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On anonymity, claims and reproducibility of actions

Fenrir, Anonymous

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I consider it important to go back to the issue of anonymity or the use of claims for the actions, to pick up again the subject of an aborted debate, not because it was uninteresting but because, since the beginning, it assumed an argumentative and offensive character by proponents of one or another position. This approach is in no way useful to a fruitful debate, that should have the objective to enrich the awareness of everyone involved through the sharing of critical analyses of the different reflections, and not degenerating into a static defense of one's own position, discrediting, even with cheap shots, the "adversary". Always keeping in mind that the anarchist thought is something which is never static, which is subjective and in continuous evolution exactly through analyses and discussion, one can avoid to become fossilized in dogmatic categorizations and divisions based on simple differences of approach which could easily coexist.

It is worth noticing that a dogmatic approach around this issue is not even representative of reality, since it doesn't take

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into account the fact that the same individual or group of action, in his/her/its path of attack against the power, can decide from time to time or in different periods of time to claim or not his/her/its actions, to sign them or not, to write long texts or just two lines, to use an acronym or a stable name for his/her cell, to invent a new one each time, just as the single individuals can choose to organize always with the same people or from time to time with different accomplices. Flexibility and unpredictability have always been important weapons in the anarchist arsenal. These characteristics are exactly what makes it difficult for the State to erase completely the anarchist conflictuality and its groups of actions, since they don't know one another, they often don't have a fixed structure and they change their way of acting and their composition over time. To create clear factions between different areas of the anarchist movement which, on one side, would support the use of acronyms and claims, and on the other side would be supporters of anonymous action or of minimalist claims, contributes in exacerbating the conflicts between anarchists around secondary issues, aiding in this way the work of repression.

At the base of my reasoning I want to always keep the respect for individual autonomy, which is the fundamental point of the anarchist idea and the essential premise for avoiding the reproduction of ideological and judgmental attitudes. What I rather wish is that the in-depth analysis and the debates between the different approaches can lead to an individual enrichment and to a more aware use of the available tools. Therefore we're going to analyze what are the implications of the choice of claiming or not our actions and in what way, and to investigate the question if the claim can be a useful tool to increase the potential of a direct action.

The choice of not claiming in any way a direct action which has been realized, to remain therefore in total "anonymity" (a term that I will continue to use since it's by now already part of the debate but which I consider definitely inappropriate, as

it's obvious that also the ones who claim their actions want to remain anonymous!), can respond to different evaluations of the individual or affinity group. It can be a strategical evaluation, that it's preferable non to give to the judiciary more elements for the investigations like those that can be detected from a claim communique, especially if in a given territory the anarchist presence is small and/or particularly exposed or the social conflict is very scarce: to leave the doubt open if an action is "politically" motivated or not and about the reasons that moved whoever realized it can certainly be useful to confuse the inquisitors and try to prolong the hostilities for as long as possible.

In other cases the choice not to claim an action can be guided, more simply, by the disinterest about the will to communicate anything to society or to those in power. To accomplish an action can be the response to a purely egoistic desire of self-liberation, a challenge conducted by the self to the authority, that has no interest whatsoever in communicating with third parties, and that needs no explanations.

These choices are perfectly valuable and respectable. Also in these cases the action fulfills one of its primary objectives, that is to inflict a material and psychological damage to the enemy. The material damage remains a concrete result which has been obtained, regardless of the words which accompany the action or not. From a psychological point of view, the pressure can in some cases end up being even more if the perpetrators of exploitation that were hit don't have a precise idea of who did it and why (even if they can easily guess it). In other cases, they could be scared exactly by the "reputation" of the anarchists or of a certain acronym, or by the threatening words which, where appropriate, accompany the claim of an action. These consequences are variable and remain, a priori, hardly predictable and measurable.

The evident disadvantage of the choice of not claiming an action is on the communicative level. If the purpose of an attack

to power is not only the material and psychological damage inflicted in the short term but also to show the possibility of attacking the power and some of the possible ways of doing it, then it is important that the news of these actions spread as much as possible. It is well known that the media have a tendency sometimes to censor the existence itself of certain attacks, sometimes to talk about them in a sensationalizing way, reducing them to meaningless acts of vandalism. To write even a few claim lines is useful, first of all, to spread the news of an attack beyond what the mass-media write or not about it, and which will reach people often only on a local level. In this way the news fly more easily through counter-information channels, reaching other people who are hostile to authority, and most of all they arrive non-mediated by the interpretation of power but with the direct words of the ones who did the action, and can inspire others to take action. This is the minimum purpose of a claim.

