed those responsible for a small bureaucracy to paralyze any initiative that deviated from the official line, which is why the organizational question was the main *casus belli* between the immobile older militants and the new active generation. The Italian Anarchist Federation was organized on the basis of an “associative pact” written by Malatesta himself. Inasmuch as it was a “synthesis” organization, anarchists of all tendencies were included, although not anarchists of all tactics, since these were conveniently redirected through the congresses, where “small centers of power” controlled, judged, condemned, or absolved minorities. The youth defended a flexible structure of “affinity groups” with neither program, nor rules, nor committees, nor any criterion of unity other than individual autonomy and personal responsibility. Critical of the unions, they promoted

evening of street justice rather than developing tactical and conceptual morasses, hobbling by superior knowledge of the terrain, causing restlessness by interfering in timing, or sapping morale by questioning leadership and morality.

6. Politics uses five rules to succeed:
  - i. the rule of delay and timing. This is the rule that determines the *when* of conflict.
  - ii. the rule of force. This is the rule that measures force vectors in conflict.
  - iii. the rule of morale. This is the rule of party unity.
  - iv. the rule of tactics. This is a rule that determines that sometimes all things are equal other than the will to act.
  - v. the rule of cooptation. This is the freedom to co-opt and negotiate without reverting to committee.
7. Most politicians are, in fact, incompetent. They do not properly assess the conditions they are in nor the capacities of their adversaries. While satisfying, this fact is mostly irrelevant because the conditions that allow for politicians do not require their competence.
8. Adversaries should never accept the terms of the arrangement. To do so is moral and cedes agency.

## Attack by fire

1. Attack by fire cannot occur unless all methods of attack are possible. This means the capacity to attack bases of operation, economic centers, supply chains, and finally field operations. If all aren’t possible then none are.

2. Attack must stay in the supple space between bearing arms and staying invisible.
3. Only attack if it is to advantage, otherwise stay still but prepared.
4. Practice formations, drills, and techniques but mostly train how to bide time, conserve energy, and maintain control. The former are necessary but the latter will bear fruit now and later.
5. Arrive first.
6. Prepare to stand at your new home forever or cede it easily. Plant seeds or never take off your shoes.
7. For the adversaries of war the purpose of attack is axiomatic and therefore opaque to the strategic mind.
8. This disconnection between means and ends is the central concern of **nothingness**. If war and political activity are two faces of the same logic, then goal-oriented activity in the social space is an exercise in absurdity or hell.
9. Force generals and politicians to reveal themselves. This is a necessary aspect of dividing and confusing their design. It is not a substitute for clarity in hostility, but a necessary component of understanding the ground.
10. It is probable that we will not have the strength to set everything aflame. We have grown accustomed and soft. Our agency is wrapped up in a concern for our survival. An attack by fire would call all of this into question and the unforeseen consequences can often stop the oppositions initiative to respond as desired.

is a sufficient reason to examine the insurrectionalist current and to critically review its main postulates.

First of all, insurrectionary anarchism seems closely connected to the figure of its main exponent, Bonanno, even though he neither holds an official position in it, nor does he head an informal leadership, nor represents, in the movement, anyone but himself. Certainly, his opinions and actions also give rise to hostile critiques and disagreements among the groups; and there have been other important “theorists” such as, for example, Constantino Cavallieri, but Bonanno’s role in the genesis of the tactics that characterize insurrectionalism and his influence on the majority are undeniable. Bonanno is a veteran anarchist with extensive experience; he is a public enemy of domination whom the State has persecuted with various trials and imprisonments. He has published numerous texts that allow us to understand his thought clearly (it is neither complicated nor original). Due to his education and character, he has always interpreted the slightest philosophical reflection as what he calls “metaphysics”. This should not surprise us; the true Bonanno has always been an agitator and a man of action rather than an analytical and enlightened thinker. My intention here is to seek out the first appearances of insurrectionalist ideas and to follow their development by following Bonanno’s personal experience and trajectory with the necessary methodological precautions—acknowledging that not all insurrectionalism is Bonannism.

Alfredo Maria Bonanno was born in Catania (Sicily) in 1937 to a well-off family. We know nothing of his first thirty years; his first known writings date from 1970 and discuss atheism and the “autonomy of productive base nuclei.” A piece from 1971 deals with “counterpower,” which denotes *operaista* influences that could equally well come from Negri or the Maoist-spontaneist organization *Potere Operaio*. *Operaismo* was a critical current of Marxism, that, in the seventies, played more or less the role that *Socialisme ou barbarie* did in France, taking the renewal of theory

# Professional Anarchy and Theoretical Disarmament: On Insurrectionalism

Miguel Amorós

*Communities of joy will emerge from our struggle here and now.*

—Alfredo Bonanno, *Armed Joy*

For ten years or so, there has existed in this country [Spain] an anarchist current that has stirred up the stagnant libertarian milieu and has brought about a change of perspective in the terms of approach to revolutionary action. If we limit its critique to tactical questions and ignore the rest, its contribution has not been plentiful. The real conditions of the moment (a lack of real struggles, the non-existence of a workers' movement, and an anarchist milieu in decline) were not ideal ones for insurrectionalist action proposals to be able to break through the pacifist spectacle of the social pseudo-movements that have bubbled up recently. The *insu* sabotages have been regarded by the unthinking masses as something alien and external, so that repression has been easy. But we would err on the side of severity if we failed to recognize, in the impulse that has brought them about, an authentic will to fight and an intelligence on a better path to the radical critique of existing conditions than that of other contemporary libertarian currents, such as the primitivist, green, communalist, municipalist, etc. This alone

## Spies

1. Knowledge of disposition requires communication with people.
2. There are five types of hostile knowledge: local, integrated, converted, suicidal, and survivor. Most of this knowledge is impossible to gain unless you accept war thinking. From the outside all we can do is evaluate the shape of the knowledge.
3. We are capable of local or residential knowledge. This is the knowledge of the survivors of suicide, survivors of deception, as in those who survived gulags or schools and lived to tell of them.
4. We do not nor cannot capture and convert, nor pay off integrated knowledge: the knowledge of the true believer or the toady to power. To use either is to participate in politics, usually to no avail.
5. Opposing spies will expose themselves by their desire for crass propagandistic acts or politics.
6. Most strangers are spies of one type or another. The rise of digital actors has guaranteed this as much as it has spectacular conformity. Those who are known have additional capabilities to garner knowledge in addition to strangers. Immunity from spies is impossible and often becomes a source of moralistic efforts.
7. Our knowledge is different from the knowledge of war makers. Our constraint by them requires consent and field awareness. We act without generals or politicians.

## Situations

1. Because our goals are not strategic in orientation, our situational awareness is of utmost importance. This includes determinations about the social disposition of our environment along with its physicality and positionality.
2. Contra strategy is required not just because of the nature of asymmetric conflict but because most of our conflicts are not comprised of two positions but a range. This range usually entails positions of state agents and nonstate agents.
3. Mystical thinking and superstition are a great danger to us but are often the only form of measurable success against the state. This is where we have the greatest affinity with shopkeepers.
4. Constantly question assumptions, to the point of inactivity. Then begin experimentation with what you formerly questioned. This experimentation should involve risks.
5. Positional judgment, tactical verification, understanding of theoretical frameworks, and application of clear thinking continue to be the means to succeed. Agency, the ground, timing, methods, and amorality, in other terms.

There is no future history where we look back at a proletariat that came into itself and threw off the shackles that bound it.

Revolution, as existentially complete of a concept as a secular person could ever contemplate, is only real in the mind. It is a satisfying illusion and little more. This does not mean that political changes don't happen, they do, but they are not as categorical as revolutionaries would desire. Political changes are not from tyranny to freedom, capitalism to socialism, or bad to good. Mostly, political change is a media fabrication used to disguise one form of palace coup or another.

Our hatred for the system does not accompany a capacity to do much about it. We would not even recommend building this capacity. This building of capacity is one of the surest ways to be noticed by the agencies of authority. It is a sure way to be suppressed. Therefore we are left with little but our howl. And a howl is not a political program.

Our hatred for the left is for a thousand reasons but chief among them is the deception about power. The left, especially as it regurgitated Marxism, led us to believe that we did have the power to instigate change. To the extent that they have been successful it has not been along any other line than to benefit their own capacity to rule. We howl at them to drown out their lies.

Knowing too much about the world, about its organization and its deceptions, doesn't give us a responsibility to change it. It is too large, too rational, too far removed for any group, much less an individual, to move it even an inch. If we were to dream in political terms it would only be to dream of confounding rationality and progress. It would be to howl at the utopians who work within the system. To howl at those who negotiate with the social sciences because they truly believe. To howl at the remnants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that haven't been cleared from our palate.

the objects of the system comprised of exchange relationships are in a condition of alienation. To become subjects we must first recognize our alienation. Second we must associate and coordinate with others who share our form of alienation. Finally—through the process of de-subjectification—we will abolish the world of social classes and end alienation.

Perhaps a theory of everything was never the right idea in the first place. A critique of this world has accomplished little beyond enveloping its critics. Theories of social change mostly satisfy people who are interested in theory, future managers, and scholars. It may not have been possible to understand this in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but time has passed and it seems pretty clear now. You can't start a social movement with a Theory of Everything. Moreover a social movement may not be the lever we once thought it was. It may have the capacity to move the world (meant as abstractly as it sounds), but there is no fulcrum. There is no terrain in which a social movement could gain purchase. The (social, material) world cannot currently be rationalized. If it ever is, it will be the greatest horror show ever, and the social sciences, Marxism chief among them, will be to blame.

## A Howl

We don't treat Marx as a comrade who went astray and led others down a wrong path. We are not attempting to reconcile our perspective with that of the Marxists. Marxism is an obstacle that has prevented clear thinking about a variety of topics because it has been assumed to have done the good work. This assumption is not true. It isn't not-true because there's no such thing as capitalism or people-who-are-beingfucked-over-by-it. Obviously there is and they are, these things exist, these categories are real. They just don't mean the things that Marxists want you to believe that they mean.

## The Black Banner (Черное Знамя)

*Down with provocateurs and spies! Down with the bourgeoisie and the tyrants! Long live terror against bourgeois society!*

*Long live the anarchist commune!*

—An open letter from the Black Banner to Yiddish-speaking factory workers in Vilna

*It was not the orators who won me over to anarchism but life itself.*

—Pavel Golman, a former Social Democrat who defected to the Black Banner in 1905

The Pale of Settlement was an area of land that stretched from the western borderlands of European Russia through Eastern Europe and North towards the Baltic Sea. Created in 1791 by the empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, the Pale existed as a place within the Imperial Russian Empire where Jews were allowed permanent residency. This effort by Catherine was the culmination of many years of attempts by Russian rulers to eliminate Jews from the Empire entirely unless they converted to Russian Orthodoxy, the official religion of the state. The Pale eventually became the permanent home to millions of Jews who were unable to inhabit towns, villages, and cities outside of its confusing and ever changing bor-

ders.<sup>1</sup> While Jews were legally allowed to live and work within the Pale, anti-semitism and exclusion from the rest of Russian society were commonplace in the Empire during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As late as 1891, 20,000 Jewish merchants and artisans were expelled from Moscow, with many relocating to the outskirts of the empire in the western borderlands. The Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement were constantly under the threat of pogroms and other attacks.

However there was no homogenous Jewish community, only a common experience of exile and oppression from the rest of Russian and European society. Within these Jewish towns and villages deep divisions existed—as in the rest of the Russian Empire political differences, class antagonisms, and social tensions were realities of daily life in the Pale. It was within the underclass plagued by economic dispossession and misery in these Jewish towns and villages that the Russian anarchist movement<sup>2</sup> was born.

While eventually spreading beyond the limits of the Pale into the rest of the Russian Empire the unique alchemy of social factors in the Pale of Settlement laid the groundwork necessary for combative anarchist activity to initially blossom. The epicenter for this activity was the town of Bialystok (located in Russian-controlled Poland). At the turn of the century Bialystok was a town of roughly 66,000 people where sixty percent of the population was Jewish. It was an industrial town with many different kinds of factories employing most of the workers within city limits. These conditions combined to lay a proper foundation for the emergence of a hos-

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<sup>1</sup> The borders of the Pale were perpetually unclear. Some Jews were even able to acquire residency in cities outside of the Pale if they were wealthy or enlisted in military service. However this did not save them from the violence of antisemitism or from being relocated to the Pale at a moments notice. There were also some cities within the borders of the Pale that prevented Jews from residing in them.

<sup>2</sup> “Movement” here does not refer to a concrete and unified movement but instead to a real movement of people towards actualizing anarchy. This movement can only exist as actual combative activity.

## Political Philosophy

How does one develop a theory of everything? Especially if everything is really an inversion of the unquestioned reality of the now. Clearly one has to have an understanding of how we got here and how we’re going to get there. One has to understand the construction of this world, that is, what are the building blocks. Finally one has to build in a spiritual arc: a place of losses and one of findings and a way to get from one to the other.

It’s trite, at least in critical left communist circles, to comment on—by way of ignoring—Marx’s Lutheran pedigree. What does it mean really? How are we implicated by the religion of our fathers? The structure of Hegel’s secular Lutheranism in Marx’s inversion places a great deal of value on the connection between what we do and what we see in the world. For Hegel, as a Lutheran, it is by faith, or good ideas, that we are saved. For Marx it is by labor, by work.

