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Tomás Ibáñez
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1984

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Farewell to the Revolution

Tomás Ibáñez

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What is the relation that exists between anarchism, on one hand, and social revolution on the other? The anarchist movement put this question aside a long time ago, and in a certain sense, one can say that the debate, “revolution, yes or no” is an old controversy, or if one prefers, a problem for ideological dinosaurs, among whom I evidently include myself.

I maintain that the concept of revolution is antithetical or incompatible with anarchist thought, for the reason that the former carries with it a series of consequences or effects which negate liberty.

This is not to put into question the “desire for revolution,” which constitutes a fundamental element of the sensibility of social emancipation and of utopian thought. On the contrary libertarians, and with them millions of people, dream, more or less vaguely, of a *social change* that would end in a society radically different from the ones that we are familiar with. This dream has been a part of the social imagination since the time, not too distant, when it was discovered that social forms are socio-historical forms, that is, relative forms; and as a result, that it is conceivable to act upon them so as to modify them in accord with our will. To actively desire to

live “in another place,” in relation to what we experience as socially instituted, is undoubtedly the imperative of all morality.

It is not therefore the *desire for revolution* that must be questioned. On the contrary, the desire for revolution is a fundamental component of all critical thought, and it is an indispensable part of the libertarian utopia.

On the other hand, what is seriously problematic is the *revolutionary project*. It is important to note the political, strategic elaboration of the desire for revolution, its concrete translation into a socio-political concept and as a libertarian practice. What appears questionable is the constitution of the desire for revolution into a rationally elaborated, articulated project, that could serve as a vehicle for effective individual and collective action. For the desire for revolution thus becomes, necessarily, a totalitarian enterprise and an instrument for domination.

Why is it that the revolutionary project contradicts what can be considered the very essence of anarchist thought? This is not a question linked to the notion of insurrection or revolution. In effect, the recourse to violence is frequently the sole valid means to overcome certain situations, and I am not one of those who sees in the use of violence a “defect” that irremediably denaturalizes all action that has an emancipatory vision. It is true that the means or instruments used are never neutral and that the use of violence necessarily implies certain consequences; but *all* the means of violence that we may use carry with them unintended and uncontrollable secondary effects. The rejection of violence of the oppressed does not appear to be justifiable, though a rejection of a “strategy of violence” is.

Beyond the insurrectional aspect of revolution, what is being put into question concerns a basic problem, linked to the very logic of the concept of revolution. An historical analysis of the emergence and development of the concept of social revolution would show us to what extent this concept has been marked by the scientific model that is proper to classical mechanics, and to what extent

1. Abandon explicitly the concept of revolution, proceeding to its criticism and following through on all the consequences of its rejection.
2. Recognize the impossibility of a society deprived of power relations, and infer the consequences.
3. Recognize that not all positive goals are necessarily compatible², and draw the appropriate conclusions.

If what I have said is correct, it is truly a pity, since it was agreeable to dream of a society without power, believing that all the values that appeared to us as positive could be organized in a harmonious bouquet, and it was undoubtedly exhilarating to live fighting for the revolution.

Anarchists were among the first to proclaim that human beings should get used to living without God, even though this was frustrating and difficult; today, anarchists, and people in general, should learn to live without the belief in revolution.

² R. Pagés, “La Libertá, la guerre, la seritú”, *Volontá*, No. 4 (1984).

3. Finally, the idea of revolution implies the belief in social *determinism*, that is, the belief that society is a kind of machine governed by laws, upon which one can apply certain causally efficacious actions to produce controlled and predictable effects. Without this belief, the “revolutionary project” makes no sense, since a strategy can only be elaborated on the basis of a causal relation between the realized actions and its produced consequences, or at least, in a conviction in these causal characteristics. This tends to ignore the fact that society is a self-organizing system, profoundly unpredictable in its ‘reactions and in its functioning. And it also leads (though this is a different question) to the acceptance of a model of knowledge of the social based on the control of the object to be known, and ultimately, on social control. Libertarian thought, by definition, cannot shelter within its womb the concept of revolution, and should comprehensively abandon the very use of the term “revolution.”

The practical activity of libertarians can, eventually, unleash and provoke a revolution, but never as the result of a rational and coherent project. The “desire for revolution” and “utopia,” conjoined with libertarian practice, constitute powerful elements for social change. They can force the social system to restructure itself without our knowing precisely why and how. Fortunately, neither the libertarians, nor any others, dominate sufficiently the mechanisms and the social laws so as to control and lead them in accord with their will.

To conclude, I would like to state that anarchism is a *system in becoming*, an essentially evolutionary system, which in its origins had insufficiencies and authoritarian characteristics, and to this day continues to have them. From the perspective of critical anarchism, the concern, it may be said, is to improve anarchism from day to day, freeing it progressively of its authoritarian contents.

