

The revolutionary project

Alfredo M. Bonanno

It is not easy to grasp the various aspects of revolutionary activity. It is even more difficult to grasp everything in terms of a complex project that has its own intrinsic logic and operative articulation. That is what I mean by revolutionary work.

We all, or nearly all, agree as to who the enemy is. In the vagueness of the definition we include elements from our personal experience (joy and suffering) as well as our social situation and our culture. We are convinced that we know everything that is required in order to draw up a map of enemy territory and identify objectives and responsibility. Times change of course, but we don't take any notice. We make the necessary adjustments and carry on.

Obscure in our way of proceeding, our surroundings also obscure, we light up our path with the miserable candle of ideology and stride forward.

The tragic fact is that things around us change, and often rapidly. The terms of the class relationship are constantly widening and narrowing in a contradictory situation. They reveal themselves one day only to conceal themselves the next, as the certainties of yesteryear precipitate into the darkness of the present.

Anyone who maintains a constant if not immobile pole is not seen as what they are: honest navigators in the sea of class confusion, but are often taken to be stubborn chanters of out of date, abstract, ideological slogans. Anyone who persists in seeing the enemy inside the uniform, behind the factory, at the ministry, school, the church, etc., is considered suspect. There is a desire to substitute harsh reality with abstract relations and relativity. So the State ends up becoming a way of seeing things and individuals, with the result that, being an idea, it cannot be fought. The desire to fight it in abstract in the hope that its material reality, men and institutions will precipitate into the abyss of logical contradiction, is a tragic illusion. This is what usually happens at times like this when there is a lull both in the struggle and in proposals for action.

No one with any self respect would admit to the State's having any positive function. Hence the logical conclusion that it has a negative one, i.e. that it damages some to the benefit of others. But the State is not simply the idea State, it is also the 'thing State', and this 'thing' is composed of the policeman and the police station, the minister and the ministry (including the building where the ministry has its offices), the priest and the church (including the actual place where the cult of lies and swindling takes place), the banker and the bank, the speculator and his premises, right down to the individual spy and his more or less comfortable flat in the suburbs. Either the State is this articulated whole or it is nothing, a mere abstraction, a theoretical model that it would be absolutely impossible to attack and defeat.

Of course, the State also exists inside us. It is therefore also i d e a. But this being an idea is subordinate to the physical places and persons that realise it. An attack on the idea of State (including that which we harbour inside us, often without realising it) is only possible if we attack it physically, in its historical realisation standing there before us in flesh and blood.

What do we mean by attack? Things are solid. Men defend themselves, take measures. And the choice of the means of attack is also open to confusion. We can (or rather must) attack with ideas, oppose critique to critique, logic to logic, analysis to analysis. But that would be a pointless exercise if it were to come about in isolation, cut off from direct intervention on the things and men of the State (and capital of course). So, in relation to what we said earlier, attack not only with ideas but also with weapons. I see no other way out. To limit oneself to an ideological duel would merely increase the enemy's strength.

Theoretical examination therefore, alongside and at the same time as practical attack.

Moreover, it is precisely in the attack that theory transforms itself and practice expresses its theoretical foundations. To limit oneself to theory would be to remain in the field of idealism typical of the bourgeois philosophy that has been feeding the coffers of the dominant class for hundreds of years, as well as the concentration camps of the experimenters of both Right and Left. It makes no difference if this disguises itself as historical materialism, it is still a question of the old phagocytic idealism. Libertarian materialism must necessarily overcome the separation between idea and deed. If you identify the enemy you must strike, and strike adequately. Not so much in the sense of an optimal level of destruction, as that of the general situation of the enemy's defence, its possibilities of survival and the increasing danger it represents.

If you strike it is necessary to destroy part of their structure, thus making their functioning as a whole more difficult. All this, if considered in isolation, runs the risk of seeming insignificant. It does not manage, that is, to convert itself into something real. For this transformation to come about it is necessary for the attack to be accompanied by a critical examination of the enemy's ideas, ideas that are part of its repressive and oppressive action.

But does this reciprocal conversion of practical action into theoretical and theoretical into practical come about as something imposed artificially? For example, in the sense of carrying out an action then printing a fine document claiming it. The ideas of the enemy are not criticised or gone into in this way. They are crystallised within the ideological process, appearing to be massively in opposition to the ideas of the attacker, transferred into something quite ideological. Few things are as hateful to me as this way of proceeding. The place for the c o n v e r s i o n of theory into practice and vice versa, is the p r o j e c t. It is the project as an articulated whole that gives practical action a different significance, makes it a critique of the ideas of the enemy. It derives from this that the work of the revolutionary is essentially the elaboration and realisation of a project.