This framing continues to plague us. There is no radical who has not been confronted with the question *what do you do?* as a form of tracking liturgical practice backwards to either a materialist or idealist pedigree and then forwards to its existential crisis and collapse. The relationship between history (what has been done) and political practice (what should we do) has been developed as a series of rails. We are on a train moving slowly from then to now. This assemblage of causal arrangements, and of a progressive story of history from primitive communism to bourgeois capitalism, is called dialectical materialism.

Those who see this world clearly, who have class consciousness, understand that the world is composed of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, of landlords and the lumpenproletariat. Moreover this understanding is a precondition to revolution and to the self-knowledge of the proletariat.

This mystical construction that requires an oblique knowledge prior to true living is also part of a spiritual practice. We who are

The issue with Marxist economics is that it is an intellectual pastime, a model of the world-in-the-world. A model that believes that it is a dead serious rapprochement with a system that is entirely hostile to it. But not hostile on the level of politics (ie reality) but of seriousness. This system is involved in the serious business of feeding and protecting seven billion people. Utopian thinking with different goal scenarios might be worth a moment of discussion but are ultimately frivolities in this important, dangerous, exceptional time.

We're being coy, of course: both conflating Marxist economics with economics as a whole, and also dissecting the specifically Marxist economic field for being irrelevant because it is small, and they have not won. The victory, or lack of victory, of a particular ideology is not at all our interest. Our interest is in the impact on daily life by social engineers and those who wish they were social engineers. When economists determine X, Y, or Z about how people should live, and politicians use that determination to set policy, it is politics. This *realpolitik*, is rarely done by generals, it's done by gray men doing serious science, on behalf of real people, for little to no reward.

We didn't get to this place, this enlightened and coldly savage place, by leaps and bounds. We got here one calculation, one abstraction, one measure at a time. A social engineer is not a job title, it is the gray man pushing us forward one step at a time.

We leave much more unsaid than said because our interest is not in the critique of the labor theory of value or the macroeconomics of the Soviet Union. We howl against it all but we also want to be precise. We abhor the measure of life in price and resource allocation. Exchange relationships are an occupying army.

tile and violent anarchist group, the *Black Banner*. With most insurgents either arrested, killed, or forced to flee Russia after the wave of anti-czarist activity in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Black Banner's emergence was in the foreground of a world where Russian radicals were stuck in the shadows far away from their former visibility. It was in the Russian emigre communities abroad and the Jewish towns in the borderlands that a new Russian anarchism, more active and ferocious than ever before came into being.

In 1902 Peter Kropotkin's seminal text *The Conquest of Bread* was translated from Russian by emigres in London for the first time. The text imbued the coming revolutionary storm that was ready to sweep the Russian Empire in 1905 with a language of anarchism that laid dormant for many years. In 1903 a Kropotkinist tendency of Russian emigres was founded in Geneva. Simultaneously an anarchist-communist group in Bialystok began using the name *Struggle*. This grouping, with no more than a dozen members, would eventually produce the Black Banner. While The Black Banner would denounce and oppose most Kropotkinist tactical and strategic positions they were always self-identified anarchist-communists. Like almost all anarchist tendencies in the Russian Empire, the Black Banner was made up of Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, other statist revolutionaries, and terrorists who, fed up with the failures and hyper-intellectual abstractions of socialism defected to anarchy. According to the late historian of anarchism Paul Avrich, the Black Banner:

*...easily the largest body of terrorists in the Empire, considered itself an Anarchist-Communist organization, that is, one which espoused Kropotkin's goal of a free communal society in which each person would be rewarded according to his needs. Its immediate tactics of conspiracy and violence, however, were inspired by Bakunin. [Black Banner] attracted its greatest following in the frontier provinces of the west and south. Students,*

*artisans and factory workers predominated, but there were also a few peasants from villages located near the larger towns as well as a sprinkling of unemployed laborers, vagabonds, professional thieves and self-styled Nietzschean supermen. Although many of the members were of Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian nationality, Jewish recruits were in the majority.*

Members of the Black Banner were often very young, the average age being roughly twenty. There were even some active members no older than fifteen or sixteen. These

*restless and primarily youthful individuals, unable to control their rebellious spirits and conform to the rules and discipline of any structured political organization... tended to leave the formal political parties to become anarchists, all questions of ideology and tactics aside (Geifman 124).*

The first anarchists in Bialystok made sure to follow in the footsteps of Bakunin by encouraging criminals and other *lumpen* individuals into their ranks. Petty thieves and criminals swelled into anarchist cadres there by actualizing Bogdanov's assessment:

*they scream, 'down with the expropriators, the robbers, criminals' ... But the time of rebellion will come, and they will be with us. On the barricades, a hardened burglar will be more useful than Plekhanov (Geifman 154).*

Many criminals became anarchists during the intensity of 1905. Similarly as counter-revolution destroyed many anarchist formations those who were able to evade imprisonment, death, and defection began living lives of pure criminality. The anarchists in the Black Banner were also quite uneducated and often came from poor Jewish provincial families. For this reason theoretical primacy and

essentializing that fact is clarifying in a field that specializes in obfuscation.

## Economics

The issue with Marxist economics is not that it's wrong. We understand that its motivation was always political rather than factual. Marx required an active agent for social change so that revolution could be possible. So he created one. Our issue is more basic. We reject the condition that has inculcated economics into the human sphere at all. We despise *Homo economicus* and the philosophers who return to its dialectical condition.

Let's take this a little further (with a caveat). We are not interested in distinctions between good science and bad prescience. There is no good science. There is not a pure thing called science that we anxiously hope for ATR that will solve all the problems of nuclear war and capitalism, that will allow the untrammelled imagination of angelic men to inflict itself onto a world of raw materiel. That said, it is possible to think about the universe in such a way that is beyond the production of new technologies. Imagination is possible and it is worthwhile to discover and explore a world beyond our eyes' capacity to see. A rigorous imagination could allow us to travel further, to ask *why*.

On the one hand there are the natural sciences and they are all well and interesting. It is probable that research in natural science, except for minor exceptions (so small as to be unnoticeable by the monsters of commerce), only benefits those who write the paychecks. On the other are the social sciences which are not so different on this line. There isn't a *People's economics*, there is only economics. A form of alchemy, sure, but to say that civilization is built on subterfuge, illusion, and half-assery isn't to assert anything at all. It is obvious.

sion and relationship. These tensions exist. It's totally fair to say that society is comprised of tension. What's missing is the understanding that the creation of a phenomenon called *society* necessitates tension. The technologies that enable the nation-form include a social body in relative peace (along with communication and transportation infrastructure). This means framing our conflicts with one another in terms that are manageable. This framing is called sociology (or journalism or entertainment) and the Marxist variety is merely a type rather than something entirely different.

At worst this sociological perspective rationalizes all of our behavior. It turns insurrection into a series of object lessons about the excesses of economic expansion and urban planning. It describes, in excruciating detail, what human behavior is, confusing the basic point that economic behavior isn't the same thing as human behavior. It believes in a truth that it also has a hand in constructing.

At best this perspective draws us into conflicts that may or may not be real. Naming something that did not exist before as a single concept is a form of creating. Conflict theory (as with crisis theory), which defines society as the conflict between classes, created this conflict but it wasn't nearly enough to expose the existential conflict between individuals, aggregates, and society. The propertied class existed prior to its description by Marx. Clearly those who work also existed but not as a class and the magic of naming them was not, nor could it ever be, enough to make them a class. This gap—the distance that could be the space of class conflict—is under theorized because its proponents see and *believe* more than they test and reality check.

For those of us who desire some kind of transformation of the world-as-it-is, the centrality of conflict in Marxist sociological theory seems hopeful. Unfortunately, one of Marxism's most notable innovations was the process of *rationalizing* conflict, which Marx(ists) postulate is in the service of a progressive history. All *irrational* conflict is to be subordinated to the final telos. The great strength of Marxism is that conflict in society continues, and

intellectual rigor was not of central importance to the Russian anarchists. Intellectualism was seen largely as bourgeois and an abstraction from the real visceral essence of struggle. Opposed to the socialist and Marxist formations that celebrated theoretical cohesion and dominance, the Black Banner (like other anarchists) believed it more important for any and all comrades to have "combat in his blood"<sup>3</sup>. This unique combination of rebellious individuals who made up the core membership of the Black Banner oriented the group towards an insurgent anarchist-communism that was tactically prepared for the revolution of 1905. While the Black Banner would come to life in other cities, towns and villages it's most popular formation lived and struggled in Bialystok. Nearly every anarchist in the city was a member of or directly affiliated with the Black Banner. This created a unique relationship to conversations and debate about tactics, strategy and the real life nature of anarchy. While in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities multiple anarchist tendencies emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (anarchist communists, syndicalists, individualists, etc) this was not the case in Bialystok. The Black Banner existed as a solitary yet combative organization that developed strategic differences within its own ranks.

Members of the Black Banner generally agreed that their struggle was against a world of all forms of domination. This domina-

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<sup>3</sup> Nearly all socialist and Marxist organizations at the turn of the century in Russia had "battle detachments" to complement their organizations. These detachments were responsible for the terroristic elements of the struggle including but not limited to assassinations, expropriations and bombings. Their activities were highly centralized and in service of a predetermined political goal. However, anarchist groups did not have separate detachments for terrorist activity but instead emphasized the importance of decentralizing terror. This meant that all members engaged in all activities—whether printing newspapers, agitating in the factories or constructing bombs, formal specialization did not exist within the anarchist cadres in the same way it did within the Marxist and Socialist organizations. It was important, especially to the Black Banner, that whoever engaged in a specific action made the decision themselves.

tion was embodied *physically* and *socially* by the bourgeois, police, military, and anyone else who defended bourgeois society. Anarchist communes, in the Kropotkinist sense, were the principal form of the non-capitalist world the Black Banner was struggling for. It was a world without the state apparatus, capital, or capitalists. However all factions within the Black Banner adamantly rejected Social Democratism as much as Kropotkinism which I.S. Grossman-Roshchin, a former Black Banner member from Bialystok refers to as “camouflaged petty bourgeois federalism and minimalism”. The Black Banner therefore undertook the very serious task of violently attacking the bourgeois world they lived in on all fronts. To fund and arm these attacks expropriations were necessary. As the 1905 revolution began to unfold, the Black Banner expropriated arms from gun shops, police stations, and armories. They expropriated funds from banks, factories, stores, and residences of the wealthy. These expropriations allowed members to work less as well as fund their activities through direct attacks on the capitalist system<sup>4</sup>. There was also agreement on the efficacy of political assassination. The social war was one that was total and assassinating police officers, capitalists, and other defenders of the social order

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<sup>4</sup> The existence of and implications of capitalism in Russia is a question all its own. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the way through 1917, major debates existed within the Empire about the future and consequences of Capitalism in Russia. It can be argued that Capitalism in the Western European sense never fully developed within Russia. Still, groups like the Black Banner referred to wealthy Russians as bourgeois and saw their conditions as conditions of class society locked within capitalist social relations. Revolutionaries always debated the potential for Russia to evade or “skip over” the development of the capitalist means of production and social relations. While industrial productive capacities began to be developed in Czarist Russia and create a very small industrial proletariat it was not until the Bolsheviks seized the state apparatus that a newer form of insidious industrial capitalism was developed rapidly in Russia using Marxism—all in the name of “skipping over capitalism” and “building Communism”. This was the fundamental contradiction of Russian Communism: through rapid industrialization Communism would make the traditional historical necessity of capitalism wholly unnecessary).

howl usually looks like a curse or an attempt to abandon a train of thought. I howl alone not because I am alone but because I exult in the joy of... those who are coming.

The formal task of this howl is to dissect Marx into the categories where he is treated as central even if he isn't named as such. The categories we are most concerned about are Marx as Sociologist, Economist, and Political Philosopher. We howl against each category in turn to confirm what the reader may already suspect, which is that we intend to abandon all.

## Sociology

Society is a ghastly will-o'-the-wisp set loose upon the world, consuming individual capacity and desire into measured parts. Society may seem self-evident today but this is only because making it seem self-evident benefitted taxmen and Kings. We are forced into the frame of reference of *society*, which means problem-solving has become impossible, a capacity the State maintains as entirely its own. Therefore sociology, as the study of society, is a mechanism by which big problems are examined and approached by states and the people who love them.

It may be possible to examine the institutions and development of society in such a way that this examination would not be used to improve them but would probably have to be done so abstractly (or counter-culturally) as to be nearly impossible to access (for systems of control). Intellectual pursuits are not the same things as exercises in imagination or open-mindedness. They exist within a context that cannot be extracted from the pursuit itself. The phenomenon known as society did not exist 200 years ago. It exists today as the child of revolutionaries and social engineers, and it cannot exist outside of the Academy or the institutions it services.

Marxist sociology is an understanding of society as a series of classes pressing against each other, like geological plates, in ten-

of the spirit. We would go beyond this. We would question goal orientation entirely because we do not see the logic of the Great Human Project beyond the local, or the individual. The Project has been the source of great suffering. Mostly the suffering of forcing young people off to war or work or whatever.

## Not a critique

We are all philosophers. We have an unquenchable curiosity about the world and our relationship to it. This curiosity isn't objective, and surely not rational. It is a painful thing, a burden, and one of the few things I share with the bureaucrats and tyrants who freely roam the earth. I choose the word "philosophy" to describe this insatiability as a autodidactic declaration that specialists hold no sacred ground here.

