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Anarchists ... and proudly so

Amedeo Bertolo

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In a well known reactionary rag *Corriere della Sera*, the equally well known hack journalist Indro Montanelli (I apologise for the double reference), in concluding his unexpected historical-literary-sentimental article about the centenary of the Rimini Conference¹, wrote that, if anything still exists of “the romantic, of the poetic, of the genuine” in the Italian socialist movement, this is due to some vestige that survives its original anarchist nature.

This is a statement that appeals to our sentimental vanity, but which, despite it expressing a modicum of truth, is fundamentally mystifying. It is true that the choice of anarchism, which is a global choice, also implies in large measure (and this much more than with other merely political choices) existential aspects. Only we, anarchists, know how much of the “poetic” (that is, of the search for beauty, for harmony in inter-human relations), of the “romantic” (that is, of the sentimental, of the emotional), of the “genuine” (which goes beyond the immedi-

¹ The Rimini Conference took place between the 4th and 6th of August of 1872, with the presence of representatives from the 21 sections of the Italian Federation of the First International, dominated by the anti-authoritarian current associated with the ideas of Bakunin. [T.N.]

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ate interests of the individual or of class) can be found in our initial choice. It is certainly a great deal. More than we wish to admit because of a certain pudicity, a radical aversion to sentimental rhetoric and a well founded mistrust of the “irrational”. These however are not the characteristic features of anarchism. These are the common features of so many human and political choices. Even the old monarchist woman who, upon dying, left four pennies to Umberto di Savoia, saved with great effort from her miserable pension, has something of the romantic, the genuine and, in a certain sense, the poetic.

It is not the passionate and disinterested adherence of so many militants famous and obscure that distinguishes anarchism (and of which anarchism does not possess any great wealth) from other social doctrines and, in particular, from authoritarian socialism, but an ensemble of original scientific hypotheses and proposals of struggle; hypotheses deepened, corrected and enriched.

Anarchism is, at the same time, a social science and a revolutionary project. On the one hand, it is a system of interpretive hypotheses about society and history (or about social changes); a system of analyses which, starting from the recognition of social ills, emphasises the nature of exploitation and oppression, of injustice and inequality, either according to historical evolution, or by identifying their causes. On the other hand, it is also (and above all) a revolutionary project, that is, an organised desire to transform social reality, substituting the hierarchical logic of the powerful (bosses, kings, generals, bishops, presidents, other bureaucrats ...) by the egalitarian and libertarian tendency of the dominated classes (proletarians, slaves, serfs and peasants, subjects, citizens ...); an organised desire based on operative strategic and tactical choices, derived from scientific hypotheses assumed as fundamental.

If it is from this desire that the possibility of passing from the observation of reality to its practical transformation derives, it is from the validation of the social science employed for the

“project” that the possibility of making the means adequate to the ends arises, of obtaining results in conformity with the objectives laid out.

The validation of the hypotheses in the field of the social sciences are not verified in a “laboratory” (unless in circumscribed aspects and in experiences limited in time and space and with results which are more indicative than definitive), but in the “future”, that is, in the confirmation of predictions, in posterior historical verification.

A hundred years have already passed since the anti-authoritarians of the First International (founders of the anarchist movement) enunciated a few basic scientific hypotheses, first in an intuitive and schematic manner, then, with time, in a more complete and articulated form and, in my opinion, these were a hundred years of overwhelming confirmation of their validity and also the condemnation of the alternative authoritarian hypotheses. One hundred years of social struggles, tumults, revolts, revolutions, experiences, sacrifices, realisations, disillusionment, blood, Spain, Russia, parliamentarianism, proletarian dictatorship ... which have duly verified the anarchist predictions and refuted the Marxist's, which verified the anti-authoritarian socialist project and put the lie to the authoritarian's.

