

THERE IS NO
UNHAPPY
REVOLUTION

The Communism of Destitution

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Avvertimento

The following is a translation of the Prologue to Marcello Tari's *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice. Il comunismo della destituzione*, published in Rome by Derive approdi in 2017. The preface corresponds to pages 5–17 of the original which, in its entirety, spans 240 pages.

We're new to Italian translation, so the results of this effort are a little rough now and then. Phrases with their Italian counterpart in square brackets indicate points whose sense was either elusive, uncertain, or which appeared to lend themselves to divergent readings. The reader is asked to consider this a draft, and to await an authorized translation before formulating any final assessment of the text.

—IWE
January, 2018

Prologue

When will the inverted world finally straighten up a little?

—Franz Kafka to Milena Jesenka Pollak

How does an epoch become an era, and thereby allow a new eon to be born?

Or,

How does a revolt turn into an insurrection, and this into a revolution?

For centuries, every generation finds itself thrust against this unsolved, and always imperative, question. It could be said that revolutionaries come into the world at the very moment when individuals pose these questions to themselves and begin, together with others, to elaborate answers. A social and spiritual battle, one that has given rise to daring experiments and amazing adventures which, it is true, have more often than not been defeated. Yet it often happened that the fight ended by the abandonment of the questioner. The tricks of History have always prevailed over the scandal of truth. Franz Kafka said that of revolutionary spiritual movements, which are always movements against history, it is as if nothing had happened yet. Nevertheless, or precisely for this reason, the question continues to surface from the ruins of time, undiminished.

Arriving now at the end of a civilization—ours, of course—the question finds itself urgently charged, carrying an unavoidable character, becoming even more precise, the silent reflection of an

increasingly widespread disquiet. These are simple questions after all, repeated several times and from distant places. How to put an end to a dominion that does not want to end? How to put an end to the misery of an existence whose meaning escapes it from all sides? How to put an end to this present, whose architectural plan resembles that of a cell large enough to contain an entire population? How to put an end to a catastrophe that can no longer spread, since it is already everywhere, and has begun to dig under the feet of the Angel of history? Finally, and above all: how can we shift the axis of the world, orienting it along the abscissa of happiness? The answer is inseparable from the question, which, for this reason, must remain motionless but open to the use of whoever feels it emerge within itself. A historian of the Kabbala once remarked that the true doctrine consists entirely of questions. The answer then enters into existence, when it comes to completely coincide with the question.

These days, however, it seems it is the world itself, being now exhausted, that poses the question, before leaving the stage exhausted, because it has consumed all its possibilities. From now on, only the impossible counts. History, when it approaches the end, becomes enormously heavy to bear, and it's been a long time that its 'progress' has signaled only the intensification of its catastrophe. The truth, buried under the immense heaps of progress' debris, is that there has never been a single world that would be that of our present, enclosed in the quaternary 'West-Modernity-Democracy-Capitalism', but only an Earth that has never stopped transforming into a multiplicity of worlds. Worlds that appear unified in their separation and hierarchization by cybernetics, capital, metaphysics, and the spectacle.

Until not long ago, there existed a possibility, albeit a subaltern one, of naming the plurality of the worlds. But the present world, which is represented as the one and only unity of meaning, has also eliminated from the dominant discursive regime the modern political definitions of the 'second', 'third' or 'fourth' world, just as it did 'classes': one world, that of capital, and one class, the planetary bourgeoisie. This *one* world, this concrete abstraction that denies existence to all the other worlds—in a word, "civilization"—is precisely what is collapsing under the weight of its catastrophic triumph. Turning this collapse, this triumphal catastrophe, this impossibility, into the redemption of all the various worlds is the wager of today's revolutionaries. To triumph against this unitary world before it collapses upon mankind

would, in the end, be the only reasonable way to confront the West's frantic will to apocalypse.

Revolutionaries are the militants of the time of the end, and within this temporality they work for the realization of a profane happiness. But we must bear in mind that the exhaustion of the possibilities of this world also includes the forms of political action that accompanied it. Unless we wish to persist in the mode of the undead, as zombies, a political identity that (like this world) has exhausted every possibility can only be laid to rest. If we are to seize upon the impossible, therefore, we are left with no choice but to modify this special form of life, this *mask* that modern revolutionary militancy was, and of which only fragments and ruins remain in memory (its historical ontology remains to be written). It is perhaps for this reason that the prevailing relationship to it has become one an unresolved mourning. The black *North Face* jacket, which has become a constant presence in every demonstration in which anything happens, seems to be there to remind each of us of the wider procession.