Perhaps our approach should be described in another way. The things (whether they be buildings or ideologies) that humans have built have no (intrinsic) value. What (extrinsic) value they have, generally, is due to the violence that frames and fills them. Value is the ability to hurt, punish, and ultimately preserve what exists. It is a conservative impulse. The mechanism by which value is inscribed is beyond (individual) human capacity, it is only possible through the great ennui. Value is a hostile act against us little ones. I howl against it.

The form of this howl is central here. Some may believe that the only howl worth considering is to lash out, alone, against the order of value, gaze, and measurement. An inverted belief is to internalize this order and run away from all rationality as the only way to hold onto the self in the face of impartial de-individuation. The tension of a howl is that it is primal, a feeling as much as a thought; social, intended to collect friends; exultant, a response of health & joy, not fear and sickness. A howl is not a critique, a negation, or sublimation, but a joyful lament about the entire situation. A

were necessary acts in pushing forward the struggle. The elements of the Black Banner who espoused expropriations and assassinations as the only or most important path towards annihilating capitalist social relations were called *bezmotivniki* ("without motive"). They were proponents of these tactics not purely for the sake of revenge or carrying out a specific political task but because the acts themselves embodied the form of attack necessary to destroy capital and the state. Other elements in the Black Banner were referred to as *communary* (communards). They argued for struggling towards the goal of turning Bialystok into another Paris Commune and that expropriations and assassinations should be done in service of this goal. Often the *communary* had close relations with factory workers and saw mass class struggle as an essential avenue for the development and proliferation of anarchist-communes. These differences were formally discussed between Black Banner members from around the Empire at a conference in 1906 with the *bezmotivniki* faction having much more solid support. With bombs, guns, and newspapers the Black Banner would effectively haunt every heart beat of the Russian bourgeoisie and whoever else dare defend the social order of czarist Russia.

The Black Banner waged a successful and unrepentant campaign of terror against the state apparatus and capital as it existed and manifested around the Russian Empire right up until the group disbanded in 1907. In Bialystok this conflict would reach a high intensity, with attacks and counter-attacks becoming the reality of daily life for employees of the state, politicians, capitalists, police officers, workers, and revolutionaries alike. While diffuse struggles and conflicts existed in Bialystok for many years they reached new levels in 1903. That Summer anarchist and socialist workers in Bialystok held meetings in a nearby forest to plan a strategy to resist the increasing numbers of layoffs in the textile mills. One of these meetings was dispersed by the police with brute force. Members of the newly formed Black Banner met to conspire about an appropriate retaliation against the state. Often the Bialystok Black Banner

*assembled in cemeteries, under the pretense of mourning the dead, or in the woods on the outskirts of town, posting guards to warn of approaching danger (Avrich 45).*

And it was at one of these meetings where the Black Banner developed a plan to shoot the Bialystok chief of police. Shortly thereafter the chief was shot though not killed. This would begin a back and forth war of position and force between the Black Banner and local authorities. In the Summer of 1904, with wages and conditions continuing to make life unbearable, weavers at a large spinning mill in Bialystok went on strike. The owner of the mill Avraam Kogan brought scabs to the striking workers and violent scuffles erupted. Nisan Farber, an eighteen year old member of the Black Banner who did not speak a word of Russian and came from a working class background with minimal schooling, attacked Kogan with a knife in front of a synagogue on Yom Kippur. While not killing Kogan, this act exemplified the vengeful desires of the Black Banner. Shortly after this a meeting was called. Radicals of all kind convened in the nearby forest to discuss how to continue antagonistic activity towards Kogan and the spinning mill. The police quickly raided the meeting and many attendees were either arrested or injured. Nisan Farber as a dedicated member of the Black Banner and committed anarchist could not allow for the state to get away with such ruthless behavior. Like many anarchists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Nisan Farber became a proficient bomb maker and utilized this practical skill in his final act of revenge. Shortly after the police raid of the meeting, Farber threw one of his home-made bombs into the front entrance of the police headquarters. Although the bomb injured a number of police officers it also took the young revolutionary's life. His name would not be forgotten among the Black Banner. Instead the name Nisan Farber spread like wildfire among anarchists in the Black Banner along the borderlands. His name was held close to their hearts and as the revolution of 1905 erupted in January their activity reflected his memory.

## A Howl Against Marx

On one level our project here couldn't be easier. We are describing a surface, smooth (if not flat), and we use the word "Marxist" to describe the surface. Then, we describe a vector orthogonal to that surface, and say *that* position is *ours*.

But in fact we have a more complicated project. For many people, ourselves included, Marxism has been the radical *Other* to American hegemony. We may be decades from seeing the world this simply, but we understand that in the polarized and barren landscape of American political analysis this position holds a great deal of resonance for many people. Cold War thinking still dominates our political imagination even if radicals are currently grappling with the implications of French philosophy from the 60s and 70s.

Moreover, for the radical left (and their discontents) Marxism has been the "science" to back up the strategy of mass political action, party politics, and engagement with certain economic sectors above and beyond others (in contradistinction to the passion of the anarchists). Even if the science has been shown to be more and more threadbare and the strategy has lagged far behind, it continues to motivate both bright young minds and stalwart defenders of the flame. To the extent that Marxism is a major component both in the development and thinking of modern economics it has also been one of the few ways one can engage in theory in a serious, lifelong, and practical way.

Finally there are the teleological aspects of Marxism that are easy to reject, starting with the crass generalization of a historical analysis that begins in the Garden and ends in the true communism

## IX

The critique of critique is the gap between what we need and what we can get. If criticism is the razor's edge cutting through what remains of our uncivilized selves then its criticism could very well be the simple act of putting the knife down. Standing still, yes, but also the act of recognizing that those people running around with knives in their hands, may be a danger to themselves and the rest of us.

The critic will of course find flaws in this argument. The terminology around criticism is perhaps not tied together neatly enough. Perhaps «name of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher» has already covered this terrain with far more mastery. But it hasn't been enough. This isn't some modified dictum about what can be accomplished with the master's tools but a lament about the role of recuperation and our role in perfecting it.

The Black Banner immediately went on the offensive elaborating an anarchist communism rooted in unbridled and motiveless terror. Expropriations of funds from bourgeois individuals, professionals, banks, shops, and factories were commonplace. Attempts at liberating imprisoned comrades were well thought out, with elaborate plans that sometimes proved fruitful. When funds were tight

*anarchists occasionally assaulted publishing houses and forced the workers under the threat of immediate execution to print their leaflets and proclamations (Geifman 131).*

Weapons were seized from anywhere they were available. Bombs were made in clandestinity and thrown into the gathering places of the wealthy and elite. Police, military officers, and patrolmen were killed. A member of the Black Banner in Odessa, Ukraine explained this methodology at his trial:

*we recognize isolated expropriations only to acquire money for our revolutionary deeds. If we get the money, we do not kill the person we are expropriating. But this does not mean that he, the property owner, has bought us off. No! We will find him in the various cafes, restaurants, theaters, balls, concerts, and the like. Death to the bourgeois! Always, wherever he may be, he will be overtaken by an anarchist's bomb or bullet (Avrich 48).*

It should come as no surprise that the individuals within the Black Banner meant what they said. In November and December of 1905 the Black Banner took responsibility for bombing a bourgeois hotel in Warsaw and a cafe in Odessa, catching the imagination of other anarchists committed to *bezmotivniki* activity. These two acts were seen as pinnacle examples of *bezmotivniki* and were

widely celebrated as such. So inspired by these acts in 1906 the anarchists in Bialystok devised a plan to place explosives along the main drag of the city so “all the main bourgeois would be blown up into the air” (Geifman 133). While this plan was never actualized similar attacks upon the bourgeoisie and defenders of the state occurred regularly. The intensity and violence of this activity immediately prior, during, and following the revolution of 1905 struck fear into the hearts of the bourgeois and police. Fatal attacks on police detachments in broad daylight became commonplace. This tactic of directly attacking police also separated the Black Banner from the various socialist camps—socialist terrorists and militants for the most part confined their activity to the economic realm (factories, shops, banks, etc) whereas the anarchists found it equally if not more necessary to direct their activity against the state apparatus. This worked in the favor of the Bialystok anarchists. Between September 1905 and March 1906 martial law was imposed in Bialystok as a way to calm the revolutionary fervor. For fear of their own life the police refused to enter Surazhskaya St., the neighborhood densely populated by anarchists. The ferocious activity of the Black Banner created conditions for a relative safety during a terribly difficult time. Similarly the police stayed away from the area during the brutal Bialystok pogrom of 1906. As the czarist army laid the city under siege and Jews were being senselessly and brutally attacked, the predominantly Jewish Black Banner used this as an opportunity to wage attacks and destabilize the local police forces.

As the 1905 revolution came to a close and counter-revolution haunted all corners of the Russian Empire, anarchist networks began to disintegrate and decompose. Prison, death, and the realities of czarist repression made the Black Banner’s diffuse web of insurgent cadres unable to exist as they had during the revolution of 1905. Some took their skills of expropriation and thievery and began a life of pure criminality. Others met the dark fate of jail cells and caskets. A few continued their activities in the margins, evad-

with the facility to manage knowledge domains rather than to engage in thinking with sensitivity and severity.

But it’s worse than this. At some point the capacity to stand outside of the things we love and hate, to take on “observer” as a perpetual role, becomes a position itself. To float ethereally above the fray of mere humans, of takers of positions, becomes an identity, maintaining the borders of the negative position as aggressively as the positive positions it alleges to counter.

Criticism would like to see itself as the opposite of ideology and a negator of the existent; it is in fact a tool of ideology and an agent of discipline against clear positions. Postmodernism, in particular, has a structural bias towards *mobility*. The mobile (or transitory) nature of political or philosophical positions, careers, or friends means that it is now the very act of standing still that is considered the impossible (or naïve) position. The critic is the *realist* who makes everything else seem absurd.

## VIII

Perhaps criticism is merely an amateur form of philosophy, often done by professionals. A search for Truth that cloaks its irrelevance by speaking of more topical matters. Perhaps it is the codependent activity of a population addicted to theory and to the desire to make that addiction be seen as relevant to life in general. But it’s a confusion.

Criticism is not thinking. It’s not the only way to evaluate the world. It is not critical of itself. It is a particular metaphysical project: perhaps a Hegelian one, possibly one that has been thrust out of the earth by Plato & Socrates. Either way, we aren’t compelled to obey it nor forced to rest atop it.

## VI

For the hobbyist critic all of this might sound like a little much. One of the advantages of not getting paid is not being answerable to the paymaster. The great thing about being irrelevant, because one's project is so small, is that one can't be accused of being domineering or oppressive.

Out here, in the wilderness, our critical faculties are more likely to be seen as under- rather than over-utilized. A critical reading of material is synonymous with reading material deeply, intentionally, closely. This world seems to have lost the capacity to read at all, therefore a call against critical reading doesn't seem to make sense. This world seems to have lost the capacity to think, so a call against critique, especially in so far as it is a call against the false opposition of anti-, will be accused of being a call against thinking. But critique is not synonymous with thinking.

## VII

At best, critique is a form of wishful discussion posing as thinking. The fact that our culture fears discussion and instead materializes thinking by way of commodity is demonstrative. Not that critique is an effective form of engagement-thinking, but that on the one hand you have the world of thingism and on the other a shadow world that no longer seeks the light.

At worst, critique is a form of the worst kind of selfcongratulatory bloviation. One does not need to know who Agamben is to understand our state of perpetual emergency, who the Situationists are to understand modern alienation, or who Marx is to know that we have been truly hoodwinked by the confusion between economics and human relations. This is a particular problem with para-criticism where the quality of an analysis is often confused

ing czarist security forces and reconceiving of how to keep struggle alive.

*The Russian Anarchists*, Paul Avrich, 1967, Princeton University Press

*Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia 1894–1917*, Anna Geifman, 1995, Princeton University Press

# A critique OF critique

## I

A critique of critique has a few tasks to perform. It must categorize the several types of critique and speak to the aspects of each type it is concerned with. It must pick sides in both an historical and a metaphysical project. Finally it has to justify itself outside of the rarified terms it alludes to. Is it fish or fowl, position or region, open or closed?

## II

Critique as career—whether professional or ideological—is our primary target, but we hope for collateral damage also. Critique is not the same thing as thinking, no matter what the specialists tell you.

## III

There is a rich tradition of critique in the Western metaphysical universe. In this tradition each new generation treats as an important part of its coming of age not only their allegedly full comprehension of the past (of the context, knowledge, and mistakes of past generations), but a kind of destruction of what came before. Not that it really destroys the past—or is it even intended to, really. The idea that domain mastery includes an appraisal and negotiation of the domain itself, is tied into most fields of knowledge.

This critique allows the space for young turks to do what they will do, which is rebel against orthodoxy and against the past, while digging out enough space so they can call something their own, somewhere they will be buried later: a place they can take ownership of, with their *fresh and new<sup>tm</sup>* insights.

## IV

What begins as rejection (or even revulsion) becomes articulated as critique, rationalized as debate, and eventually, if it is a qualified insight, part of the knowledge domain itself. While the hard sciences valorize this process (calling it the “scientific method” and implying that this process is central to rigorous domain expansion), the academy as a whole thrives on each new generation coming forward, hat in hand, begging for a portion of the resources and patience of the University in exchange for the energy and exuberance of their youth. In exchange for recognition, all that each generation of empiricists and critics sacrifice is their capacity for life/thought outside of this recognition.