But before discovering what a r e v o l u t i o n a r y p r o j e c t might be, it is necessary to agree on what the revolutionary must possess in order to be able to elaborate this project of theirs. First of all courage. Not the banal courage of the physical clash and attack on the enemy trenches, but the more difficult one, the courage of one's ideas. Once you think in a certain way, once you see things and people, the world and its affairs in a certain way, you m u s t have the courage to carry this through without compromise or half measures, without pity or illusion. To stop half way would be a crime or, if you like, is absolutely normal. But revolutionaries are not 'normal' people. They must go beyond. Beyond normality, but also beyond exceptionally, which is an aristocratic way of considering diversity. Beyond good, but also beyond evil, as someone would have said.

They cannot wait for others to do what needs to be done. They cannot delegate to others what their conscience dictates to them. They cannot wait peacefully to do what others itching to destroy what oppresses them like themselves would do if only they decided, if only they were to awake from their

torpor and from allowing themselves to be swindled, far away from the chatter and confusion.

So they must set to work, and work hard. Work to supply themselves with the means necessary to give some basis to their convictions.

And here we come to the second thing: constancy. The strength to continue, persevere, insist, even when others are discouraged and everything seems difficult.

It is impossible to procure the means one requires without constancy. The revolutionary needs *cultural* means, i.e. analyses and basic common knowledge. But studies that seem very far from revolutionary practice are also indispensable to action. Languages, economy, philosophy, mathematics, the natural sciences, chemistry, social science and so on. This knowledge should not be seen as sectarian specialisation, nor should it be the dilettante exercises of an eccentric spirit dipping into this and that, desirous of knowledge but forever ignorant due to the failure to possess a method of learning. And then the technics: writing correctly, (in a way that reaches one's objective), speaking to others (using all the techniques on the subject), which are not easy to learn and are very important, studying (this is also a technique), remembering (memory can be improved, it does not have to be left to our more or less natural disposition), the manipulation of objects (which many consider a mysterious gift but instead is technique and can be learned and perfected) and others still.

The search to acquire these means is unending. It is the revolutionary's task to work continually to perfect these means and extend them to other fields.

Then there is a third thing, creativity. There can be no doubt that all of the above means would be useless, simply specialisation as an end in itself, were they not to produce new experiences, continual modification in the means as a whole and the possibility of putting them to use. And it is here that it becomes possible to grasp the great force of creativity, i.e. the fruit of all the preceding efforts. Logical processes become no more than a basic, unimportant element, whereas a different, total new one emerges: *intuition*.

So now the problem comes to be seen differently. Nothing will be as it was before. Numerous connections and comparisons, inferences and deductions are made without our realising it. All the means in our possession begin to vibrate and come alive. Things of the past along with new understanding, old concepts, ideas and tensions, that had not fully been understood become clear. An incredible mixture, itself a creative event, which must be submitted to the discipline of method in order for us to produce something, limited if you like, but immediately perceivable. Unfortunately the destiny of creativity is that its immense initial explosive potential (which becomes something miserable in the absence of the basic means mentioned above) must be returned to the realm of technique in the narrow sense of word. It must go back to becoming word, pages, figures, sounds, form, objects. Otherwise, outside the scheme of this prison of communication, it would be dispersive and abandoned, lost in an immense fathomless sea.

And now one last thing, materiality. The capacity, that is, to grasp the real material foundations of what surrounds us. For example, we require suitable means in order to understand and act, and that is not so simple. The question of means seems clear, but always leads to misunderstanding. The question of money, for example. It is obvious that without money one cannot do what one wants. A revolutionary cannot ask for State financing to develop projects aimed at its destruction. They cannot for both ethical reasons and a logical one (that the State would not give it to them). Nor can they seriously believe that with small personal subscriptions they will be able to do everything they want (and consider necessary). Nor can they simply continue to complain about lack of money or resign themselves to the fact that some things just can't be done for that reason. Even less can they adopt the stance of those who, being penniless, feel their conscience to be at rest and, stating they have no money, do not participate in the common effort but wait for others to do so in their place. Of course, it is clear that if a comrade does not have any money they cannot be held to pay for what they cannot

afford. But have they really done everything they can to procure some for themselves? Or is there only one way to get hold of money: go begging for it, letting oneself be exploited by a boss? I don't think so.

In the arc of the possible ways of being, including personal tendencies and cultural acquisitions, two extreme kinds of behaviour polarise, each of which is limited and penalising. On the one hand there are those who accentuate the theoretical aspect, on the other, those who immerse themselves up in the practical one. These two poles hardly ever exist in the 'pure state', but are often accentuated enough to become obstacles and impediments.