Let's be careful though, to not pit ourselves *against* the militant, whose history deserves our respect. Instead, let us adopt the Pauline strategy of the "as not": militants are *as not* militants. As Giorgio Agamben writes,

"The 'as not' is a deposition without abdication. To live in the form of 'as not' means to strip all legal and social property, without this deposition founding a new identity."

In the first place, this would mean freeing those who live in that form from the obligation of being *someone*, or, what amounts to the same thing, to live *as if* they were something they're not, something never really present but positioned ahead of them as an exterior end. To live 'as not' means for the militant to dissolve the spell that invests him in an *infinite task* and an *absolute delegation*.

Mask and face can no longer be superimposed and separated at will, at least if we do not wish to repeat the tragedy of the professional revolutionaries Berthold Brecht already staged in his 1930 *Die Maßnahme*. Because we now know that there is no face that is not already a mask, it is up to each of us to decide which one to be faithful to. Both the militants of the party and the young comrade protagonists in Brecht's *pièce* were wrong: the former because they were blinded by ideology, the latter by their own voluntarist sentimentalism. And

although that era can be thought of as a magnificent tragedy, for us the “conducting thread” can no longer claim to be straight one, governed by a series of “provisions” and “measures”; rather, it makes a distinctive swerve, a spiral, bending inward at the same time as outward, endless, without a top, like Tatlin’s tower.

There is no need, therefore, to flee our vocation. Militancy, as the philosopher might say, can be “made use of”. It must be placed in tension with revolutionary temporality, deactivating its inclination to become a tyrannical identity, a form separate from life, the conducting thread of a moral substance from which one proceeds by means of gestures and behavior so easily separable from the subject who performs them. “You are no longer yourselves (...) but (...) blank pages on which the revolution writes its orders,” says the leader to the agitators in Brecht’s didactic drama: the revolution has always meant the destitution of the identities assigned to us by this world and it continues to be so, but the militant can no longer be the quintessence of the politics of means to ends, a body and a voice that become *instruments* through which the progressive will of history is determined. An external vanguard to *itself first of all*, to one’s own life no less than to others’. In *Mauser*, Heiner Müller’s rewriting of the drama forty years later, the activity of the militant—i.e., to kill the enemies of the revolution—is seen for what had really become: a work, and the revolution itself a way of producing enemies.

What defines a revolutionary becoming is the destitution of the ego together with the reality of the enemy. The auto-destitution of the militant consists at once in consenting to the deposition of one’s own social identity, in deactivating the apparatus of ideology, while also grasping the power of that mask, of the particular mode of existence of militancy, which implies a form of life that emerges by exposing the singular relationship to one’s own side [*parte*: ‘part, share, side, way, direction, somewhere, party] and to the world, one based on fidelity to a truth, the truth of an encounter that each of us undergoes in his own life, not with individuals, or with an idea, but with a force [*la verità di un incontro che ciascuno fa nella propria vita non con degli individui, né con un’idea, ma con una forza*]. For revolutionaries, a real encounter is one that not only allows a political friendship to exist through this force, but which offers everyone the possibility of coming into contact with his own self, and from there, to make a decision about his life, together with others. Taking over the language of the first Christian communities, we could say that whoever accomplishes such an

encounter receives *grace*, or *power*. The power of being nothing—that is, everything. Nothing and everything is the truth of that mask.

The image of this strange figure of the militant who lives the militant *as not* could appear almost incomprehensible in the unique dialectic that obtains between the inside and the outside of the self. Paul of Tarsus, in the chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians dedicated to grace, describes the life of the members of his commune in this way:

“...In everything, we present ourselves as ministers of God, in tribulations, in the necessities, in the anxieties, in the beatings, in the prisons, in the tumults, in the labors, in the vigils, in fasts [...] We are considered impostors, and yet we are truthful; strangers, yet we are well-known; dying, and yet we live; punished, but not put to death; afflicted, but always happy; poor, but we make many rich; people who have nothing, and instead we own everything!”

And if, by all evidence, it is this last sentence that resurfaces centuries later in the famous verse of the International, “We who are nothing, we will be everything”, it must be admitted that Paul’s was more convincing, given his insistence on the integral actuality of power, as opposed to the “will be” of the proletarian hymn. On the other hand, the part of the phrase normally translated from the Pauline Greek as “people who have nothing” (ὡς μηδέν) clearly resumes the ὡς μὴ, that is, the *as not*. It might therefore be better translated as, “people who are as not having anything”, that is, people who lay down all their possessions and neutralize their identity while remaining themselves. The verb used by Paul in the second part of the sentence, κατέχοντες, also means “to hold”, “conserve”, “keep still” and “inhabit”, all meanings that seem much more appropriate than those normally employed in contemporary translations of the epistle (“We possess”), as they offer the possibility of thinking, at least in this specific case, something distinct from the typically singular *katechontic* function of the figure here in question. Precisely because they are poor, having destituted all possessions and identities, they have the strength to hold all that remains with them, to conserve the truth, to keep their purpose firm, and to fully inhabit a form of life.