## V

The managers of this process aren’t fools. They are political creatures forged into shape by circumstance, privilege, and disposition. They recognize hostility from a far distance and have a thousand techniques to deflect it, block it, dis-possess it, and ultimately turn it into its opposite. Dialectics is a worthy foe in this regard; it is battle tested. Moreover the myth that between here and tomorrow is the hard work of people like you and me—of our progressive mission, and new & improved ideas—is a trap. It traps us into serving those who profit from all of this work, it traps us into believing in the work itself, it traps us in a bind of others’ designs.

Various Authors  
Attentat  
A journal of collision  
2013

<[www.libcom.org/article/attentat](http://www.libcom.org/article/attentat)>

An anonymously written journal composed of essays on nihilist ideas, history, strategy, and critique.

Attentat is intended to explore the collision between anarchist and nihilist ideas. The position itself is more about the collision than about words (or labels). For too long we have suffered the limitations of words and identities that collapse into insignificance. That crumble before gaining the corresponding heft of a weapon or tool one is led to believe they will develop into. The big ideas the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have to be recognized as not important in the same way anymore. Still around, haunting, but not on the tips of our tongues or the back of our minds. Attentat explores a history and set of ideas intended to collide with what exists and to explode.

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theory into practice”, specifying the four conditions sine qua non of that elaboration that the revolutionary was to bring together, to wit: courage, perseverance, creativity, and “materiality” (meaning something like common sense). The Milan gathering in October of 1985 around the motto “Anarchism and the Insurrectional Project” allowed Bonanno to expound his vision of the transformations of capitalism in broad strokes. The ease with which he employed trivial ideas made fashionable by American sociology (for example, describing society as “post-industrial”) and the professorial tone he took on are surprising. In his intervention we can read this bit of nonsense: “From the productive point of view capital’s capacity is no longer based on the resources of financial capital, on investment in other words, but is essentially based on intellectual capital” (“From Riot to Insurrection”). Believe it or not, Bonanno was repeating the words of Professor Negri. “Capital no longer needs to rely on the traditional worker as an element in carrying out production” so “[...] workers have been displaced from their central position. First, timidly, in the sense of a move out of the factory into the whole social terrain [Negri again]. Then, more decisively, in the sense of a progressive substitution of the secondary manufacturing sector by the tertiary services sector.” One wonders if he knew what he was saying, since tertiary services have nothing to do with production, but Bonannist prose has always been a tortured prose, above all when it theorizes. According to him, the working class was progressively moving to the margin of production, losing its protagonism; also, the revolution could just as well happen as not, since in post-industrial society the relation of cause and effect between struggles and their outcomes disappeared. Bonanno had noticed the uprisings of marginal districts in English cities and gratuitously pontificated about the anarchists’ task: “to transform irrational situations of riot into an insurrectional and revolutionary reality” (*ibid*). The matter was shelved indefinitely, but I have already said that theory is not his forte and, having to regularly fill up a couple of publications, he unscrupulously pro-

ceeded with the materials he was pirating. For example, in 1987 he copied the layout and typography of the magazine *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* for the new series of *Anarchismo*, which would be a harmless anecdote were it not for the fact that three articles of the *EdN* were copied in two successive issues of Bonanno's organ. Unexplained cuts, abusive interpolations, arbitrary revisions and numerous unintentional errors forced the *EdN* to propagate a communiqué that concluded "Those who, showing off a critique that is not their own, begin by concealing its origin as much as possible, as well as hiding the struggles from which it emerges and the relations they imply, show, in this way, that they are not capable of using this critique and discovering the secrets of their time, or of understanding the diverse specialized operations of spectacular democracy. Where fiction rules the large stage, small falsifications are of no importance. We nevertheless take advantage of the occasion to declare our modest conviction that the latter explain the triumph of the former, and that the collapse of the former comes through the end of the latter." Such trifles did not concern Bonanno. His problem was, on one hand, "attack", and, on the other, the police's attempts to implicate him in various attentats.

He was the first agitator since Blanqui to declare the possibility of an offensive against Power during a complete retreat of the working class. It was evidently an attempt to escape historical conditions through the overwhelming action of minorities. The main role was, according to Bonanno, to be given to informal groups, the only ones capable of acting effectively. The masses were not interested in revolutionary revelry. He condemned mass demonstrations as peaceful and useless; in their place, in addition to demonstrations "organized in the insurrectional way" he called for "the need for small destructive acts, for direct attack against the structures of capital." The responsibility for those attacks should be fully taken on by the groups and not depend on favorable or unfavorable consequences, or the level of general consciousness. The decision to directly attack Capital and the State was the business of revolu-

tionaries, repositories of the insurrectional essence of conflict. “We either attack or retreat. We either accept the class logic of the clash as an irreducible counter-position or move backwards towards negotiation and verbal and moral deception” (“Propulsive Utopia”). If they wanted to live their lives, liberate their instincts, negate bourgeois ideals, satisfy their authentic needs or whatever other trivialities from the liberated vocabulary of the dissatisfied rebels, words were not enough. Anarchists had to overcome the political and moral barriers that impeded them from acting. Bonanno described such efforts as “the great work of liberating the new ethical man” (“The Moral Fracture,” in his magazine *Provocazione*, March 1988). He disdained assembly-style methods because they slowed down or stopped the more decisive actions; he also disdained initiatives that sought to bring together the maximum number of adherents: “the mania for quantity”. For that reason he paid no attention to the protest movements at the base, such as the COBAS [*Confederazione dei Comitati di Base*], constituted in November 1987. The Bonannist model was that of the “self-managed leagues” formed at the beginning of the eighties by the people of Comiso (Sicily) to oppose an American missile base. They were informal “nuclei” advised by anarchists with only one objective: the destruction of the military base. With no program, autonomous (ie independent of parties, unions, or any other entity), they remained in “permanent conflict” with domination and “attacking” without engaging in dialogue, negotiations, or agreements. Probably so as to distinguish them from non-immediately destructive struggles, he called these sorts of conflicts “intermediate struggles”, to contrast them with others with wider objectives, motivated by the “insurrectional task”, like the “struggle against technology” that resulted in the dynamiting of more than one hundred high voltage towers between 1986 and 1988. The translation of a German pamphlet that detailed how to blow up one of these towers earned Bonanno a new stay in prison. In the campaign of the pylons, in which rebels of various countries participated, the mania for quantity returned through the

back door: the syndicalists counted membership cards, and the activists, bombings. The quantitative spirit prevailed equally in all. For the efficacy of an attack does not depend on the number of explosions, nor on the degree of destruction brought about. There are not “intermediate” struggles and real struggles; there are practical struggles and useless struggles— struggles that awaken the consciousness of oppression and struggles that put it to sleep. The police was unable to implicate Bonanno in any violent act, but it did treacherously implicate him in a jewelry store robbery. He was arrested on February 2, 1989, and freed without charges two years later. Once free, he seized the opportunity to travel to Spain and put the final touches on insurrectionalism, an ideology that had its influence in the anarchist milieu of various countries where anarchism was stagnant, dormant, and controlled by factions.

In 1992, Bonanno and other comrades decided to take a qualitative leap in “attack”, seizing an “organizational occasion”. To that end, they brought together the group that instigated an Anti-Authoritarian Insurrectionalist International. The word “Insurrectionalist” appeared for the first time. In January 1993, he traveled to Greece and presented two lectures to university students in Athens and Thessalonica in which he explained “why we are insurrectionalist anarchists”. Here is the insurrectionalist ideology summed up in six bullet points:

- ▶ Because we consider it possible to contribute to the development of struggles that are appearing spontaneously everywhere, turning them into mass insurrections, that is to say, actual revolutions.
- ▶ Because we want to destroy the capitalist order of the world which, thanks to computer science restructuring, has become technologically useful to no one but the managers of class domination.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

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► Because we are for the immediate, destructive attack against the structures, individuals and organizations of Capital and the State.

► Because we constructively criticize all those who are in situations of compromise with power in their belief that the revolutionary struggle is impossible at the present time.

► Because rather than wait, we have decided to proceed to action, even if the time is not ripe.

► Because we want to put an end to this state of affairs right away, rather than wait until conditions make its transformation possible

(“The Insurrectional Project”)

The idea of an organization, the elements of which had been being formulated for the last twentyfive years, completed the ideology. Bonanno just stuck it into a label-sticker with which many would be unhappy. “The revolutionary anarchist insurrectionalist organization” consists of affinity groups formed in times of struggle with the goal “of carrying out specific coordinated actions against the enemy” and “aimed at creating the best conditions for mass insurrection”. The insurrectionary character is granted by “permanent conflictuality,” that is, knowing one is at war with the oppression of capitalism and the State. Such groups will rely on “base nuclei”, the old Bonannist idea, whose function “to take the place of the old trade union resistance organizations—including those who insist on the anarcho-syndicalist ideology—in the ambit of intermediate struggles” in a terrain consisting of “what is left of factories, neighborhoods, schools, social ghettos, and all those situations that materialize class exclusion.” For Bonanno, it was the destructive aspect, not the degree of consciousness provoked in the masses that established the appropriateness of the action. So it goes without saying that the preferred form is sabotage, “the classic weapon of

all the excluded” (“Another Turn of the Capitalist Screw”), valid for any occasion and good for all ages. Sabotage is like desire—it has neither schedule nor calendar date.

Analyses of social reality continue to be Bonanno’s unfinished business. He states there is no “factory mentality” and asserts the “deskilling” of the individual and the “pulverization” of the working class, so he thinks it unfounded to refer to “ridiculous dichotomies such as that between bourgeoisie and proletariat”, only to move from there to similar dichotomies taken from pop sociology: “specific social reality.. always presents a constant: the class division between dominators and dominated, between included and excluded.” The dichotomies do not stop there, since he alludes to “the confrontation between rich countries and poor countries” that takes on, or tends to take on, the form of national liberation struggles or religious wars. This confrontation, occasioned by capitalism’s incapacity to “resolve the economic problems of poor countries”, leads him to find positive aspects in nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, whose brief appearances around the Mediterranean lead him to conclude that this will be the “theater of the coming social confrontations”. Reading newspapers has convinced him that he is an expert in geopolitics, since he claims, without bothering to prove it, that in the Mediterranean countries “conflicts will develop that will be able to heighten the tensions already underway”; he does not clarify if they will be conflicts between classes or states (probably both) but in any case they will have to be confronted with the most adequate practice: the insurrectional one (“Proposal for a Debate” 1993). Actually, Bonanno is referring to the Palestinian conflict, in which he has placed great hopes. As always, armed struggle, having attained the heights to acquire a global vision, remains in the clouds of Third-Worldism.

I say that revolutions, in societies of class antagonism, are made by the oppressed masses, not by formal or informal minorities. Organization will be the product of social struggles, not the artificial fruit

A new definition of attentat would be an act, any act really, that does not concern itself with cause-and-effect but with inspiration: not the inspiration of the song or a revelation of a higher power but of the overloading of a moment with the kind of aggregation of feelings that transforms a moment into a lifetime.

one's self as unique. It seems like a biased avoidance of nurturing and the pack. It seems like wishful thinking that, true or not, has consequences on the potential of pack behavior and mental and emotional health.

We concern ourselves with questions of causality because they give lie to all programmaticism. Whether it be capitalist happiness derived from consumption of material goods, socialist evolution through doing more good things and fewer bad things, or identitarian belief in fixed human essences. The desire to fit humans, their experiences, bodies, potential into equations where the right side of the equal sign is declared the result of a cause determined by someone else seems central to the politics of this time.

## attentat

But what's not visible in all of these words, in all of this baggage, is the unstoppable feeling. The world of imagination may not be possible but the tactile need to experiment is.

Our mission, if we can lower ourselves to such a mundane form, is to experiment to no end. To test the fabric of social life to the point of tearing and beyond. To push moralists to the brink and drink of their misery. And yes, to continue empirical relationships with the planet and the people on it.

The mistake of our antecedents was to limit our actions to those comprehensible by others. It was a lack of imagination that constrained attentat to a mere political program. Sure it could also be a cultural, conceptual, or scientific program but instead it should be one of explosive imagination. Everything in this world is boring because we are constrained by the deception of cause-and-effect. The unfettering of our actions from moral and political consequence is to dissect that deception with our bodies.