When exasperated to infinity the great possibilities that theoretical study gives the revolutionary remain dead letters, becoming elements of contradiction and impediment. Some people can only see life in theoretical terms. They are not necessarily men of letters or scholars (for the latter this would be quite normal), but could be any proletarian, an emarginated person that grew up in the streets coming to blows. This search for a resolution through the subtlety of reason transforms itself into disorganic anxiety, a tumultuous desire to understand that invariably turns into pure confusion, lowering the primacy of the brain that they are trying to hold on to at any cost. This exasperation reduces their critical capacity to put order in their ideas, widening their creativity but only in the pure, one might say wild, state, supplying images and judgement devoid of any organisational method that might make them utilizable. This person lives constantly in a kind of 'trance', eats badly, relates to others with difficulty. They become easily suspicious, when not anxious to be 'understood', and for this reason tend to accumulate an incredible hotchpotch of contradictory thoughts with no guiding thread. The solution for getting out of the labyrinth would be action. But according to the model of polarisation we are looking at, this would have to be submitted to the dominion of the brain, to the 'logic' of reason. So, the action is killed, put off to infinity or lived badly because not 'understood', not brought back to the pre-eminence of thought.

On the other hand, there is endless doing, the passing of one's life away in things to be done. Today, tomorrow. Day after day. Perhaps in hope of a particular day that will see an end to this putting off to infinity. Meanwhile no search for a moment's reflection that is not exclusively linked to things be done, or very little at least. Devoting all one's time to doing kills in the same way as devoting it all to thinking does. The contradictions of the individual are not resolved by action as an end in itself. For the revolutionary things are even worse. The classic flattery that individuals use to convince themselves of the validity and importance of the action they wish to undertake is not enough for the revolutionary. The only expedient one can have recourse to is to put things off to infinity, to better days when it will no longer be necessary to dedicate oneself 'exclusively' to doing and there will be time to think. But how can one think without the means to do so? Perhaps thought is automatic activity that one slips into when one stops doing? Certainly not. In the same way as doing is not automatic activity that one slips into when one stops thinking. The possession of a few things then, courage, constancy, creativity, materiality, can allow the revolutionary to bring the means they possess to fruition and build their project.

And this concerns both the analytical and practical aspects. Once again a dichotomy appears that needs to be seen in its inconsistency, i.e. as it is usually intended by the dominant logic.

No project can be just one or other of these aspects. Each analysis has a different angle and development according to the organisational proposal, which needs to be assisted by other, similar analyses.

The revolutionary who is unable to master the analytical and organisational part of his project will always be at the mercy of events, constantly turning up after things have happened, never before.

The aim of the project, in fact, is to *see* in order to *forsee*. The project is a prosthesis like any other of man's intellectual elaborations. It allows action, makes it possible, prevents it from being extinguished in pointless discussions and improvisation. But it is not the 'cause' of action, it contains

no element of justification in this sense. If correctly intended, the project itself is action, whereas the latter is itself a project, becomes fully part of it, makes it grow, enriches and transforms it.

A lack of awareness of these fundamental premises of the work of the revolutionary often leads to confusion and frustration. Many comrades who remain tied to what we could call *r e f l e x* interventions often suffer backlashes such as demotivation and discouragement. An external event, (often repression) gives the stimulus to act. This often ends or burns itself out and the intervention has no more reason to exist. Hence the frustrating realisation that one has to begin all over again. It is like digging away at a mountain with a spoon. People do not remember. They forget quickly. Aggregation does not occur. Numbers decline. Nearly always the same people. The comrade who can only act by 'reflex' often survives by going from radical refusal, to shutting himself away in disdainful silence, to having fantasies of destroying the world (human beings included). On the other hand, many comrades remain attached to what we might call *r o u t i n e* interventions, i.e. those involving periodicals (papers, reviews, books) or meetings (congresses, conferences, debates, etc.). Here again the human tragedy does not fail to present itself. It is not usually so much a question of personal frustration (which also exists, and you can see it), as the comrade's transformation into a congressional bureaucrat or editor of barely readable pages that try to hide their inconsistency by going into daily events, explaining them according to their own point of view. As we can see, it is always the same story.

