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The Demise of the Revolutionary Imaginary?

Alessandro Dal Lago

1.

A great deal of recent leftist theory is more or less obliquely concerned with the sterility of the revolutionary imaginary [*immaginario rivoluzionario*]. The disputes over nihilism, the crises of reason and legitimation, and the end of the political demonstrate, if nothing else, a gradual realization that this imaginary, which was supposed to create alternatives to capitalist society (communism, liberation, the revolution), is bankrupt. The revolutionary tradition is now dispersed into fragments which range from the so-called culture of narcissism, at one extreme, to "castling" to protect orthodox positions at the other, but none of them seem to be generating any renewing energies which could use the crisis as the starting point of new alternatives [*nuove pratiche*]. We

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lamented the embarrassing discovery that we have a few skeletons in our closet, or that even a humane or passionate [*tropicale*] socialism doesn't disdain power politics, but we didn't let this feeling stimulate any serious reckoning with the revolutionary tradition. Some reacted by replacing the crumbling authority of Hegel and Marx with that of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, thinkers more up-to-date and less dogmatic, and thus tried to explain, for example, that the gulags emanate directly from the perverse imaginations of nineteenth-century philosophers. But this move produced no new philosophy of history, nor even of reason. Then there are those who try to improve on the revolutionary tradition by immersing themselves rather hastily in areas they traditionally scorned: civil rights, the politics and poetics of the body, emotional fervor [*la calda sfera dei sentimenti*]*—*but this move doesn't seem convincing either. It's comforting, then, to see that people are again beginning to discuss embarrassing and even slightly unrealistic issues such as the concept of revolution, without recourse to the reigning metaphors of rationality [*della razionalità*] and language games, and without pretending that nothing has changed, arrogantly ignoring the fact that this tradition, at least in Italy, led to bloodshed and prison, not to a celebration of peace [*ballo di riconciliazione*]. But as we begin to rediscuss the concept of revolution, we must recognize that its collapse echoes in a world where we are a bit less free, not so much because there are more police or because an egalitarian conformism [*l'ossequio democratico*] is spreading rapidly, but rather because its failure is depriving us of some other things which, for good or ill, are connected to it: the passion for political inquiry, the habit of recognizing one's own lack of freedom.

What is at stake, then, is not a theoretical choice of new models of transition (transition to what?) as much as the possibility of preserving critique and opposition to unlivable social structures, whatever their updated definition might be. The basic question is this: Can we retain the notion of difference (both distance and opposition) and thus keep open the possibility of *praxis*, in spite of the fact that this notion is now deprived of either rational or historical foundation? It's the problem of political identity, the good old-fashioned question of what unites or divides citizens. As such it compels us to question the theoretical mechanisms which up to now have furnished us with a reassuring response to the problems of identity and difference, groups and individuals, alliances and conflicts. Take, for example, the mechanism of labor value, which produces not only a dubious [*discutibile*] economic theory, but also theories of class, society, politics, and alliances

(remember that strange debate over the role of the intellectual?). After all, revolutionary discourse is a *machine*—that is, an artifact whose parts interlock and function as a whole but are nonetheless individually replaceable. Practically any text demonstrates this: one outdated part necessitates a reworking of the whole discourse. But this theoretical machine continues to produce something, reshaping existing materials; it follows that a serious discussion on revolution doesn't have to engage in that old game of patching up and making substitutions. (Since the factory proletariat never became a general class, we replace it with the new subject, or the office worker [*l'operaio sociale*]; since capitalism doesn't seem to be dying, and the state has not been crushed under the workers' heel, we introduce the fiscal crisis or the crisis of legitimation.) If we're going to engage in a serious discussion of this situation, we have to do so from a perspective outside the framework of traditional revolutionary discourse. We have to treat the latter as we would any other text: examine its parts, trace influences, separate its divergent strands, but above all look at its effects. For example, it's possible that because we focused exclusively on the role of the state and its extinction in world history we have blinded ourselves to other power centers, other forms of constraint and limitation which are just as determinative and even more prevalent. Revolutionary discourse concerns us intimately because until recently it provided us with hopeful alternative images, but we will have a hard time understanding it today if we don't detach ourselves from it, and begin to treat it as a discourse with a history.

2.