...

of activist voluntarism or propaganda. If the times are not ripe, it is because there are no movements of conscious masses. Because we can't do better, we do what we can, but the lack of massive struggles will never be compensated for by the activism of a few groups. A strategic defense would be to organize the theater of social war with the objective of fighting the class enemy. That would mean to free up spaces for the development of consciousness in the masses, that is to say, for the emergence of autonomous struggles. In the opposite context, activism not only substitutes for such struggles, it sets itself up as the radical spectacle of such struggles. As much as it tries to contribute to the resurgence of revolutionary protest, it prepares the terrain for its perversion. This incredible confusion of insurrectionalist theses was unacceptable, but the inconsistency and superficiality of the analyses did not matter to Bonanno, possessed by a desire for action that he was able to transmit to anarchists disappointed by the inactivity of traditional organizations. They became followers of his ideas, beyond all logic, especially because logic was not their most attractive characteristic. Insurrectionalism permeated certain youth milieus not because of its lucidity or theoretical superiority. Nor did it do so through the efficacy of its actions, often seasoned with the vinegar of prison and personal tragedy. Even less so because the Mediterranean prophecy came true. The reasons for its relative success were of a psychological nature: those who wanted action got action. Action had something of an emotional release to it. Bonanno had realized that "anarchism is a tension, not a realization" (*The Anarchist Tension*, talk in Cuneo, January 1995), and he insisted on this fact. Bonanno described the anarchist coming to consciousness as an "insurrection of a personal nature, that illumination which produces an ideaforce inside us," a kind of revelation that determined a way of life and not simply a way of seeing things. It produced an intimate liberation, the elevation to a state of anarcho-grace that helped to free oneself from the bonds of one's surroundings: "insurrectionalism is a personal thing; each one should accomplish their own insurrection, modify

their own ideas, transform the reality that surrounds him, beginning with the family, with school, which are structures that keep us imprisoned...” (Interview with Bonanno on Radio Onda Rossa, 20 November 1997, trans. modified). Anarchists, if they wanted to be real anarchists, had to question themselves daily in terms of what they did and what they thought, since doing and thinking could not go separately. Either “metaphysics” or anarchism—that is, action. Action therefore took on an existential dimension. An anarchist without action was like a garden without flowers, or like an officer without a uniform. Why stop, if one was in “permanent conflictuality”? Action became a moral criterion: one was a good anarchist or a bad anarchist depending on whether one did or did not act. *Bonannism*, that peculiar revolutionary version of *American do it yourself*, offered all the charms of sectarian militancy with none of its organic servitudes. The lack of true social movements was not so much a handicap as a condition of insurrectionalism: the illegal character of agitation suggested, for obvious reasons a certain distance from prosaic work with masses. An extreme individualism called “autonomy” protected the professional anarchist from all critique (a few passages from Stirner perhaps tended to reinforce it). The insurrectos could believe themselves to be in the limelight whatever the relevance or pointlessness of their actions; because they were indifferent to the masses, they had no one to answer to. They were their only judges. Due to a historical irony, old Bonanno has survived his contradictions and defects, thanks to acne.

The Insurrectionalist International met in Athens in fall 1996, a little before or a little after Bonanno was imprisoned for belonging to an armed group. Repressive forces had also begun to act, with detentions and media-judicial montages beginning in 1994. *Anarchismo* had stopped coming out, but in *Cane nero*, published in Florence, the different informal factions of the International momentarily converged. The insurrectionalists had overestimated the revolutionary possibilities of the Mediterranean countries and un-

at all. But the math on impossibility is clear. Technology has made the management of crowds, information, and capacity more centralized than ever. The cultural difference, at least in this country, between those who lead and those who are led—combined with this incredible complex of integrated systems and technologies—makes utopian ideologies seem childlike.

Anything less complex than the spectacular, cybernetic, late capitalism of this world is hopelessly naïve and simplistic. It would necessitate untold violence and brutality. It would tear asunder the illusions of two hundred years of humanistic, rights-based social organization.

Even if we could accept the progressive myth that a better world lies on the other side of this militaristic and social barrier, we wouldn’t. The entire structure of this thinking—time is on a line, rights are a real thing (not a bargain with the state for good behavior), and a better world is in the future (or after death), and we are part of the thinking that constructed this thing—accepts too much. We are not outliers of a tradition that could make room for us. We are barbarians who see the jeweled city for what it is—shit.

We accept that there is no future because *now* has been constructed by the jeweled city. Revolution is impossible not because humans aren’t beautiful snowflakes but because it’s defined in terms of the jeweled city and not outside of it.

### III.

We are hesitant etiologists. Our critical engagement with causality has led us to suspect its ontological centrality in the social and material sciences. To put a point on it, we believe in neither where we came from nor in where we’re going.

The cosmology of the modern man is of willful self creation. Love of Nietzsche aside, this scans as absolute absurdity. It ignores all the moments (eg childhood) prior to the ability to articulate

## I.

We would like to believe that our position is an active challenge to ideological thinking. This means that we maintain a willingness to challenge constitutive values, ideas, and actions. It also means that we recognize that the systems no longer hold the center. Anti-ideological dialecticians spend as much time constructing systems to oppose... Strike that, they spend far more time constructing hobgoblins than fighting them.

We begin with hostility. Active, aggressive, and engaged hostility with the puffed up men of ideas, religious thinkers, and sycophants to dead total systems. Sure, the employed gravediggers are the worst, but the hobbyists aren't much better. Taking them down a peg can confuse our hostility with their goals. Indeed a goal is to destroy those bewitched by ideology, but hostility is not the same thing as destruction.

The correct use of the contingent tool is to recognize the terrain that ideology occupies and either work around it, surround it, or plant seeds. Fighting ideologists is one of the clearest ways for them to win.

## II.

The simplest definition of our position, it is that revolution is both desirable and impossible. But revolution hasn't been possible since 1917. This doesn't mean that there can't be a changing of the guard; in fact most of the time what is called "revolution" is just that—a contest of who gets to grab a chair when the music stops.

Is that the same thing as impossible? It depends on the scale of one's imagination and capacity and unfortunately, usually these two things have an inverse relationship. The more one can imagine a different world for example, the less capable one tends to be in achieving even a different household. The more capable one is the less likely one is to imagine much of a social transformation

derestimated the repressive abilities of an overequipped State. The most basic kind of strategy would have posed this question first of all: could insurrectionalist practice survive the repression that was about to break out? Of course not. The Marini trial was the Italian State's response to the insurrectionalist pinprick. There were similar responses in Greece and Spain (Bonanno did not pull a Fanelli: insurrectionalism had its debut here with the Córdoba robbery fiasco in 1996). Bonanno left prison in October 1997. The divergences between the different groups, exacerbated by repression, blew up as could have been predicted. The International met a second time in 2000 somewhere in Italy and concluded its existence. Four years later the Marini trial ended with harsh sentences for most of the defendants. Nevertheless, in one way or another the insurrectionalists keep at it and have not forgotten their prisoners. "Offer flowers to the rebels who failed," Vanzetti said. My critiques do not prevent me from acknowledging his courage, and our disagreement is not an obstacle for me in demanding his freedom.

*Written at the request of some friends. Finished between March and August 2007.*

*From Desde abajo y desde fuera. Proyectiles. Brulot, 2007.*

# Insurrectionary Anarchism as Activism

## 1

We have translated and published this article by Miguel Amorós for two reasons. First, because it is a historical exposé on the origins of Bonanno-style insurrectionalism. This is of some interest: many of the fans of Bonanno's highly quotable writing seem not to know much about his history. This piece ought to prove informative, and perhaps troubling in parts.

The second reason for publishing this article is that it comprises a thoroughgoing critique of the founding assumptions of the insurrectionalist outlook. This critique of insurrectionalist ideology, of insurrectionalism as ideology, is what truly interests us in the piece, and why it is included in *Attentat*.

Amorós critiques the hidden activist ideology in insurrectionalism through the figure of Bonanno. Bonanno has had significant influence in the US, and all over the world, for that matter, but we are not interested in tracing his influence in particular. What concerns us is the lack of self-critique in insurrectionalist thinking, which affirms all action so long as it may be classed as an attack.

Let us first give credit where credit is due. Like Amorós, though probably from a very different position, we can say that insurrectionaries are perhaps the closest to our own position. That is, we might be doing what they do if we thought there was any chance it would make a difference. That we do not do what they do does not mean we cannot respect their courage and audacity. Consider

change is possible. Even if we were to remove the guns, clubs, and video cameras of the current regime the scale of momentum necessary for political change is no longer possible. There are too many conflicting perspectives (state, sectarian, economic, cultural) that affect mass society in a way that libertarians could never accept.

Therefore the politics of participation is over. Any project the size of mass society was a fiction anyway. Our question, as always, is how to destroy this fiction. In this is the difference between nihilism and skepticism: a skeptic would ask whether society should be destroyed, a nihilist asks how. The small detail, the yet-to-be resolved issue, is that somewhere around the desire to destroy is the hope that it would make a difference. That we can take an action that would *matter*. Perhaps the small detail is an existential one: do we matter?

What term can we use to describe our rejection of the impossible, while desiring it? We despise Christians for their sacrifice and their proselytizing for more sacrifice. The same could be said for revolutionaries who put off living until the redemption of man. But we don't despise the bourgeoisie with nearly the same venom for their insistence to live today. Perhaps the difference is hope.

## three point plan

Our goal here continues to be to define a set of contingent tools. A way for our friends and comrades to apply some of this thinking into a practice that is hostile and engaged. Tools, not answers, with an emphasis on building. Whether that building takes the form of siege weaponry, social institutions, or personal skills is more or less irrelevant. What's not irrelevant is the transition between big talk (with no capacity) to less talk (and greater capacity).

to hipster: vivacious naïve engagement becomes world-weary sadness and then the post-apocalyptic vacuousness near-politics of the critic—separate, cyber-knowledgeable self-satisfied.

When a nihilist declares that they can do anything, some may hear a threat. Strategically the act of making a threat is a foolish one and in our time of data mining it's a ridiculous one. A threat instead should be hidden in ellipses, implied rather than declared, but it must be there for the friendly reader to make the connection. On the other hand, the critic declares nothing (a passive nothing at that), does nothing foolish or threatening. A critic's connection to the world, to action, lives entirely in the arena of reaction. A Critic is a troll by other means.

## the continuing appeal of hope

We come to our position from the context of testing the limits of pre-existing positions. It was a recognition that even the meager possibilities of social-democratic change are impossible in winner-takes-all democracy that led us to anarchism. It was a refusal for settling that led us to revolutionary anarchism. But we always knew it was impossible. We just preferred the impossibility of what we truly desired to the impossibility of healthcare, social peace, and accommodation with mass culture.

This impossibility is what guides our thinking today. Impossibility is a pressure with two directions. Conceptually the pressure against a utilitarian perspective is deep and wide. It forces one to recognize the pernicious ways that Protestant Christianity has inculcated itself into all aspects of so-called radical politics. It also confronts us with the recognition that political change often, if not always, has unforeseen consequences or (to put it more bluntly) serves a different master than the believers, financiers, or even the politicians who serve it. Practically, we don't live in an era where utopian or even liberal (in the broadest sense of the word) political

it warmly acknowledged. Amorós attributes courage and a sense of humor to Bonanno, and we will repeat the gesture: we appreciate many things insurrectionaries in the US have said and done.

That does not mean we are inclined to agree with their analysis.

## 2

If we are to believe Amorós, Bonanno-style insurrectionalism appeared in Italy and elsewhere through a critique of syndicalist methods. Its autonomous base nuclei are a direct response to practical questions that were to some extent shared with the older generations of red anarchists and more or less anti-state communists. But beyond such organizational questions (notably the aspect of specifically Bonanno-style insurrectionalism that has had the least impact here) we may also observe a theoretical genesis. Here Amorós is brutal in his critique.

To reduce the critique to a dialectical argument Amorós does not quite make, it was the failure to absorb or properly respond to the negativity of Situationist critiques against the libertarian left that allowed the left to return in a peculiar form, one that still emphasized a very loose form of organization, but above all action and spontaneity. This is what the US milieu has inherited—or interpreted—in the form of “crews” and “attack.”

In the US, the bulk of the current generation of insurrectionary anarchists (in word and deed) transitioned into their current position not out of a milieu of anarcho-syndicalists and anti-state communists, and certainly not in any active debate with urban guerilla partisans, but largely from the activist post-anti-globalization left, the DIY/skillshare subculture of practical anarchy, and the diffuse, prevailing idea of anarchism centered on an unlikely mix of collectives, identity politics, and consensus process.

We would like to ask whether the meaning of insurrection and of insurrectionary approaches varies accordingly.

Amorós praises Bonanno's courage in not backing down after the wave of repression in the early eighties. But he rightly criticizes him for a complete failure of analysis before the circumstances. All Bonanno said at that time was the same thing he had said before. There was no lesson in failure. But his approach seemed more radical, more important—and not only to himself—because others were backing down.

And to the degree that he was saying something, he was unwittingly parroting a diluted vanguardist line. Amorós accurately pinpoints the vague echo of such a line in the commonplaces of insurrectionalism. If the masses were not revolting, it was up to a more advanced group to revolt first. From these ideas, it is not far to say the group that attacks has the consciousness that the masses lack, and that they are not only revolting first but *for* them, so that they may see the open possibility of revolt. The vanguard no longer leads, it attacks first. Is it not still a vanguard? From this we get what Amorós ironically calls Bonanno's great theoretical discovery: that any action that can be undertaken, should be.

For Amorós this motto bespeaks a separation between theory and practice: "The separation of theory and practice reduced one to a simple accompaniment and the other to mere technique." The acts are technique, reduced to what can be easily done and reproduced. And reproducibility is perhaps what has gotten the US milieu to make the most reproducible acts (window smashing, for example) into its currency.

Amorós calls insurrectionalism "an ideology that had its influence in the anarchist milieus of various countries where anarchism was stagnant, dormant, and controlled by factions." To whatever degree it has succeeded in the US, then, it is because of these factors: reproducibility (practice as mere technique), and stagnation (theory as accompaniment—the weakness of new anarchist theory in

those of us who despise flags and violence there will be nothing to hide behind when we act.

### whose ironic muscle is the biggest

*Nihilists are trapped in the same circuit of dualism as moralists. They say 'having negated god, I can do anything I choose.' Actually, they could do anything they chose beforehand too. Indeed, the fact Christians hardly followed God's dictates should be a clue. Nihilists probably took God more seriously than the average Christian since they believed breaking God's rules meant something.*

Somewhere between *The Big Lebowski* and *The Matrix* lies the extent of the modern North American political imagination. On the one hand, it's read a few books and knows what's up with Baudrillard, Plato, and *Neuromancer*. On the other, it knows that it's not a big deal, it's all cool, and whatever.