Evident proofs, if only one wants to see; demonstrations woven with facts (and what facts!) and not with mere words; proofs of the fact that if anything scientific, rational, sensible is to be found in socialism, then it lies with anarchism.

Among the scientific hypotheses of the pioneers of anarchism, I want to emphasise one that I consider fundamental and from which, in my opinion, almost all of the others or even all of them may be derived: that of authority. Against the Marxist economic hypothesis, which, by generalising a historically limited form, wished to attribute to the private ownership of the means of production the cause of privileges and exploitation, the anti-authoritarians opposed the sociological hypothe-

sis of the unequal and hierarchical distribution of power as the source of social inequality.

From the Marxist hypothesis was born a revolutionary project which exhausted the essence of the revolution in the abolition of private property (having the abolition of “super-structural” inequalities deriving automatically from this) and which employed authoritarian means to do so (Party, State, etc.). From the anarchist hypothesis was born a revolutionary project which brought together the socialisation of the means of production with the destruction of authority in its most complete and modern social form – the State – and which used libertarian organisational and operational instruments (mutual agreement, federation, etc.) in a scientific coherence between means and ends. Against the distinction between rich and poor, between property owners and the propertyless, the anarchists preferred and, sometimes, even placed first (when they considered economic inequality a particular aspect of social inequality and, in a certain initial historical phase, a phenomena emanating from political power) the distinction between those who govern and the governed, between those who command and those who must obey.

The anarchist sociological hypothesis contained, in its essence, necessary and fecund developments which could go in a thousand directions, enriching the cultural patrimony of the anarchist movement and of humanity as a whole (thanks also to the direct and indirect influences on “progressive” thinkers and “reformers” of the system). Acute criticisms of coercive institutions, pedagogy, religion and the church, the administration of “justice”, sexual repression, the patriarchal family are thereby developed, along with proposals to integrate the city and the countryside, manual and intellectual work ... In many the work and practice of many psychiatrists, pedagogues, sexologists, vanguard urbanists today can be found the libertarian inspiration (though diluted in such a way as to lose its character as a rupture with contemporary

mation of the capacity of anarchism, with a series of extremely harsh tests before which it is already almost a victory to have survived as a movement and as a system of thought.

If, essentially, anarchist social science and the anarchist project are more than ever valid, they also most certainly display, in their development, a poverty and a lag which penalise anarchism; something which can only be overcome in thought and action. But without guilt complexes, because the anarchist movement did what it could, immersed in struggles and acting against repression, without means, without professionals of political thought and without complexes of inferiority. Despite all of the academics' contempt (which is the contempt for or fear of all that which is simple because it is true), that science and that project reached the highest point ever attained, until today, by the movement of human emancipation over the course of its millennial history of efforts and failures, of attempts and defeats.

For all of this, and even though the anarchist movement is today fragile and contradictory, still recuperating from a crisis that almost saw it disappear from social struggles, and even though the anarchist movement is today, in some of its characteristics, at the same time senile and infantile, let us be anarchists and, damn it, proudly so.

forms of power) of that explosive and extremely fertile anti-authoritarian hypothesis.

In the more strictly political field, from that hypothesis were born ways about how to destroy power (to be distributed among all by means of a decentralised, federalist organisation, based more on agreements than laws, more on consensus than on coercion) and predictions about the failure of "State socialism".

The anarchist sociological hypothesis about the nature of social inequality is a hypothesis which today, at the distance of a hundred years, finds scientific confirmation in its capacity to comprehend and interpret social-economic realities and changing forms of exploitation, whether in the so-called socialist countries, or in the neo, late, post-capitalist countries (according to the preferred terminology) of the West, whereas the Marxist hypothesis explains nothing before systems where private property no longer exists (USSR, etc.) and where power and the privileges inherent therein were substituted by the control exercised in private companies and the state apparatus by techno-bureaucrats.