The fact that we start from the notion of difference already implies our detachment from this discourse, but this is no ground for fear; we don't have to introduce thinkers as complex as Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Deleuze yet. Initially, to think starting from difference means to stop believing that reality is produced by grand mechanisms: that we can, for example, deduce the existence of an object from its contrary: the subject from the object, the society from the state, or the state from the society. We can continue to use words like "Dialectic" or "History," but we must also realize that they are mere words, not Realities which determine us. Each of us must speak as his own tiny self, not in the name of the Proletariat. Starting from difference means that, yes, it's probably true that we are alienated, divided from ourselves, and expropriated, but that this is not a condition which necessarily

contains its contrary, our liberation, in a potential state: rather, this is the condition in which we have to operate, one which will not necessarily end. To accept difference means to stop thinking in terms of *exile* and diaspora. Revolutionary discourse is remote precisely because its authors speak from absence. In fact, it is frequently noted that its core (from Marx and Lenin to Lukács and the various forms of twentieth-century Marxism) is based on the idea of recomposition, return, the reconstitution of the different separated and alienated subjects, the recapturing of a definitive collective identity. In a word, the subject of revolutionary discourse *suffers* the various forms of his division (from himself, others, nature, his own labor, etc.) while he is actively awaiting [*nell'attesa attiva*] his reunification. But if this advent (independently of the rhythms, probings, and obstructions which prepare it, and of the forms of its fulfillment) constitutes the goal of history, then the path that leads to it is the expression of a truth which, even if hidden in the various vicissitudes, appearances, and detours of historical contingency, is an immanent, coded one which will eventually be unmasked. The moment of recomposition constitutes both the theological nucleus of revolutionary discourse and the legitimizing principle of its various converging partial truths. The journey to revolution always begins with absence and separation in order to move towards epiphany and reconciliation: the separated subject moves towards the healing of its own consciousness and a reintegration with its society; separated humanity as a species moves towards reunification with nature ("the natural is humanized and the human is naturalized"); the proletariat finds in its expropriation the condition for beginning its journey to reconciliation with the product of its labor and the means of production. Furthermore, this movement is concrete and temporal; it can be traced and detailed in the development of history, not merely on the level of categories. Revolutionary discourse is thus a great historical threshing machine which processes events, manufacturing the individual stages of the road to reunification. So the discipline [*disciplina*] of the factory prepares for the conditions of its suppression, the utopian prose writers of the nineteenth century (both those like Owens who invented a rational administrative discipline, or mystics of production like Saint-Simon) "anticipate" the liberation of labor; classic German philosophy meets with French socialism and they engender scientific socialism. Depending on which phase or stage is being considered, history is the history of those who are either behind, ahead of, or in tune with (the classical economists, for example) their particular stage. This accounts for the profound ambiguity with which

revolutionary discourse treats the prominent exponents of a particular historical phase. This applies to enemies of the workers' movement, F. W. Taylor, for example, as well as to those who contribute to the development of their particular stage. Thus the discipline of the factory is not discussed for what it is in itself (its relations with bodies, its properly disciplinary function), but solely for its role in the development of communism. This is why revolutionary discourse, which moves away from exile and suffering, ends up dragging with it the necessity of alienation and division.

On the other hand, it is recognized that the road to revolution neither conforms to linear time nor starts from voluntaristic utopian schemes, as if history could be abolished overnight by fiat. Rather, it is the result of a tension which exists in the nature of things, an antagonism which reduces the variety of existence and society to an eternal Manichaeism. From the perspective of revolution the historic process works like a machine which fabricates oppositions, translating the chaos of experience into clearly definable antagonisms. And it is precisely in this capacity to translate diversity and incommensurability into the unity of an opposition that the scientific character of revolutionary discourse (or, epistemologically speaking, its "rationality") resides. The fascination with the modern revolutionary imaginary stems from its power to fashion a dialectically ordered unity out of the disorder of experience. This latent positive power looms over the negative poles of the process of unification (today's defeat is the precondition of tomorrow's victory, breaking free from capitalism, escaping its contradictions, etc.). It's this promise of unity out of diversity which gives meaning to the process of revolution, transforming what might otherwise be an interminable conflict among its ever historically determined yet changeable [*ogni volta storicamente determinati e potenziali*] subjects into a tormented revelation of truth rather than a mere clash of irreconcilable or incommunicative elements. Its superiority over other eschatologies such as evolutionism, with which it has much in common, resides in its integration of conflict and flux into a truth-revealing process. Thus history advances, ever more advanced forms are spontaneously generated, "human anatomy is a key to monkey anatomy."