The simple point made in this criticism is that we do not need a new vocabulary to be free. It's unnecessary to spend a whole lot of time connecting ourselves to historical tradition, to other people's baggage, or to a whole jargon set that isn't really that descriptive anyways. Instead we can just be what we want to be.

Well, fucking duh.

One takes (abstract and arbitrary) positions not because they are necessary but because we use them to test ourselves. We do difficult things as a way to interrogate our imagination. Our play is intended to be rough and tumble, to inflict bruises, to lose teeth.

Moralists judge without doing (they send functionaries to do that). Our proposition would be that the doing (being) is the interesting activity and the judging turns out to be not so interesting at all. This has been perhaps the greatest limitation of the radical imagination from the cultural shift from hippie to punk

universal. We can go further and say that the two terms can nearly be used interchangeably.

The criticism that could be made of attentat is that the result of an attack against an individual or a series of individuals is at best not predictable, and at worst has a predictably reactionary result. There are few examples of attacks against civilians that have not resulted in a consolidation of state power, an increase in misery for those impacted by this consolidation, and (if we accept imaginary units of measurement) a decrease in freedom.

On the other hand, in war and in bullying (for example, the US military versus the Islamic world) attentats are seen as entirely appropriate. Taking out enemy combatants and military targets is seen as exactly the right thing to do.

The terms by which we measure **right** are completely different in these contexts. What is right is not a measure of the value of human life but of what an actor can get away with.

In our heightened condition of statist terror, we (its enemies) can get away with very little. Even the sharing of these words has to be very hesitant and measured because we know that eventually these words will be connected with this body and there will be consequences. The freedom to act is political, which means it is entirely dominated by a monopoly on violence. It's also why speech is never free.

Violence is often framed as a topic about values and what is right but it's really a conversation about the extent to which we accept the power relationship between the state and those whose lives are imposed upon by the state. It is not our central proposition that attentats can, will, or should be the way to confront the state. We are not capable of the horror show that would require.

When moral terms are used to describe the violence that an individual inflicts upon others, but not to describe the violence inflicted by the state (or any other social abstraction), then the speaker is raising a flag—usually a nationalist one, but not necessarily. For

the years when insurrectional writings were gaining traction in the US). Clearly, sadly, one feeds the other.

#### 4

Amorós' critique of this ideology, this pro- "action, any action" approach combined with a weak and separated analysis comes down to saying that its supposition is wrong. "I say that revolutions, in societies of class antagonism, are made by the oppressed masses, not by formal or informal minorities." We prefer not to take sides on this issue, since we are not sure what is meant by revolution; but the least we can say is that we have yet to see insurrectionary acts be anything more than themselves—anything more than reproducible. Those who imitate them are influenced by the same simplistic ideas. The masses remain motionless.

If North American insurrectionaries were to undertake and explain their actions differently, as something done for their own satisfaction, or from an advocacy of destruction for its own sake, we would no longer consider this critique relevant. But to continue to suggest that revolt will spread because easily reproducible actions do deserve a skepticism like that of Amorós. His critique of the mutated vanguardism of insurrectionalism is that its "activism not only substitutes for such struggles, it also sets itself up as the radical spectacle of such struggles." We would only say that we are even *more* skeptical, because we have no idea how revolutions are really made, or if a revolution is what we want as opposed to a more comprehensive undoing of the world as we know it. To Amorós' anti-vanguardist, Situationist-influenced critique, we add our nihilist one: we don't even know if the conscious masses are possible.

We could therefore call many if not all of US insurrectionary anarchists activists, if only because their adherence to the simple idea of taking action is ideological. That ideology, the faith in action

as opposed to waiting (there is a difference between waiting for the masses and waiting because conditions are uncertain), should be called activism, shouldn't it?

We agree with Amorós when he suggests that what is attractive about such activism is the psychological satisfaction it brings about: those who want action get action. It is easy to claim that the action was important, relevant, or liberatory after the fact, especially if there is a poorly thought through analysis that helps you to say so. Action is intrinsically meaningful; this is what Amorós calls its "existential dimension." It is right to act, and wrong not to; this is what he calls action as a "moral criterion."

## 5

We became convinced that this text had serendipitously folded itself into our collection when we read the sentence in which Amorós writes that insurrectionary anarchism is a "peculiar revolutionary version of American 'do it yourself' [that] offered all the charms of sectarian militancy with none of its organic servitudes." How funny; how painful; how apt. Because US anarchists know DIY so well, they traded up from collectives, skillshares, and puppets to insurrectionary acts, without knowing that the realness they were reaching for, and would soon be claiming and demanding of everyone around them, was merely a riskier variant of, not a real break with, all of their activism so far.

telling. Who is the most ideological? Is a question absolutely nobody cares about. We are either all trapped in a field of illusion or none of us are. And realistically it's both. Puppet theater about words is naturally going to favor the position of the author, or a lover of words. It's still no more than puppet theater.

To pivot towards a conclusion, while semantic arguments or puppet theaters may be toxic, pleasant, or a nice way to spend an evening, they're not useless. We spend our nights staring at the sky and our days at the beach or in front of a computer. This is living: a perspective that dictates all waking hours should be spent either in toil or in attack is silly. We talk about impossible ideas and passions we will never experience. We think these things, we dream these dreams, our minds wander far afield. But this wandering is often converted to an activity of *use value* by radicals. "It's fine for you to play because one day this play will be useful for your career." I despise this notion. I despise the idea that my life is lived in a line. Every step preceded by another step heading towards a goal called death or a job or a title or a revolution.

In the case of this comradely criticism we are to believe that visions and imagination are useless and the implied counter is that calls to action are worthwhile *as long as they aren't blueprints*. Our response would be that it is the confusion of visions with blueprints that is the problem. The conversion of wandering into use value is the hostile act. Just because you call your use value an inspiration towards action doesn't change what you're asking of me.

## violence

Arguments about the role of violence in a political context are a waste of time. This isn't because of the argument about the ethics of violence; if you are into ethics there is probably still something to be said here, but the relationship between politics and violence is

*production and exchange alone, nor would I say an understanding of economic systems should suffice to understand the strategic opportunities for transition... I do not think this means that utopian visions and imagination are useless or mistaken. For me they serve an important purpose, as inspiration towards action, not as a model of the future.*<sup>1</sup>

In the delicate dance of semantic arguments we define terms in such a way that our position is supported. Materialism then is either the firmament upon which all other arguments and systems are built or the new time religion (aka one of the religions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), which moves the marker past the individual (and their faith) on to something measurable and reproducible. It's either necessary to understand everything or irrelevant and yet another ideology to dismantle<sup>2</sup>. But in fact while I may tend towards the latter position I can see the validity of both.

To put this another way (I think this is most pointed in the social sciences), most so-called central questions are pretty ridiculous. *Materialism versus idealism* and other arguments about the true nature of reality are really questions about their proponents. They are mission statements. In the harshest light this is an accusation that philosophers, social scientists, and Internet trolls are all flavors of politician, devoting their energy to convincing others of a worldview. By day this may be gentle nudging and polite conversation but by night it includes appeals to authority (aka holding a cell phone at ready with the numbers 9 and 1 already typed and the thumb on 1) and social isolation.

Semantic arguments tend towards toxicity because they are usually debates about ideology and—like most debates—are more about technique and talent than some shared mission of truth

<sup>1</sup> *anarchykka.yuku.com*

<sup>2</sup> The critique of ideology hasn't improved since the SI but it's been repeated: [www.bopsecrets.org](http://www.bopsecrets.org)

## History as Decomposition

### About the afterlife of a situationist idea

#### §1

Supposing the word is in one's vocabulary, it is easy enough to dismiss others as nihilists in deed or in intention. Like *atheist*, the term first appeared as an accusation. Used in this traditional manner, it is a simple way to pathologize your enemies. Many dedicate their time to this kind of symptomatic hand-wringing. It places your enemies in accepted moral scripts that redefine them in a range from careless to evil. It is more difficult, but hardly a great feat in itself, to declare oneself a nihilist. In its simplest form, this is to perversely and excessively embrace being dismissed as a badge of difference and pride. In a more developed form, it is to argue and act from a range of positions we currently recognize mostly by slogans of the "no future"/"everything must be destroyed" sort. A more difficult variant of the embrace of the term is one that claims it drives a wedge between two kinds of nihilism. Whether they are posited as two visions of the Void or different methods of destruction (moral and anti-moral, social and anti-social), this version of the nihilist position is ultimately descended from a distinction made by Nietzsche between active and passive nihilism. But the Nietzschean inheritance is double: there is the above-mentioned wedge position; and there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism. The latter suggests understanding a condition psychologically, as Nietzsche did in his late notebooks, or metaphysically, as Heidegger did in his Nietzsche seminars. Such attempts to diagnose render very

difficult the separation of the thinker and the thinking, the writer and the writing, from the condition (which may be understood as a corrosive phenomenon variously affecting a place, a time, a culture, a civilization, an empire, and so on).

Now and then the diagnostic sense reappears, severed from the wedge-distinction. In recent years some have taken up the diagnosis of the nihilistic society as the most powerful tool of a kind of critical theory (and, probably unbeknown to them, a contemporary echo of the traditional use of *nihilist* as an accusation). At the same time, others have taken up the wedge, severed from the diagnosis, as their way of distinguishing a nihilist position that is able to act in a space clear of social implosion.<sup>1</sup>

By that I mean: to distinguish the destructive action that comes from agents in the milieu (or our presumed allies) from the self-destruction, implosion, and dissolution, of social forms and probably of society in general. Both are done with too much ease precisely to the degree that they ignore each other.

There are a few of us, at least, for whom nihilism is a vital problem in a way that exceeds the action of the wedge and the contemplation at work in the diagnosis. It is something I feel I have to think through, as well as live out; and neither of the above ways of understanding it seems sufficient. I suspect that this means that the problem is not what it was. (Or at least that, like Nietzsche, I feel implicated in the diagnosis.) We are not satisfied with lining up the conditions and our position, saying: our epoch (dominant moralities, culture, civilization, etc) is nihilistic, and so are we—as if we were merely expressing the disintegration around us as theory or as smashy. Even to say that there is a general tendency and that some *we* is pushing it farther, driving it to its limit, etc sounds perilously close to the old Communist idea of exploiting the contradictions of capitalism so as to overcome it. The question always

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<sup>1</sup> Two examples in terms of recent writing in the anarchist space would be *Witherburo*, for the first, and the “Editorial Statement” in *Lawless*, for the second.

## Attentat – Nihilism as Strategy II

At one time it could’ve been said that we were looking for the extreme position. We were looking beyond the accommodations of *social* positions, the **activism** of most every position, and with an explicit hostility to our “critical” friends whose potency is seen in terms of word count. At some point we ended this search, but when we did, the conclusions we drew were too simple. We distilled the most extreme position down to a word or two, no deeper than any other bumper sticker, label, or position-for-the-sake-of-position. We stopped, which allowed the mediocres to whittle away at the loose ends and simplifications. By stopping we allowed our preliminary thoughts to be seen as static ones. This was never our intent.

In our preliminary notes we asserted that our position required three types of action, three ways to avoid certain traps: skepticism, disrespect towards historicism, and amoralism. During our search for the extreme, we offered a thousand nos for every yes but were neither specific enough nor adventurous enough to go further. With this in mind we address a few of the criticisms we have heard throughout the years of our untenable and delicate position, with an eye on creating a new set of preliminary recommendations.

### materialism

*I believe that social systems are ultimately founded upon a material basis, but I wouldn't limit that to the forces of*

It might be what we need to face others in decomposition. Facing them we might also come to understand  
Baltasar Gracián's saying,

*It takes more today to make one sage than seven in years gone by, and more to deal with a single person than an entire nation in the past.*

remains as to whether that *we*, at the farthest reach, at the limit, is not doing the innovative work that future systems will be built upon. From this questioning **we may take “no future” and “everything must be destroyed” less as slogans of a supposedly self-evident sort and more as dark mottos** that guide our explorations of a complicated and dangerous terrain.

## §2

I begin with the wedge position, not the isolated diagnosis, because I feel closer to it. But I also need to set out what separates me from it, since I do not understand by what criterion one could claim to clearly distinguish what is on either side of the wedge.

*Our nihilism is not christian nihilism.*

*We do not deny life*

wrote Novatore, who, inspired by *The Antichrist*, was perhaps able to live out or live with the wedge position. Well, as with much of what he wrote, I am inclined to say that I share his perspective, but with a superadded sense of uncertainty. The uncertainty arises from a sense of impossibility, the impossibility of gaining the proper distance from society, Humanity,

*...the collective tempests and social hurricanes...*

insofar as today this society-weather is a technological issue and not merely a spiritual one.—Did I write *spiritual*? I might as well have written psychological, or mental, or referred to character, taste, or temperament. All I have done here is enumerated the beginning of a list of phenomena that we only know in their ruination, or, in political terms, in and as their complicity with mass phenomena. Or, in ethical terms, through their betrayal.

I may well deny life, if life is unlivable: narcotic life, cyborg life. And the nihilist position we both claim and seek—for us it is never simply *not* Christian, just as our atheism echoes the atheism of those raised with religion. A certain kind of transition is at stake:

*By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of resentment becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary. There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition. Juvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada*

wrote Vaneigem. Here the wedge is something else: not their nihilism and ours, but nihilism as consciousness, active nihilism as the transition between *ressentiment* and revolution; the tempting idea that the symptom would become the cure. I do think one can describe the difference between active nihilism and passive nihilism as an awareness. I do think that awareness matters in terms of how one might live beyond *ressentiment* and beyond the spectacle of society. But I must part ways when it comes to describing awareness as prerevolutionary (or, for that matter, anyone as the legitimate heirs of Dada, tongue in cheek or not).