A more explanatory text about the realized action can be useful also to other purposes: to deepen the motivations of the choice of the target, of the infrastructure or the personality which was hit, its/his/her strategic importance or its/his/her specific responsibilities; to reveal technical details about the realization of the attack, like the materials used or the ways in which the target was approached, the presence of obstacles (alarms, cameras, etc.) and how they were neutralized; to develop a more extensive analysis of the social/political context in which the attack fits; to bring forth proposals of anarchist projectuality.

Different paths and contexts brought individuals and groups that realize actions to use the claim outlining, on each occasion, some of these aspects rather than others. For example many unsigned claims, or claims signed by acronyms like ALF and ELF, have always tended to be more synthetic and to focus on the choice of the objective and on the used means, leaving little space to a wider social/political analysis and to a possible pro-

reports and articles about how to create an affinity group, how to conduct sabotages and liberating animals, the recipes for assembling simple incendiary devices, and tips about how to keep the group safe and face the potential repression.

The anonymous spreading of materials like this, as well as of technical explanations of the functioning of the enemy's infrastructures (for example the network of data and energy) and of how to sabotage them, could be a different idea for feeding the reproducibility of actions and widen the possibilities of action for a number of individuals willing to put themselves out there but excluded from certain knowledge.

In general I just think it's a positive thing the spreading of attacks against the symbols of power, without any hierarchy of modalities and means, but rather through a variety of forms of attack. If the reproducibility of one's own actions is one of the pursued objectives beyond the caused immediate damage, I think the only still point should be the clarity of the motivations for which one decides to attacked a particular target. So that the perspective in which the various forms of attacks, the reasons and the aim place themselves is clear, aiming at a qualitative growth.

ity belies any previous theory about it. The action that in the latest years has produced the biggest social consensus, and sparked a series of other attacks in varying different forms against the same target, was a parcel-bomb claimed by the FAI which maimed the CEO of Equitalia (the State debt collection agency). The direct actions that, following this one, spread like wildfire on all the Italian territory, weren't carried out only by anarchists but also by common people, who shared the hatred against this State institution that was ruining their lives. And yet the initial action which sparked a sequence of other attacks was neither anonymous nor easily reproducible from a technical point of view. In that case the well-chosen target has been the determining factor for the reproducibility of the action, while the high level of destructiveness and specialization of the used method, instead of discouraging for its difficulty to reproduce, contributed to enhance the fighting spirits.

We then have the examples of the strings of car fires that spread in different cities in Europe becoming unstoppable by the authorities, that were at a total loss to find the responsible one. Anonymous actions, that anybody could have realized, for all sorts of motivations.

But also actions which were claimed and signed with a specific acronym found wide dissemination – often on an international level instead of a local one – becoming inspirational for many people. It is the case of the actions signed by the ELF or the ALF, which contributed from the 80s til today to spread the practice of direct action like wildfire, showing that one doesn't necessarily need a big specialization or big means to realize attacks of considerable impact.

We can draw an interesting lesson from the experience of these groups, which had a different idea on how to facilitate the reproducibility of actions than the anonymity proposal. The ALF and ELF contributed to the passing on of their experiences by publishing and spreading different pamphlets, handbooks,

posals for projectuality. Other groups of action, especially those who adopted, over time, a stable organizational form with its own name (accompanied or not by a certain acronym), have often used claims mainly to develop their own social/political analysis, in which the single actions fit in the framework of a theoretical evolution and a long term projectuality of the group. In the latest years, thanks to the theoretical contribution of groups like the FAI and the CCF, also the proposal of using the claims like means of communications between groups of actions, to potentiate the debate on analysis and strategies, as well as to enhance the solidarity in front of repressive attacks, gained strength. The initial proposal of the FAI – expressed exactly through the claims of some actions, then resumed and relaunched later by the imprisoned CCF members – to extend the use of this acronym, leaving it available to use by other anarchists to claim their actions, as long as some basic points were shared (internationalism, informality, prisoners solidarity etc.) fits exactly in this perspective.

Such a proposal, that can and wants to be a further opportunity in the anarchist toolbox which is available to the anarchist individual set up for action, was misunderstood by the supporters of “anonymity” at all costs, who interpreted the spreading of long claims/analysis like displays of egotism and self-centredness rather than a new way of dialogue and confrontation between groups and individuals who share the practice of action. These critics even came to the position that the choice to claim one's own actions, and to use those claims also as a way of debating between groups of actions, was actually covering the will to show off, to be approved, to impose a hegemony on the movement, to play the vanguard, to be on the center of the media stage, and other criticism of this kind. Beside the fact that whoever claims his/her actions keeps on being anonymous, hence it is unlikely he/she can gain “celebrity”, it is evident that by laying such kind of criticisms, no debate can be possible. Reading between the lines, what seems to under-

lie the conflict between the two methods is a different vision of the possible ways of intervening into reality, in which on one side it is seen as a priority the search for accomplices and comrades and the solidarity with them, on the other side the attempt to involve other “exploited and excluded” people. Different approaches which seem to be mutually exclusive but not necessarily, if we keep in mind that every direct action affects, in some way, both the collective and the individual imagination, inspiring other anarchist and rebel people, compelling the indifferent to take a position, and warning the accomplices of dominion.