In effect, the anarchist sociological hypothesis is a global scientific hypothesis, applicable always and everywhere, from the tribe to the super-State, from the pastoral to the post-industrial economy, while the Marxist hypothesis is only applicable (and with some reservations) to classical capitalist society. Accordingly, the nature of classes and class conflict can be reasonably explained, in their current reality and generalised scientifically, by making exclusive reference to the anarchist hypothesis.

Let us consider, almost haphazardly, a Marxist sociologist, the Pole Stanislaw Ossowski, moderately heretical, and the social-democrat Ralf Dahrendorf, a German sociologist and EEC technocrat.² The first writes in *Struttura di classe*

² "European Economic Community" is the former name of the current European Union. [T.N.]

e coscienza sociale that: “The insufficiency of the Marxist-Leninist conception of class for the analysis of the social structure of countries with nationalised means of production was revealed, on the one hand, in the Stalinist conception of non-antagonistic classes and, on the other hand, in the discussions about systems of privilege of specific groups of the populations of these countries. But, even in relation to the capitalist countries, the Marxist criterion of class ceased in part to be adequate [...]. A conception of class from the 19th century, whether in the Marxist or liberal interpretation, lost in many respects its actuality in the modern world [...]. Where political power can, in an open and effective way, change the class structure, where the determining privileges for social positioning, among which the privilege of a greater participation in profit, are conferred by the decisions of political power, where a considerable part, or even the greater part, of the population is framed by hierarchical bureaucratic-type stratification, the 19th century concept of class becomes to a certain extent a greater or lesser anachronism.”

Dahrendorf writes in *Classi e conflitto di classe nella società industriale* that: “Classes and class conflict always subsist when authority is distributed in an unequal way, according to social position. It may seem of little importance to say that in the communities of post-capitalist society there is an unequal distribution of power; on the contrary, this affirmation serves to sustain the applicability of the theory of classes.”

This is why, a hundred years latter, the hypotheses and project of Bakunin, Malatesta, Cafiero and of the other pioneers of anarchism are still the project and the hypotheses upon which the anarchist movement obstinately moves: the obstinacy of reason and not of sentiment. This is why, at a hundred years distance, the fundamental contradiction between anarchists and Marxists, between authoritarians and anti-authoritarians, is more than ever valid and irremediable (unless by dialectical artifices), not by fidelity to a

confrontation between persons (Bakunin and Marx), but by fidelity to a fundamental choice which has shown itself to be factually correct. This was a choice that became a practice of struggle and of organisation for hundreds of thousands of militants and sympathisers, a choice that went from being a popular intuition to a scientific intuition (let us not forget that Bakunin himself said that he learned anarchism with the workers and artisans of the Swiss Jura) and which revealed itself to be a “living” truth in the life and militancy of workers, peasants, artisans, masons, miners, in the revolutionary epics and in the anonymous daily activities of the diffusion of ideas and of agitation, in the factories, schools, prisons, in exile, in city squares, in clandestinity, in military barracks, in the countryside, in avenging gestures and in the humanity of the gestures of daily life, in explosive revolts and in the efforts at education and self-education ... No social movement saw so much creativity, so much revolutionary imagination, such a variety of means (in the unity between means and methods): from syndicalism to avenging or protesting assassination (and not terrorist), from pedagogical engagement to agitation of the masses, from propaganda to the founding of experimental communities, from insurrection to non-violence ...

The hundred years lived by the Italian and international anarchist movement of the Rimini Conference and of the Saint-Imier Congress to today have imparted to us an invaluable patrimony of thought and experience, an ethical-scientific patrimony unique in its coherence and extension in the history of human emancipation. (This is not an inheritance thanks to which one can live from the rent or profits, or, worse, thanks to which one survives while eagerly exhausting it, but a capital, forgive me the metaphor, to invest in action, in struggle, in study).

The hundred years lived by the anarchist movement were a hundred years of defeats, of bloody repression, of mistakes, but also, and above all, a hundred years of exemplary confir-