Some of us need to experience the full consequences of this parting of ways. This means to show and to witness what the awareness of decomposition is *now* or *to us*, and what it contributes to stating the problem of nihilism as some of us understand it. **What is most dramatic in this new understanding is the tension between realizing that this is a new understanding, one that is of our time, and simultaneously that we are grasping to what extent the question of nihilism has become detached from a historical understanding.**

by its inevitable unconcealing, it pushes nihilism farther in its diffuse, passive, social direction. Unitary urbanism...

*May 1968 revealed to a great many people that ideological confusion tries to conceal the real struggle between the “party” of decomposition and the “party” of global dépassement*

wrote Vaneigem in 1971. Quotes or not, what he is invoking are *parties*, sides. The entire text “Terrorism or Revolution” is based on the wedge, drawing lines and making the same kind of claim we have by now become used to: “this is the highest stage,” or its variant, “if not now, never.” These claims issue from a confusion deeper than ideological confusion, the confusion that *is* decomposition.

## §14

Those who echo an ancient military rhetoric, invoking necessity in the political and historical senses, drawing lines and insisting “now or never” as if by habit, will always confuse the problem of nihilism. The few of us who feel it as a *problem*, and only secondarily, if at all, as a position, understand that we cannot divide ourselves from decomposition to diagnose it and to act on it. Our psychology is anti-political, so we have to explore in other ways. Our awareness of decomposition leads to certain insights that are disconcerting and fascinating as well; they may well be visions from outside Civilization. This awareness informs our action without distinguishing us from events. I am referring to what is most questionworthy: the passing sense of the weird and meaningless way in which things happen, beyond causality and so beyond lasting explanation. I am referring to what might be called events as signs of non-events, or historical events as masks of non-historical events. **So if and when we call ourselves nihilists, know that we are wearing a mask.**

ways been there in our explanation, our diagnosis, and the actions they are said to justify; and that HisStory is decomposition's double movement: as Civilization unravels, it narrates its unraveling. The dead thing, Leviathan, organizes life, builds itself up as armor in and around it (which would include machines and a certain stiffening of postures and gestures, and concurrently thinking and action, in human bodies). But the dead thing remains dead, and it breaks down. It functions by breaking down. It creates ever more complex organizations (analyses of behavior) that then decompose, ie break down.

### §13

Returning to the analysis of nihilist positions with which I began, I would say that the wedge position and the diagnostic one, the active nihilist and contemplative criticaltheoretical appraisal, are both the results of running the Nietzschean diagnostic through a political machine, turning its psychology into political psychology. And **the political machine is one of the devices of decomposition.** To appraise all of society critically, or to divide the friend and the enemy once and for all, are the respectively theoretical and practical Ur-operations of politics. All debate about the priority of the one over the other aside, I recognize in them the basic moves of the constitution of a *polis*.

*The councils represent order in the face of the decomposition of the state...*

wrote Vaneigem in his "Note to the Civilized." It is possible to read this, not as the political opposition of order and chaos, organization and disorder, but as an understandable misprision of the tension that, whoever wins, pushes decomposition farther by temporarily concealing it. And in this temporary concealing, followed

### §3

Of the definitions offered in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, two are notable for their recent underemployment: *unitary urbanism* and *decomposition*.<sup>2</sup>

Unitary urbanism: *The theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as means contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior.*

This is the most noticeably obsolete of the situationist definitions. It suggests to those familiar with the early SI the exploration of the city as the setting for the practices of constructing situations, psychogeography, and the wandering they called *dérive*. The city figures here as a "unified milieu." If unitary urbanism has been abandoned, it is because that side of the SI was not of much use to anyone—to the popularizers or the inheritors. Tom McDonough explicates the project competently enough:

*There was, in fact, a curious strain of situationist thought, little remarked today, that was precisely concerned with the destruction of the subject, with the vision of a new, malleable humanity. This vision was particularly apparent in early discussions of the construction of situations and the linked problem of*

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<sup>2</sup> The definitions have had remarkably different fates. Situation/situationist/situationism have been discussed on and off as needed (now and then some of us enjoy pointing out the third of these to those that need a clarification). Psychogeography/ psychogeographical/psychogeographer have, for better or for worse (probably for worse) turned out to be the most harmless of the bunch, leading to a variety of popularizations in contexts often disconnected from the rest. Of the two usually untranslated terms, the fate of *dérive* has been tied to the psychogeography bundle, though I'm not sure it had to be. *Détournement* has also inspired both popular (cute) and unpopular (perverse) forms. The internet entertains with plenty of both; neither has any lasting importance.

*unitary urbanism, both of which were conceived as means of inciting new behaviors, and as such would have access to all the methods offered by modern technology and psychology. That peculiar neologism, “psycho geography,” conveyed exactly this desire for rational control over ever greater domains of life.*

Just a strain. But the popularizers were never concerned with such dramatic changes to our lives. And the inheritors—here I mean those who, like Fredy Perlman, translated and expanded on the ideas of the SI—understood sooner or later, if not immediately, that this strain represented a wager the SI played and lost. The side of the optimistic, the historically rational in the SI—the defense, therefore, of progress, a possible progress buried but to be unearthed (a common enough story for communists and many anarchists, of course)—was ravaged by historical and political events. Since the demise of the SI, and without entering into a detailed discussion, I think it is fair enough to say that the last fifty years have been all about “inciting new behaviors” and the confluence of “modern technology and psychology.” In some inverted sense, unitary urbanism was realized—by its enemies.

Decomposition, on the other hand: who has really thought this idea through? In one sense the definition seems to belong to the same strain of Situationist thought that opted for unitary urbanism.

*Decomposition: The process in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions. We can distinguish between the active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures—which came to an end around 1930—and a phase of repetition that has prevailed since that time. The delay in the transition from decomposi-*

this temporal logic, the apparent necessity of the highest stage. For us it has come to seem a rhetorical crossing of the wires, where description spills over into prescription. Psychologically, it makes sense: to insist that this is the *final* moment means that if you have *highest* stage and the *any* inclination to act against Empire et al, you must do it now! *Hic rhodus, etc— This is the place to jump, the place to dance!* that is how Fredy began, too.<sup>7</sup> But, as I have noted, he did not end there, but in ambiguity, in questions. Our thought decomposes, too...

## §12

In sum, the perspective that says that decomposition is the logic of His-Story elucidates two things. First, that we were right to deny Progress; second, that we are not believers in its opposite, an inverted Regression away from a golden age. As I imagine it, a principal characteristic of whatever preceded His-Story (civilization, etc) would be its neutrality, its stony silence at the level of metanarrative. **Rather than Progress or Regression we could describe historical decomposition as the accelerating complication of events. This acceleration is violent and dangerous.** Here and there an eddy may form in which things either slow down or temporarily stabilize in the form of an improvement. What we can say with some certainty is that as historical time elapses, things get more complicated; and that these complications so outrun their antecedents that the attempt to explain retroactively becomes ever more confusing.

Situationally, we may be getting some purchase for the moment, an angle, a perspective. But what Debord perhaps could not admit, what Perlman perhaps understood, is that decomposition had al-

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<sup>7</sup> *Hic Rhodus, hi salta!* goes back to Marx and Hegel, of course. In the 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes of a situation “in which retreat is impossible.”

ately sought to appraise and orient us in terms of the history of the twentieth century, have been deceptive. They have traced outlines of decomposition without discovering their complicity in its logic. Yes, decomposition tempts everyone to periodize. To each her own perverse history. Think of our pastimes—think of gossip! Think of the idle talk of generations or decades in discussions of the character of individuals, their politics, or their modes of consumption of culture. What we bring forward in such sleepy analyses of culture and character are our own repetitions, our own novelties, our own crappy contributions. It is the work of culture, after all. Some of us feel a need to remain silent, sovereignly neutral, in the face of this folk art of milieus and subcultures.

It could be good practice, at least, for it is just this neutral gaze with which we have learned to read certain of our contemporaries.

*Empire is not the crowning achievement of a civilization, the end-point of its ascendent arc. Rather it is the tail-end of an inward turning process of disaggregation, as that which must check and if possible arrest the process.*

wrote Tiqqun. This perspective seems close to the one I have been elaborating here. But they immediately follow that proposition with:

*At first glance, Empire seems to be a parodic recollection of the entire, frozen history of a “civilization.” And this impression has a certain intuitive correctness. Empire is in fact civilization’s last stop before it reaches the end of its line, the final agony in which it sees its life pass before its eyes.*

It is just this familiar reference to the final and highest stage towards which we have become skeptical. We are as eager to find a way out of the process, supersession or overcoming, as we suppose many of our friends to be. And yet a few of us have had to abandon

*tion to new constructions is linked to the delay in the revolutionary liquidation of capitalism.*

The first sentence certainly appeals to the same sense of progress. Such progress would be predicted and measured according to “superior means of controlling nature” (in French the phrase is *domination de la nature*). As the means appear, cultural forms destroy themselves, a necessary sacrifice, one might suppose, for progress to carry on. In the most immediate sense, which relates decomposition to art movements, this corresponds to the

*active and critical*

destruction of forms (so wrote Anselm Jappe) which came to a head with Dada but could include Impressionism, Symbolism, Futurism, Cubism, and so on. What follows troubles this interpretation, however. It seems that “around 1930” everything was marching according to plan. Since then decomposition carries on as

*empty repetition,*

(Jappe again) which would mean that cultural forms farcically continue to destroy themselves without any “new constructions.”

*The decomposition of artistic forms has thus become perfectly concordant with the real state of the world and retains no shock effect whatsoever.*

This is the eternal return of an Art that was declared dead countless times—its repeated resuscitation by the market. This dynamic of repetition is referred to a “delay” in the “liquidation” of capitalism.

The dynamic of decomposition in the arts is coupled with the impasse in urbanism in the “Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism”:

*The development of the urban milieu is the capitalist domestication of space. It represents the choice of one particular materialization, to the exclusion of other possibilities. Like aesthetics, whose course of decomposition it is going to follow, it can be considered as a rather neglected branch of criminology*

wrote Vaneigem and Kotányi. The necessary question is why one will follow the other. (A provisional answer is that the unity of the phenomena under investigation is revealed when one notices that separate spheres are decomposing in the same way. It could also be that it is in the realm of aesthetics that the awareness of decomposition is greatest, and that the awareness accelerates the process, so that other separated spheres of life must follow it, at least for now.)

What decomposition seems to mean so far is that if material conditions do not improve along the lines of true progress, culture breaks down. It changes, yes; but these changes are to be understood as a self-dismantling, and then the indefinite repetition of that self-dismantling. When Vaneigem composed his enumeration of “Theoretical Topics That Need To Be Dealt With Without Academic Debate or Idle Speculation,” he included

*Dialectics of decomposition and supersession in the realization of art and philosophy*

but there is room to question whether what is under consideration here has a dialectical structure when the supersession (*dépassement*) never comes. **Decomposition can be provisionally interpreted as the invocation of an ethico-political ideal against an aesthetic one, the refusal of the new in art, or even the refusal of art as such, insofar as, in its separated existence, it can not act on the economy, can not alter material conditions. But it can also be seen as a way of beginning to understand the “delay” from within the “delay”; and in that sense**

*People of resentment are the perfect survivors—people bereft of the consciousness of possible transcendence, people of the age of decomposition. By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of resentment becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary.*

The age of decomposition: a global diagnosis. It is populated by two types: people of *ressentiment*, survivors, are those who continue to believe in progress and contribute to processes of decomposition. Artists or not, their production is repetition. These are the passive nihilists of the wedge position. The person who is aware of this, aware of decomposition, thereby becomes an active nihilist. For Vaneigem this is prerevolutionary; it is not for the likes of Novatore, or many of our friends these days. But what studying *Against His-Story* perhaps shows is that the *pre-in prerevolutionary* has something of historical progress about it. As though there really were three stages and the middle one was conscience, consciousness, awareness! **To take up nihilism as a problem today means precisely this: that nothing in particular seems to us prerevolutionary because revolution sounds too much like decomposition to our ears.** Thus my penchant for the wedge position, insofar as it affirms active nihilism without positing something else after it; thus my insistence on some version of the diagnosis—the awareness of decomposition that is part of our thinking, not the contemplation of a historically achieved reality to be understood historically and overcome by making history!

## §11

I would suggest that all of the interminable discussions of cycles of struggle, the various and competing periodizations of capitalism and technology (for starters), especially as they have desper-

latter they may have a temporary or even long-lasting protective effect for those groups or communities, but they weigh in the same way as His-story on those who purposely or accidentally put in their lot with them. Foucault's attempts to write what he called histories of the present could be described as last-ditch attempts to see what could be done with history; but even he, in his wise ambivalence, wrote history as genealogy. The genealogical perspective sometimes locates or even summons counterhistories, but usually only the lives of the infamous:

*Lives of a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words. Brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents. Ex-empla... not so much lessons to ponder as brief effects whose force fades almost at once.*

It is the awareness of that fading, another name, perhaps, for decomposition, that we can no longer do without.