Connected to this issue is the one about *reproducibility*, another important knot of the debate. This concept, which is often accompanied by the anonymity one, has become one of the ruling words of “classical” insurrectionalism, but it has been rarely reviewed and submitted to critical reflection, becoming sometimes a *cliché* with a prescriptive tone.

The desire that one’s own actions could inspire other people and that conflictuality can spread is more than understandable. The problem lies in the statement that reproducibility is only possible at some conditions, namely that only anonymous, unclaimed and simple actions can *belong* to anybody and consequently being more likely *reproduced*. According to this belief, it is preferable that an action is not attributable to a certain “identitarian” area, like the anarchist one (element which becomes evident in case of a claim), so that any people who recognize themselves in that attack can give it their own meaning and, in their turn, replicate that method against what oppresses them.

This proposition is problematic under different points of view. What is being proposed to the attacking individual is to nullify his/her own individuality and the motivations which drive him/her to act, in order to blend into the mass, to be more understandable by it. Moreover, it is evident that it is mainly other anarchist or anti-system people who replicate

on the territory would thus be more valuable than more complex and focused actions, which are deemed to require more specialization.

I don’t find it positive to establish parameters which measure the intensity of the means of conflict, moreover choosing then to lowball. Nor I find it positive to establish a hierarchy between reproducible and non reproducible actions, as if this was the only differentiating circumstance that matters, and as if these different modes of attack couldn’t coexist. The variety of forms of action is welcome, the increase in the number of both attacks against the networks of dominion spread on the territory, less controlled and thus easier to carry out (which become more valuable exactly if they are numerous and maintained in time) and the attacks to core structures of power, which sometimes require a meticulous planning and proper means. The wish is that whoever has the technical skills and the means for more destructive and complex actions would use them at full potentiality, rather than to lower the level of his/her own actions to be more “reproducible” by others. Some well targeted actions, which are not necessarily easy to carry out, are not reproducible, but that doesn’t in any way detract from their importance. The issue of reproducibility cannot include all the spectrum of anarchist action.

To make matters even more difficult, the reality contributes in dismantling the belief that only simple and anonymous actions can reproduce themselves. It happens, at times, that the conflict explodes where the less you were expecting it, while at the same time many attempts to ignite it in a calculated way fail completely. It is almost impossible to extrapolate rules or rigid patterns about it. The fact that some actions happen not to be repeated while others spread in a viral way depends on an infinite number of factors which are not only the choice of the target and the used means.

There is a particular specific example of the Italian territory, that if we want to talk about social consensus and reproducibil-

very explicit. Whoever agreed could be inspired by them and encouraged to act in his/her turn.

Would an explosion in front of a governmental institution, perhaps realized by anarchists but unclaimed, produce the same effect today, with a hysterical media background which cries about Islamic terrorism? To highlight the meaning of one's own actions can be an incitement to attack for other comrades or still unknown accomplices. If an action is realized also with the desire that it could be of inspiration to others, then to make sure its motivations are clear is of fundamental importance, just like it is to spread the news of the actions that happen and the words that eventually accompany them.

Obviously we're talking about actions that are split from a wider context of social conflictuality. The ambiguity of an anonymous action is no longer in question in cases where there is already a campaign of actions or protests, or a local struggle, going on against the target, or when the action is one of a series of other similar ones which were already previously explained. The examples of this type are countless, even only in Italy, from the hundreds of Enel pylons destroyed in the 80s during the struggle against nuclear power, to the GMO fields destroyed, and the many sabotages against the high-speed train railways realized in the past years in all Italy in conjunction with a phase of the No Tav struggle in Val Susa. In these cases one can undoubtedly talk about relatively easy actions, reproducible everywhere and with a clear meaning, whether they are claimed or not (even if the problem of the specificity of these struggles still remains, so that if the perspective in which they are inserted is not clear, even an action against these targets could be realized by individuals whose ideas are very distant from the anarchist ones).