Today, the progress of anarchist thought traverses three fundamental conditions:

it is a tributary of the deterministic and dominating scientific ideology that impregnates the Galilean-Newtonian scientific model. Lappo Berti¹ has formulated this analysis in an excellent article that appears in the magazine *Aut-Aut*; for this reason, I will not treat this issue in a detailed way, and instead limit myself to simply pointing out that, historically, the concept of revolution has been for the most part useful for the purposes of the bourgeoisie, and more generally, for all projects that aim at political power.

This aspect by itself would be sufficient to cast a shadow of doubt over the pertinent, pretended libertarian concept of revolution; what matters, however, is to note other aspects, and for those, it is necessary to identify some characteristics of the notion of revolution. A revolution obviously does not reduce itself to a simple transformation of society. It is necessary to specify at least five supplementary elements, in order to come to some understanding of it:

1. It is a relatively *brusque and rapid* transformation – otherwise the terms “revolution” and “evolution” would be interchangeable.
2. It is a *radical* transformation – if it were not, one could speak of a simple re-adjustment or social “reform.”
3. It is an *oriented* transformation. that is. it has a final goal – libertarians are not “democrats” satisfied with the realization of majority rule. but demand that the revolution. if it is to be “authentic.” must conform to their own proper criteria.
4. It is a *global* transformation that concerns all of society – contrariwise one would be speaking of nothing but a temporary local social change.

¹ L. Berti, “Revoluzione o ...?” *Aut Aut*, January 1980, Milan.

5. Finally, as a political project, the revolution necessarily converts itself into *atranscendental objective* — the effects attributed to its realization are sufficiently important. as this objective (the revolution) is situated at a level qualitatively different from other objectives. relegating these others to a position of hierarchical subordination.

If we analyze the different consequences that follow from these five characteristics. it is easy to see why the idea of revolution becomes incompatible with anarchism from the moment that it takes on the form of a political project. that is. a project that is virtually realizable and that orients the oppositional social practice of libertarians. Very briefly. I will cite three of these reasons:

1. The idea of revolution. as a supreme transcendental objective. necessarily re-introduces a *theological* element into libertarian thought. This supreme objective legitimizes the sacrifice of the present to the future. concretely lived time to a purely ideal time — not to speak of other sacrifices that extend from the self-sacrifice of the militant and the sacrifice of others. through to the sacrifice of “principles.” From the moment that there is a transcendental objective, a supreme end, a value located in a future time, *all sacrifices are permitted*. Given that the revolution could be achieved by means of a strategy. whatever it be. we could not call ourselves libertarians If we did not intend to carry it out — whatever the cost. The thousands of deaths that instituted society daily causes. the innumerable sufferings and humiliations of every moment. the permanent injustice. leaves us no choice. If the revolution is inscribed as a possible consequence of a strategy, *nothing* can justify the renunciation of that strategy. The affirmation that “the end does not justify the means” loses, in this context, all meaning which is not moralistic and pious. Of what importance are the justifications if the result constitutes the end of barbarism? We are dealing. obviously. with an old debate. but those who believe that the revolution can be a direct consequence of their actions have reasons to “scorn”

the “good sentiments” of the libertarians. It is undoubtedly necessary to choose between the belief in the revolutionary project, on the one hand, and the libertarian “ideology” on the other.

One cannot be an anarchist and engage in a revolutionary project, as this latter negates all libertarian values. Not having understood this, the libertarians of the first half of the century were led into incredible confusions. creating a distance between their practice and their ideology.

2. The idea of revolution, as a global and totalizing project concerning a given Society in its entirety, is necessarily a totalitarian project because it ties, in the same fate, the totality of individual projects, subordinating the particular to the general.

In effect, society is a *system*, in the strong sense of the term — all its parts interact with one another and are interrelated. Society is more than the sum of its parts, yet it is also less than the sum of its parts, because each part, as incorporated in a system, suffers the obligations that limit the expression of its own characteristics. The “revolutionary project” also carries with it a “social project.” It is not simply a negative endeavour aimed at destroying what is socially instituted, for it involves the proposal of an alternative social system. Consequently, the revolutionary project presents itself as a plan, which will affect the existence of *every one* of the parts of the social body, obliging, in addition, these parts to adapt themselves to the social project as conceived by the “revolutionaries,” whether they wish to or not. A social project can be conceived in a way so as to maximize the liberty and autonomy of each social element, but each element must adjust itself with the whole, and the whole secures the compatibility by exercising the required material and ideological functions. The model of society guided by a revolutionary project is therefore a model for *all*. It is doubtful that the goal of libertarian action is to promote a social system, whichever it may be, if it means that, by definition, this system would have to be partially enforced.