Marx, for whom the proletariat becomes the political, liberating power of all humanity precisely at the point where it is nothing, perhaps would nod his head ever so slightly. The expression, “people who are

as not having anything” evidently does not refer only to material goods, but to socially valuable predicates and qualities that may appear to enrich individuals, while in reality they do nothing but drive them away from themselves and their power, delivering them to the alienation of a soulless form of collectivity incapable of bringing about any genuine experience. It is in this sense that poverty, to be socially nothing, is the form of our freedom: it permits a radical experience of ourselves, an intimacy with our own existence. And if experience—which also means possessing, preserving, retaining, inhabiting a power—is possible only together with others, it is likewise true that only a force composed of individuals who understand the meaning of solitude, which is to be *only* that which we are, and who have a relationship to life and death, who know both happiness and sadness, both collective and individual resistance, only thus a force can arrive at a real experience. The problem of “collectives” is that as soon as they become institutionalized they tend to erase the experiences they have endured, their rigid informality being incapable of holding them back; for this reason, their elaboration requires both the free expression of singularities *and* communism as its discipline. Brecht has a nice phrase explaining how individual freedom can merge with collective discipline, he calls it: “improvisation with a specific purpose”. In any event, no collectivization can ever artificially impose communism, or replace the work of the self upon itself, and it is precisely those who begin, one by one, to perform this work that are able to give life to a commune, which, in turn, constitutes the collective force of gravity that can correct individual egoism. This is one of the differences, and not the least important, between an ordinary collective and a communist form of life.

If this negation (‘we are as being nothing’) [*noi non siamo niente*] contains the deposition of every existing identity, of every socially valorizing attribute of the subject, it is in its positivity (‘and yet we are everything’) [*eppure noi siamo tutto*] that the affirmation of the power of revolutionary becoming lies. For they are not two different phases, nor is there a before and after: they are *one and the same gesture*. Destitution always opens a becoming. It remains for the militant to practice a form of life that lives its life as impossible with the world as it presently exists. The work of its existence is to render the present reality impossible.

In fact, it is against the present in which we have been asked to live, one that can be consumed and which consumes us, but whose use is

forbidden, that all the destructive power of which we are capable must be exercised. If to fight against history means to risk a judgement on every moment of the past, the struggle against the present consists in the practical fulfillment of this judgment. There is no other possible world, but only a weak possibility of another end of *this* world. The present that is today in force, the dominant present, must end in order for it to finally be lived in its fullness: not the end of communism nor the ends of communism, but “the communism of the end.”

The People is absent. And it will remain so, as long as this present is in force. For now, the breach opened by revolt offers one of the few ways in which this lack can appear in the world, if only for the duration of a flash. But can we really move against the present, then? Or must we figure out how to sidestep it? In order to avoid an obstacle and move forward, other paths, other passages, other temporalities must be opened. And opening that passage always implies the violence of a gesture, although certainly not just any gesture, not just any violence. A step to the side is not enough: the present must be interrupted, for it is in its interruption that the possibility of passage is created. On the other hand, the revolutionary exit from the present seems to be the only valid option in the face of the fascist closure that asserts itself at every level these days, both institutionally and existentially.

The dangers harbored by our original question as to the transformability of time are now visible to anyone willing to see them. On the one hand, there is the coarse [*coriacea*, lit: ‘leathery’] apocalyptic belief in a linear temporality conferring rights upon a revolutionary eon; on the other, the belief that time that always returns to the same, the latter being concealed behind the mass enjoyment of the catastrophe. In the end, the two become equivalent. Whence the tragic illusion that the key to victory lies in the exercise of an unlimited will, no less than the demonic illusion that seizing power provides the possibility of liberation. “You are never free through your own will”, Deleuze says to Spinoza. Twin illnesses of the West. On the contrary: everything is already here. There is no progress and there is no eternal return, there is only the conjuncture of a present that wishes to see itself as insurmountable, perennial, eternal.

The will must be shattered, the power of capital must be annihilated, the enemy must be defeated.