The other assumption of "classical" insurrectionalism according to which the actions can be *reproducible* is that, in addition to being anonymous, they are *simple to carry out* and hit *outlying tentacles* of dominion. Small actions spread

certain actions, to whom the presence of an anarchist claim could actually be inspiring, much more than the big mass of exploited people who never dream of raising their head and react against their and others' exploitation.

But above all, we find here that exaltation of the means over the end that we had already criticized elsewhere. If the aim of an action is in no way to communicate something, this aspect can be of no interest to the authors of the gesture, since there is always still the material damage caused to one of the tentacles of dominion. But if the aim of an action is also (or mainly) communicative, to tend towards the reproducibility of a method splitting it from the aim to which it is directed and which motivates it, in this way *depersonalizing* that action, is an absolute nonsense or even damaging. I will explain this concept with a few examples.

Between February and April 2016, four bombs exploded in front of as many churches and cathedrals in the city of Fermo, in the Marche region (Italy). Some time later, an anarchist website reported these news stories, which hadn't had a great deal of attention beyond the local area, exalting the gesture and assuming an iconoclastic motive (the hypothesis that the bombers could be extreme right wing exponents was dismissed as very unlikely). In July of the same year, two local people were arrested and accused of the four explosive devices based on hard evidence. Initially presented as anarchists by the media, the two arrested individuals later turned out to be extreme right wing members, local football hooligans, tied in a close friendship with Amedeo Mancini, another neo-fascist hooligan who some days before, in the same city, had beaten to death Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, a refugee from Nigeria who was trying to defend his girlfriend from racist slurs. In that occasion these two guys, who will later be arrested for the churches bombings, had expressed on the social networks their total solidarity to Emmanuel's killer, as well as expressing, in their turn, heavily racist comments and statements. One of the

churches that was hit in Fermo was the same that was hosting Emmanuel as well as other immigrants and refugees.

This example appears in my opinion illustrative of how a same action and a same method could have totally different meanings depending on who is carrying them out and with which aim. The actions in question, not having been accompanied by any explanations about the motivations which underpinned them, were leaving space to ambiguity, thus not contributing in any way to an advancement of the struggle against domination. An explosion that hits a church can be, likewise, the iconoclastic atheist gesture of someone who wants to hit the “Church” institution as such, or the gesture of a fascist who is outraged about the reception policies of that church towards refugees. Two motivations that are clearly the incompatible antipodes of each other.

Another example: on July 8th 2016 a big arson almost completely destroyed the skiing facilities in Fossolo, Brembana Valley (Italy). An environmentalist-motivated action, in full Earth Liberation Front brand, or a move concocted by local corrupted politicians together with the companies who won the competitive bids for the reconstruction, as assumed by the investigators?

Sure, to get to know about actions like this can initially make us gloat, but a basic doubt and uncertainty about the motivations of the gesture remains. A claim communicate, or even only a graffiti, an acronym, a symbol left on the place of the action would have cleared up any confusion. Otherwise these anonymous actions, whose meaning remains unknown, can be “appropriated” really by *anyone*, included fascists and mafia. Anarchists and rebels against authority don’t have the monopoly on the practice of direct action. The State, right wing groups, organized criminality and religious extremists, just to give some examples, have used and sometimes use methods which are similar to ours to attack their objectives, with very displeasing motivations.

Even the objective of an attack can be the same – a church, a courthouse, a government agency, a bank – but the motivations be completely different from our own, for example the fact that one of those institutions is expressing too “moderate” policies, from the point of view of one who has a reactionary ideology.

Something similar can happen in case the objectives and corresponding claims of an attack concern a specific aspect of exploitation, without any mention of a wider criticism against the dominating system in its entirety. Some specific struggles can potentially be shared by anarchist/libertarian people as well as opposite factions, if it is not clear how that specific struggle fits in a wider struggle for total liberation. Let us remember the case of the two fascists arrested in January 2013 for four incendiary attacks realized by the ALF against the meat and dairy industry, that were claimed with very short and generic texts, which focused only on the specific aspect of animal exploitation.

Does it make sense to say that only the action in itself matters, beyond the motivations and the spur that armed the hands of who realized it? This would mean to slide into a fetish for the means, a fetish for violent action in itself, a fetish for the bomb. One of the assumptions underlying anarchism is exactly the commonality between the means and the ends, thus if we talk about propaganda with the deed both of these aspects should be evident, because the reproducibility of the used means alone is not sufficient for a qualitative advancement of the struggle against the system.

When the Weather Underground were attacking political and military targets of the United States, they were used to explain their actions very well, because their aim was not only to retaliate against the US government in response to the massacre in Vietnam, but also to encourage other people to take action against war and imperialism, “to bring war home” in a wider sense. The political motivations and the objectives that consequently were chosen wanted to be made