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The Merchants of Life

Val Basilio

2000

Thirty years ago, a Belgian situationist — whose decayed radical subjectivity is now in an advanced state of decomposition — noted in his most famous work that: “Power, if only it were human, would be proud of the number of potential encounters it has successfully prevented.”

One of the encounters that was avoided according to the suggestive proposition of the author was that of the French anarchist Albert Libertad with the Italian artist Giorgio di Chirico. The former — burning his identity documents — the latter — drawing heads without faces. Both are understood as denouncing the operation of organized annihilation carried out by the social order in its confrontations with the individual. Better not to have a name or a face than to be a mere reflection of social conventions. The refusal of the identity that is assigned to us by the state is the first step to affirming our individuality. Starting from completely different experiences and presuppositions, the anarchist and the artist had arrived — each in his own way — at analogous conclusions.

But this play of affinities never came together and the encounters missed on the terrain of the reappropriation of our existence does not stop at this single case.

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Anyone who might be interested in curbing the process of commodification that is transforming all of our life into a vast supermarket — where adventure is booked in a travel agency, the appetite is satisfied with pre-cooked meals ready in five minutes, creativity serves only to decorate advertising posters and play consists more than anything else of operations of exchange — will certainly find the correspondence of aims between deeds and persons from the same era, but different continents, interesting.

Argentina, 1927. Here, as in many other parts of the world, the night of August 22 is a night of vigil. On the plaza and in the houses, thousands of people are waiting. They wait to find out if the United States has effectively executed Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the two Italian anarchists accused of robbery and murder and condemned to death on the electric chair. Never had such an act produced so many repercussions in the world. Arrested in May of 1920, the two anarchists were tried and condemned in July of the following year in spite of the alibi that excused them and the numerous witnesses brought forward by the defense. An impressive campaign in favor of their liberation was begun throughout the world involving thousands and thousands of people with very different ideas. In Argentina as well, protest demonstrations, meetings and direct attacks were not lacking: against the US embassy, against the monument to Washington and against American enterprises such as Ford. And, of course, the initiatives in favor of the two anarchists multiplied with the approach of the prophetic date.

The dawn of August 23 found thousands of people still awake, thronging the newsstands in order to read the morning papers. The news flowed from mouth to mouth between the general disbelief and dismay. The law had won. Sacco and Vanzetti had been executed. The announcement of their murder would provoke protest demonstrations everywhere with clashes and incidents. In Argentina, a general strike is called by the central workers on this day. People pour out into the streets as incidents break out on all

Christ drove the merchants out of the temple with violence. We know his reason: only god had the right to establish the price of life.

Contrarily, what happened in Argentina and France during these years cleared the board of both the merchants and the temple. It is only a question of taking the advise of a German philosopher and starting to stretch out a hand.

sides. The names of the two anarchists have become a symbol of the struggle against the outrages of power throughout the world.

This is the situation in which a businessman from Buenos Aires, one Bernardo Gurevich, head of the tobacco firm “Combinados”, gets the idea to put a new brand of cigarettes on the market at an economical price intended for the workers. In order to draw attention to the product and attract sales, Gurevich has the brilliant notion to call the cigarette “Sacco and Vanzetti”. The business initiative is not appreciated. Speculating on the death of the two anarchists? Mingling the smoke of their bodies burnt on the electric chair with that of cigarettes? Transforming the tears shed for their death into ink for fattening a bank account? Enclosing the rage of others between the dusty lids of a snuff-box? Making an advertising gimmick of the symbol of the struggle against the state? On November 26, 1927, a powerful charge of dynamite destroys the establishment of “Combinados”. The attack is attributed to the same anarchist who was held responsible for other dynamite attacks in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, namely Severino di Giovanni. The damage caused by the explosion is huge. That very day, the businessman who came up with the original idea decides to withdraw the brand of cigarette called “Sacco and Vanzetti”.