So, the project must be *p r o p o s i t i o n a l*. It must take the initiative. First operatively, concerning things to be seen or done in a certain way. Then organisationally: how to go about doing these things. Many people do not realise that the things to be done (in the context of the class clash) are not set down once and for all, but take on different meanings throughout time and in changing social relations. That leads to the need for their theoretical evaluation. The fact that some of these things actually do go on for a long time as though they cannot change, does not mean that this is so. For example, the fact that there is a need to organise in order to strike the class enemy necessarily signifies extension in time. Means and organisation tend to crystallise. And in some respects it is well that this should be so. That is not to say that it is necessary to re-invent everything each time one re-organises, even after being hit by repression. But it does mean that this 'resumption' should not be an exact repetition. Preceding models can be submitted to criticism, even if basically they remain valid and constitute a considerable starting point. At this point one often feels attacked by misinformed critics and preconceived ideas, and at all costs wanting to avoid being accused of being an 'irreducible', which actually sounds quite positive, but implies an incapacity to understand the evolution of social conditions as a whole.

So it is possible to use old organisational models, so long as they are submitted to a radical critique. But what could this critique be? In a word, pointing out the uselessness and danger of centralised structures, the mentality of delegating, the myth of the quantitative, the symbolic, the grandiose, the use of the media, etc. As we can see, it is a question of a critique aimed at showing the other side of the revolutionary horizon, the anarchist and libertarian side. To refuse centralised structures, organisation charts, delegates, quantity, symbolism, entrism, etc., means to fully adopt anarchist methods. And an anarchist proposition requires a few preliminary conditions.

The latter might seem (and in certain aspects is) less effective at first. Results are more modest, not so obvious, have all the aspects of dispersion and that cannot be reduced to one single project. They are pulverised, diffused, i.e. they concern minimal objectives that cannot be related to one central enemy immediately, at least as this comes to be presented in the descriptive iconography that power itself has invented. Power has every interest in showing its peripheral ramifications and supporting structures in a positive light, as though they had purely social functions that are indispensable to life. Given our incapacity to expose them, it effectively conceals the connections that pass from these peripheral structures to repression, then to consensus. This is the not inconsiderable task that awaits

the revolutionary, who should also expect incomprehension concerning actions when they begin to strike, hence the need for 'clarification'. And herein lies another trap. To make these clarifications in ideological terms would reproduce concentration and centrality exactly. Anarchist methods cannot be explained through an ideological filter. Any time that this has happened it has simply been a juxtaposition of our methods on to practices and projects that are far from libertarian.

The concept of delegating is criticised because it is a practice which, aside from being authoritarian, leads to increasing processes of aggregation. Refusal to delegate could lead to building *i n d i r e c t a g g r e g a t i o n*, a free organisational form. Separate groups then, united by the methods employed, not by hierarchical relations. Common objective, common choices, but *i n d i r e c t*. Not feeling the need to propose aggregational relationships that sooner or later end up producing hierarchical organisation charts (even if they are horizontal, claiming to adhere to anarchist methods), which turn out to be vulnerable to any increase in the winds of repression, where each does their own thing. It is the myth of the quantitative that needs to fall. The myth that numbers 'impress' the enemy, the myth of 'strength' before coming out into the struggle, the myth of the 'liberation army' and other such things.

So, without wanting it, old things are transforming themselves. Models, objectives and practices of the past are revolutionising themselves. Without a shadow of doubt the final crisis of the 'political' method is emerging. We believe that all attempts to impose ideological models on to subversive practices have disappeared for ever.

In due proportion, it is the world as a whole that is refusing the political model. Traditional structures with 'strong' political connotations have disappeared, or are about to. The parties of the left are aligning themselves with those of the centre and the parties of the right are also moving in that direction, so as not to remain isolated. The democracies of the West are moving closer to the dictatorships of the East. This yielding of the political structure corresponds to profound changes in the economic and social field. Those who have a mind to manage the subversive potential of the great masses are finding themselves facing new necessities. The myths of the past, also that of the 'controlled class struggle' are finished. The great mass of exploited have been drawn into mechanisms that clash with the clear but superficial ideologies of the past. That is why the parties of the left are moving close to the centre, which basically corresponds to a zeroing of political distinctions and a possible management of consensus, at least from the administrative point of view.

It is in things to be done, short term programmes such as the management of public welfare, that distinctions are arising. Ideal (therefore ideological) political projects have disappeared. No one (or hardly anyone) is prepared to struggle for a communist society, but they could be regimented into structures that claim to safeguard their immediate interests once again. Hence the increasing appearance of wider struggles and structures, national and supranational parliaments.

The end of politics is not in itself an element that could lead one to believe there has been 'anarchist' turning in society in opposition to attempts at indirect political management. Not at all. It is a question of profound changes in the modern structure of capital that are also taking place on an international level, precisely because of the greater interdependence of the various peripheral situations. In turn, these changes mean that the political myths of the past are finished as a means of control, resulting in a passage to methods better suited to the present time: the offer of better living conditions in the short term, a higher level of satisfaction of primary needs in the East, work for everybody in the West. These are the new rules of the course.