It is not enough to pose the question to ourselves, to our friends, we need to address it to the outside, to the unknown, and in particular to listen to the question that the world itself addresses to us, to hear

its pulsation in the depths of ourselves. Knowing how to listen is a fundamental trait of revolutionary spirituality: the rhythm of the world merges with that of revolt. What we must rediscover together with our friends is how to accompany the real becoming of what is already here, now, with us, in our midst. To become its assistants. To organize ourselves so as to disappear in turn into this becoming. Those who organize themselves in the becomings of history, as its revolutionary faction, have always known that the real victory would coincide with their gradual and happy dissolution. For them there has never been a motto that proclaims “all power to us!”, or “to our organization!”, but rather to the people, to the Soviets, to the communes. On the other hand, this is one of the sharp arrows that Lenin fired in his 1917 *April Theses*.

What is this becoming-real? Marx used to say that “the being of men is the real process of their life”; its becoming, then, is the full time of this process, an “unalterable form” dragged outward from within, saturated with a power that pulses noisily in those interruptions whose duration can never be known in advance. Sometimes a flash, other times lasting decades, enough to remain for the time of a lifetime. Often we do not know what use to make of these interruptions, we do not understand their potential, which we mistake for irritating interferences in the incessant progress of History. We live inside them as in the waiting room of a doctor on call, who is in fact simply waiting for you to get sick. The real seems to disappear into a flat screen, the possible becomes a fascinating ornament to be shown to visiting acquaintances, the world itself wishing only to come to an end: judgment without redemption.

The interruption is not the time of waiting, as each moment carries with it the possibility of taking a position against the present. Every moment can turn out to be the decisive one. The end of apathy. The impossible that grips the world. It is the time of a minor heroism, an anonymous force that can no longer stand calculation, homogeneity, constancy. It can be discerned, as it has a rhythm: at first imperceptible, it begins to pulsate slowly, then accelerates vertiginously, until it is interrupted. Its sudden acceleration paradoxically brings about the slowing down of History, to the point of putting it in a state of arrest, where everything stops, immobile, “in the absurd present—unconditionally true—therefore also absurd—of the messianic advent,” as Furio Jesi put it. It is in this moment

of suspension, in which the past suddenly appears in actuality with the violence of a stellar storm, that the image of a sensible form of becoming appears, a *we* that is both dispersed and, at the same time, a sort of crowded solitude—issuing from both the dead and the living. This ‘we’ is what remains of the whirlwind of time, the ever-to-come origin of every insurrection. And it is this form, which surrounds a life that exceeds every existing thing, that must learn how to shatter the present into a thousand pieces.

Although what is to come does not depend entirely on what we manage to do, to give it form can help navigate it either towards fulfillment or perdition. “*Glück ist hilfe*”: fortune and happiness help and rescue, as Comrade Brecht said. “Mutualism”, another *revenant* concept, is not about distributing goods, money and merchandise, but assisting each other, every day, in our revolutionary becoming. Do things ourselves, or lose ourselves continually in the world? Perhaps the real victory consists in both, together. The real defeat would be to lose both the world and ourselves at the same time.

We need to examine our lives more closely, to extract from them an image, and to contemplate it as if it were one of those “deeds or feats” [*imprese*], those coats of arms that were the sign and seal of baroque existence. We need to hone in on the precise point of existential interruption that, with its intensity, has marked our singular becoming-revolutionary, whatever that means for us in our life. It begins without any great preambles, by teaching us to stand up straight, to smile, to feel pain, to make use of our hatred of domination, to weave friendships, and to educate our sensibilities. To live communism as a collective exposure to the extreme risk of existence, and true solitude as that to which communism delivers us one by one. For life, like politics and poetry alike, is always a question of intensity, of irreversibility: *true life* always begins from a point of no return. It can happen that it sinks—streams, scratches away, inscribes, scrutinizes—re-emerging from time to time there where we place our hands, our thoughts, our lips, our breath. It intensifies itself, again and again, through encounters, in a flood of passions, in ruinous downfalls, in the loves of a life, in the forest of despair, in terrible joys and brilliant failures. Finally, if there is anything remaining, it reappears, as a faith, like the apparent movement of a golden star. For men and women, the heavenly vault is the book of their always unsolved and always imperative human becomings. Let’s avert our gaze from the *displays*, read the signs in the sky, and return to Earth.

De revolutionibus orbium coelestium: the Sun is immobile, it is the Earth that moves.

Rays, life, time. It's time.

This book is dedicated to a memory of happiness, one of those that, for it to truly be, as the poet said, must be capable of being forgotten, and whose return we await patiently as for own kin, in a look and a gesture without name, where there is no longer any difference between the memory and oneself.

PROLOGUE