France, 1930. About a half a century has passed since the publication of the Chants of Maldoror by Lautreamont, a book which has subsequently been greeted as “the most radical book of all western literature”. This book had gone through many changes of circumstance and might have been destined to fall into oblivion if it had not attracted the attention of the surrealists who get the credit for the recovery and recasting of its author. Already in the spring of 1919, even before building the surrealist movement, Andre Breton had edited the publication of the Poesies of Isadore Ducasse (Lautreamont’s given name). In 1927, another surrealist, Philippe Soupault, had edited the first edition of the Complete Works, which would stir up a hornet’s nest of controversy. The surrealists would make a kind of precursor, an extreme model, of Lautreamont. For

the young in search of a new existence, the work of Lautreamont had nothing to do with literature. The torrential imagination of the “man of Montevideo”, his iconoclastic fury, could only constitute an incitement to revolt, the overcoming of this world, an affirmation of one’s individuality. Lautreamont sits at Sade’s side on the peak of the Black Olympus of the surrealists.

Thus, it is not at all surprising if they don’t seem to take pleasure in the news of the imminent opening of a new Parisian nightspot, the “Bar Maldoror”. The shopkeeper enterprise wanted to make a menu of Evil, to serve blasphemous imprecations at its tables. It wanted to satisfy the customers’ stomachs rather than consume them with doubt. It wanted to quench the fire that burned in the throats of the clients rather than set it to their hearts. It wanted to make people pass a pleasant evening rather than making them all go into a rage. It wanted to make many instead of overturning the world. It was too much.

Already, a few years earlier — in that same 1927 which was shaken by the news of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti — the surrealists had sent an open letter to the committee for the reconstruction of a monument to the poet Rimbaud (a monument that had been destroyed during the first world war) in Charleville, the city of his birth. In that letter, one could read: “Hypocrisy extends its dreadful hand toward the people that we love in order to make them serve in the conservation of that against which they have always fought. It is evident that we are no longer deceived about the range of such enterprises of confiscation, we do not alarm ourselves more than is necessary at your shameful and habitual maneuvers, persuaded as we are that a force of total fulfillment animates everything that has truly been inspired in the world against you. To us it matters little...that some profit is drawn from the most subversive intelligences, since their marvelous poison will continue to penetrate into the minds of the young in order to corrupt or expand them.” Three years later, this literary outpouring of fatalistic wrath would fortunately give place to an action stripped of aestheticism.

At the opening of the “Bar Maldoror”, Andre Breton and his comrade were there and the completely laid waste to the place. The owner had no choice but to change the name of his business. The name of Lautreamont was saved from the slime of commerce.

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In the face of this determination to prevent money from realizing its commerce over individuals desiring only to see it disappear, in the face of this strenuous defense of the spirit of revolt against the assaults that have come from the shopkeepers’ spirit, in the face of these vigorous attacks against mercantile logic, chance does not dwell on how much separated the protagonists of these actions. It is better to leave all the pathetic demands for improbable property rights to the militant and artistic rabble. It is enough to know that, in spite of appearances, the communicating vessels of dream and action have met on the terrain of hatred for all commodification, even if only for a moment. It doesn’t matter what it is: the memory of two executed comrades, the work of a writer, the taste of a meal, the natural environment, an idea. That which is from the heart is an expression of life. And it is never too late to recall that life cannot be reduced to an object of commercial exploitation. It has no price, it only has the claim of having a meaning. Today we are so thoroughly surrounded by commodities, adapted to the act of perpetually putting our hand in our wallet in order to get what is already ours, that nothing seems to touch us any more, nothing seems to come from our hearts. One cannot be filled with love for a plastic wrapped object. We remain with only our indifference, every emotion in us extinguished. When all human expression has been brought back inside the boundaries in which commercial exploitation is possible, when nearly nothing that could not be an object of lucrative activity has survived, when the amount in one’s bank account is the best calling card, it is time that brutality takes the upper hand over indifference and resignation.