## §10

As to incoherence, this remark was aimed at the anarchists Debord knew, not the ones we know. But one might say that the "incoherence" of "aiming at the absolute" is precisely what our discourse will sound like to someone who still and always relies on historical explanations. What we are doing with history is what Debord himself recommended we do with decomposition: to turn it against itself parodically, in *détournement*. And here the third rule of *détournement* applies:

*Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.*

I took the phrase "awareness of decomposition" from Vaneigem. I have already cited part of the passage:

**already suggests the refusal of the production of the new in every sphere when we are aware that it is empty repetition.**

## §4

This tension between longing for supersession, if not progress, and refusal of the present can be detected everywhere the term was used by Debord—already, for example, in three proto-Situationist texts of 1957. "One Step Back," published in the journal *Potlatch*, opens by invoking

*The extreme point reached by the deterioration of all forms of modern culture, the public collapse of the system of repetition that has prevailed since the end of the war...*

and on this basis warns:

*Undoubtedly the decision to make use, from the economic as from the constructive viewpoint, of retrograde fragments of modernism entails serious risks of decomposition<sup>3</sup>*

The risk being to participate in decomposition (as opposed to contesting or undoing it) by hanging on to the creations of the past, now shattered by that decomposition into fragments. "One More Effort If You Want to Be Situationists" is notable for its parenthetical subtitle, "The SI *in and against* Decomposition":

*The Situationist International exists in name, but that means nothing but the beginning of an attempt to build*

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<sup>3</sup> Parenthetically, this text accuses members of the Lettrist International of "a certain satisfied nihilism", presumably deploying the term in its isolated diagnostic sense.

*beyond the decomposition in which we, like everyone else, are completely involved. Becoming aware of our real possibilities requires both the recognition of the presituationist—in the strict sense of the word—nature of whatever we can attempt, and the rupture, without looking back, with the division of labor in the arts. The main danger lies in these two errors: the pursuit of fragmentary works combined with simpleminded proclamations of an alleged new stage.*

*At this moment, decomposition shows nothing more than a slow radicalization of moderate innovators toward positions where outcast extremists had already found themselves eight or ten years ago. But far from drawing a lesson from those fruitless experiments, the “respectable” innovators further dilute their importance. I will take examples from France, which surely is undergoing the most advanced phenomena of the general cultural decomposition that, for various reasons, is being manifested in its purest state in western Europe.*

Most of those who would have spoken of progress in 1957 would have said it was farthest along in Western Europe or the United States! So decomposition is clearly a placeholder for progress-delayed. The article contrasts the bleak terrain of what “decomposition shows” with the description of the nascent group as the “beginning of an attempt to build beyond it”—beyond what it shows. That same year, the booklet *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency*, presented by Debord at the founding conference of the IS, significantly broadens the sense of the term. In some places it seems we are still asked to think about what is a dead end in art. In others, though, it seems **we are being asked to consider the dead end of culture itself:**

## §9

One could reply that in my presentation of this awareness, in the overall thrust of this essay, I have exemplified the anarchist allergy to history that Debord diagnosed in *Society of the Spectacle*,

*It is the ideology of pure freedom, an ideology that puts everything on the same level [qui égalise tout] and loses any conception of the “historical evil” (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence.*

I would answer: as to losing any conception of the negation at work in history, yes, excessively, I hope. Evil is not a term I find useful. But **the negative or destructive side of history is for some of us more or less all that history has been or done. In the strict sense, nothing is being worked on or built up in or through history.** The places, people, and events in past time that we enjoy or claim, appreciate or appropriate, must be creatively re-identified as non-historical, extra-historical, or anti-historical currents. There may have been, may continue to be what Foucault called insurrections of subjugated knowledges: counter-histories. It is true that certain moments of revolt are coupled with strange perspectives on history. But it is also true that these counterhistories have an odd way of becoming ordinary histories, either by incorporation into universal His-Story, its narrative, or by becoming the local his-stories of smaller groups and communities. As the

*tournement. Or, as some friends recently put it, we locate ourselves within the subversive current of history that willfully attempts to break with the ongoing progress of society.*

**To identify this negative movement, or this subversive current, is to lose, to give up on, the sense of “delay” and to become aware of decomposition.**

## §8

**Awareness of decomposition is then, most immediately, a new kind of diagnosis of the present and an alternative to historical thought. This diagnosis belongs to the subversive current; it does not take place in isolation. We are and are not Society.** We know we are in—we do not know if we may be out of—decomposition. In this awareness we discern that decomposition is not Decline, as though the film of Progress were run backwards. Decline as a general logic would mean that everything gets worse. But the idea here is to undermine any global, world-historical scale for judging what is better or worse. Only from within decomposition has Progress seemed possible; and only from within decomposition would history appear to be complete disaster, or completely anything (the victory of one race, culture, or religion, for example, as vindicated by history, or the defeat of another). Such an awareness could come as a shock. It could lead to the denial of temporal logic (order, progress, explanation, justification). But it is not a relativism that flattens out the differences between events.<sup>6</sup> It may amount to a perspective from outside civilization.

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<sup>6</sup> That it could lead to the denial of temporal logic does not mean that it is the denial of what I called above “cosmic time.”

*Decomposition has reached everything. We no longer see the massive use of commercial advertising to exert ever greater influence over judgments of cultural creation; this was an old process. Instead, we are reaching a point of ideological absence in which only the advertising acts, to the exclusion of all previous critical judgments—but not without dragging along a conditioned reflex of such judgment.*

[...]

*The history of modern culture during the ebb tide of revolution is thus the history of the theoretical and practical reduction of the movement for renewal, a history that reaches as far as the segregation of minority trends, and as far as the undivided domination of decomposition.*

## §5

Look at “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” a piece that Debord published in *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (the same issue as the definitions). The fifth thesis begins:

*We are excluded from real control over the vast material powers of our time. The communist revolution has not yet occurred and we are still living within the confines of decomposing old cultural superstructures.*

The seventh thesis adds:

*The practical task of overcoming our discordance with this world, that is, of surmounting its decomposition by some more advanced constructions, is not romantic.*

For Debord decomposition was always a cultural phenomenon. Faced with art objects, mass media contents, and with their

commodity-forms, the situationist would only respond that they were to be seen as the products of decomposition. I think this illuminates the accompanying definitions: *détournement* is a way to refuse to produce new decomposing art, provisionally turning decomposition against itself by rearranging existing elements; *dérive* and *psychogeography* are techniques for wandering in, and analyzing, cities that one has no idea how to transform, in search of the elements to be transformed. These are the practices of “building beyond” decomposition. All of this unfolds in a larger “presituationist” historical framework in which “the communist revolution has not yet occurred.”

Not yet... Almost ten years later, Debord did not make much of decomposition in *Society of the Spectacle*. He mentions it in a few theses in the context of cities and in the context of the implosion of modern art. More or less the original context and usage, then:

*The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.*

As is well known, although the communist revolution had “not yet” occurred in 1967, either, *Society of the Spectacle* did include some proposals as to how to bring it about. For many, the way in which the book has continued to be important is in its theory of spectacle and separation, which could be considered a way to understand decomposition writ large. The counterbalancing notions of “cultural” resistance, *détournement*, *dérive*, and situation are only hinted at in its theses, while a great emphasis is placed on the worker’s councils, which were to bring about the revolution that had “not yet” occurred... Around the same time, Vaneigem raised a more troubling question:

of a certain accumulation of complications, a tension to be understood naturalistically and ecologically, as the resonance of the primordial accident? Are those who are aware of this decomposition even a little set apart from it through this knowledge? Can they move in a way that does not belong to its process?

*it is not yet known ... if the new outsiders do indeed still have an “inner light,” namely an ability to reconstitute lost rhythms, to recover music, to regenerate human cultures.*

*It is also not known if the technological detritus that crowds and poisons the world leaves human beings any room to dance. What is known is that Leviathan, the great artifice, single and world-embracing for the first time in His-story, is decomposing.*

What is clear is that Perlman broadened the relevance of decomposition by definitively breaking with the progressive and optimistic aspects that it bore in its first situationist version. By making the process of breakdown primary, he invented a new kind of diagnosis of the present, and a new way to understand history. This diagnosis suggests:

1. That history, as a whole or in segments, has not been progressive, in either a linear or cyclical way, but rather a process of increasing complication, destructiveness, falling apart of previous epochs (along with their attitudes, ideas, practices, and so on).

Corollary:

The very phenomenon of history (as His-Story), its possible unity as narrative and idea, is peculiarly undergirded by this process, which is itself a fragile hanging together of fragments of fragments, endlessly shattering, strangely recombining, giving most observers the sense of “delay.”

2. That what we might be inspired by in history has to do with turning decomposition against itself in the negative manner of dé-

Or should this be:

3. Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments *will* reorganize into a new Leviathan.

It is difficult to say. It is clear enough that the beginning of the process is accidental. But is its unfolding accidental? Is the movement of complication from one Leviathan to another, the increasing globalization of decomposition, a process that Perlman thought of as necessary?

## §7

I am not sure how to answer these questions, nor do I think Fredy knew how. He begins the penultimate chapter writing about his impatience to finish the story, the book... to finish *His-Story*. It is not much further on that the last passage I cited continues:

*... when there are no others, when Leviathan is One, the tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, is almost at an end. Civilization, synonym of Capital, Technology and The Modern World, called Leviathan by Hobbes and Western Spirit by Turner, is as racked by decomposition as any earlier Leviathan. But Civilization is not one Leviathan among many. It is The One. Its final decomposition is Leviathan's end. After twenty centuries of stony sleep vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, the sleeper is about to wake to the cadences of a long-forgotten music or to the eternal silence of death without a morrow.*

This passage is deeply ambiguous. Is the image offered here of “final decomposition” another version of the “delay”? Or is the word final to be taken literally, meaning that decomposition— and so history—are coming to an end? And is this end itself the result

*In the end, by dint of identifying ourselves with what we are not, of switching from one role to another, from one authority to another, and from one age to another, how can we avoid becoming ourselves part of that never-ending state of transition which is the process of decomposition?*

How long until “not yet” turns into “never-ending”? How long can a “delay” be? And consequently, **how long until a provisional idea of culture as decomposition develops into another idea about culture—about civilization itself?**

## §6

To my knowledge no one has underlined Fredy Perlman's transformative use of decomposition in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*. He introduces the term in a passage that could be used to explain one of the ways in which the situationist critique of culture was transformed in the direction of the current array of primitivist, green anarchist, and anticivilization perspectives.

*The death of Egypt's gods is recorded. After two or three generations of Pharaoh's protection, the figures on the Temple walls and pillars no longer jump or fly; they no longer even breathe. They're dead. They're lifeless copies of the earlier, still living figures. The copyists are exact, we would say pedantic; they seem to think that faithful copying of the originals will bring life to the copies.*

*A similar death and decomposition must pale the songs and ceremonies as well. What was once joyful celebration, selfabandon, orgiastic communion with the beyond, shrinks to lifeless ritual, official ceremony led by the head of State and his officials. It all becomes*

*theater, and it is all staged. It is no longer for sharing but for show. And it no longer enlarges the participant, who now becomes a mere spectator. He feels diminished, intimidated, awed by the power of Pharaoh's household.*

*Our painting, music, dance, everything we call Art, will be heirs of the moribund spiritual. What we call Religion will be another dead heir, but at such a high stage of decomposition that its once-living source can no longer be divined.*

The situationist inheritance is clear.<sup>4</sup> Ritual and repetition replace life and creative action. Except this is not the decline of art, but art itself *as* decline. Decomposition is presented here not as the culture of an advanced technological society whose history has stalled on the way to communist revolution; not the culture of the “not yet”, but culture *as such*. This is one sense, and one source, of what is called Civilization in the perspective of anti-civilization thought. An attitude that Debord outlined with respect to capitalist or spectacular culture was now shaken loose from its grounding in our epoch, and granted the broadest historical sweep possible. *Has all history been decomposition?*—But if the answer to this question is affirmative, then the very notions of epoch and historical sweep (let alone spectacular and capitalist culture) have to be reevaluated from the perspective that has redefined decomposition. **The priority of organization and breakdown are reversed, and the breakdown is now primary—primordial.**

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<sup>4</sup> The other possible source for some of Perlman's uses of this term would be Jacques Camatte. But his use of it is closer to the *IS* than to Camatte. They probably have a common source in Marxist theory of the early twentieth century.

To detail this anti-historical grasp of history, I will need to isolate a conceptual core in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*<sup>5</sup> Three axioms:

1. History (not as cosmic time, but as His-Story) begins *accidentally*, as the runaway cascade of problems and complications beginning with a situation of ecological imbalance; this event is also the constitution of the first Leviathan.

Corollary:

*The Leviathan places human beings in a situation they do not meet anywhere else in the Biosphere except in rare places like Sumer.*

That is, Sumer is the place of an accident; and the Leviathan is the generalization and reproduction of that accident. To say it is an accident is to say that the accident was a contingent event, an event that did not have to happen.

2. Every Leviathan is in a state of decomposition (its artificial life in some sense *is* decomposition). Perlman hints at this throughout the book until putting it plainly towards the end, referencing

*the decomposition that accompanies every functioning Leviathan.*

Corollary:

The scribes (historians, intellectuals by extension) are trained not to see the decomposition as such. 3. Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments can reorganize into a new Leviathan.

*We've seen that earlier Leviathans were always in a state of decomposition. When one decomposed, others swallowed its remains.*

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<sup>5</sup> I think for too long this essay has been relegated to the realm of appreciative private readings on one hand, and public dismissals (on grounds of romanticism) on the other. I found another way to read it, so I am propagating it.