No matter how strange it might seem, however, the general crisis in politics will necessarily bring with it a crisis in hierarchical relations, the delegate, etc., all the relations that have tended to put the terms of class opposition in a mythical dimension. It will not be possible for this to go on for much longer without consequences, many people are starting to see that the struggle must not pass through

the mythical dimension of politics but enter the concrete dimension of the immediate destruction of the enemy.

There are also those who, basically not wanting to know what the work of the revolutionary should be in the light of the above social changes, come to support 'soft' methods of opposition, claiming that they can obstruct the spreading of the new power through passive resistance, 'delegitimation' and such like. In my opinion this is a misunderstanding caused by the fact that they consider modern power, precisely because it is more permissive and based on wider consensus, to be less 'strong' than that of the past based on hierarchy and absolute centralisation. This is a mistake like any other, deriving from the fact that in each one of us there is a residual of the equation 'power equals strength' whereas the modern structures of dominion are dismantling themselves piece by piece in favour of a weak but efficient form, perhaps even worse still than a strong, boorish one. The new power penetrates the psychological fabric of society right to the individual, drawing him into it, whereas the latter remained external. It made a lot of noise, could bite, but basically only built a prison wall that can be climbed sooner or later.

The many aspects of the project also make the perspective of the revolutionary task multiple. No field of activity can be excluded in advance. For the same reason there cannot be privileged fields of intervention that are 'congenial' to one particular individual. I know comrades who do not feel inclined to take up certain kinds of activity—let us say the national liberation struggle—or certain revolutionary practices such as small specific actions. The reasons vary, but they all lead to the (mistaken) idea that one should only do the things one enjoys. This is mistaken, not because it is wrong that one of the sources of action must be joy and personal satisfaction, but because the search for individual motivations can preclude a wider and more significant kind of research, that based on the totality of the intervention. To set off with preconceived ideas about certain practices or theories means to hide—due to 'fear'—behind the idea, nearly always mistaken, that these practices and theories do not 'please' us. But all pre-conceived refusal is based on scarce knowledge of what one is refusing, on not getting close to it. The satisfaction and joy of the moment comes to be seen as the only thing that matters, so we shut ourselves off from the perspective of the future. Often without wanting to, we become fearful and dogmatic, resentful of those who do manage to overcome these obstacles, suspicious of everybody, discontented and unhappy.

The only acceptable limits are those of our capabilities. But these limits should always be seen during the course of the event, not as something that exists beforehand. I have always started off from the idea (obviously fantasy, but good operatively) of having no limits, of having immense capabilities. Then day to day practice has taken on the task of pointing out my actual limits to me and the things that I can and can't do. But these limits have never stopped me beforehand, they have always emerged as insurmountable obstacles later on. No undertaking, however incredible or gigantic, has prevented me from starting. Only afterwards, during the course of particular practices, has the modesty of my capabilities come to light, but this has not prevented me from obtaining *p a r t i a l* results, the only things that are humanly attainable.

But this fact is also a problem of 'mentality', i.e. of a way of seeing things. Often we are too attached to the immediately perceivable, to the socialist realism of the ghetto, city, nation, etc. We say we are internationalist but in reality we prefer other things, things we know better. We refuse real international relations, relations of reciprocal comprehension, of overcoming barriers (also linguistic ones), of collaboration through mutual exchange. One even refuses specific local relations, their myths and difficulties. The funny thing is that the first are refused in the name of the second, and the second in the name of the first.

The same thing happens concerning the specific preparatory activity of finding revolutionary means (instruments). Again, this decision is often automatically delegated to other comrades. This is due to

fear or remorse which, if gone into carefully, have little to say for themselves.

The professionalism that is flaunted elsewhere is not welcome in anarchist methodology, but neither is downright refusal or preconceived ideas. The same goes for what is happening concerning the present mania for experience as a thing in itself, the urgency of 'doing', personal satisfaction, the 'thrill'. The two extremes touch and interpenetrate.

The p r o j e c t sweeps these problems aside because it sees things in their globality. For the same reason the work of the revolutionary is necessarily linked to the project, identifies with it, cannot limit itself to its single aspects. A partial project is not a revolutionary one, it might be an excellent work project, could even involve comrades and resources for long periods of time, but sooner or later it will end up being penalised by the reality of the class struggle.

Published in "*Anarchismo*" n. 59, January 1988 (Italy)

Translation published on <http://pantagruel-provocazione.blogspot.com>

ATabula ARasa

Alfredo M. Bonanno
The revolutionary project

atabularasa.org