3.

But for some time now this *a priori*-type historical progress, which legitimizes its own conflictual and yet inevitable truth in much the same fashion as does the ontological proof for the exis-

tence of God, has failed to provide any reasons for action. Not only is it illegitimate, pretending to be scientific while refusing to tolerate any inquiry into the primitive operations which have made it possible, but it is also painfully irrelevant to world events, which constantly confound it with troubling questions: Who are the contemporary proletarians? Why haven't the various twentieth-century revolutions occurred in advanced capitalist countries? What happened to the falling rate of profit [*la caduta del saggio di profitto*]? Why do people have such scant interest in liberation through work? Where is the State that has to be abolished? What does civil society mean today? These many partial disconfirmations of the theory don't mean much; no other type of global discourse is any better off with respect to complete truth. It's rather the general truth of the discourse as a whole which has been failing to convince, unify, and attract. If it's really necessary to speak of a historical process, anyone can see that the latter doesn't gather up the empirical manifold into the unity of an opposition, and that today more than ever its variety resists formulas such as proletariat against the state, the governed against their rulers, desire against repression, life against death. If there is a process, it seems rather to produce dispersal, multiplications of unsynchronized conflicts, the dissemination of discourses and activities which can't be subsumed under a common language. The proletariat does *not* synthesize the contradictions of youth and women; labor does not produce meaning (as the industrial psychologists, but not the revolutionaries, know well), much less the logic of its suppression; the crisis of capitalism does not produce crashes [*crolli*], and much less does its consequent social degradation raise consciousness; the subjects of the crisis are not unifiable, much less disposed to take on the system. Briefly, we don't have to resort to unifying categories or spatial [*topologiche*] metaphors such as deviance or marginality to see that the identities traceable in the social processes are separate and incommensurable.

This leads to strange theoretical reversals. Theoreticians such as Crozier or Luhmann, who speak on behalf of the system, speculate openly about the crisis of democracy or procedural legitimation [*la crisi della democrazia o la legittimazione procedurale*]; an author such as Habermas, who appeals to historical materialism, refuses to believe that a state can continue to exist unless there is a certain amount of common interest between the rulers and their subjects. (Thus the technocrats survey crises and conflicts; the left legitimizes the state.) In short, the process produces differences;

only those who think they are still living in the days of Louis Philippe succeed in finding traces of struggle or raised consciousness. But that's not all. Above and beyond older models such as Saint-Simon's productive universe, Sade's or Fourier's oppressive game machines, and all the other past utopian projects, intellectual and moral reforms, is there anyone who knows what a definitive reunification would be, or who would desire it? How, for example, would a humanization of nature based on a free development of productive forces be able to avoid a total humanization of nature?

These become meaningless questions the moment one discovers that the answers were already contained within the questions, the truths of revolutionary discourse constituting a system of Chinese boxes known as dialectic: Who will expropriate the expropriators? The expropriated; or that the various partial truths are inscribed one within the other: state and society, conflict and process, value and labor, alienation and consciousness. Yet the final form of the process of processes, the global truth, *is written nowhere*, or, better, it is contained under various aspects of philosophy of history, that neglected chapter of philosophical science. If epistemology, which pretends to excise the nonverifiable assertions from every discourse, wanted to apply its reductive method to revolutionary philosophy of history, it would find that the grand tautological/theological agenda [*operazione*] of revolutionary discourse is an outer shell of meaning and reunification which masks an insensitive horror of process and change. This point indicates the toughness [*durezza*] of our position, the depth and hiddenness of what we will be able to see if we would only bracket the self-proclaimed truth of this discourse and peer over the edge of the abyss it screens. Of course, it's really only an abyss for those who until just yesterday swore by the inevitability of democracy and peace [*la marcia fatale della democrazia e della pace*] or, similarly, by the certain demise of capitalism or the triumph of communism. To oppose today's nihilism to yesterday's arrogant certainty is, in the best of cases, just philosophical trial-and-error [*sperimentalismo filosofico*]. Instead, recognizing the complete vacuity of the revolutionary imaginary means admitting that we live in a difficult world which, though deprived of eschatology, still has its own contours and configurations and requires choices. In short, it means we must, without a religious recourse to the traditional imagination's authority, begin using our own imaginary to deal with the infinite problems our world poses.

Yet, from the point of view of imagination, the deflation of revolutionary discourse might even reveal itself as an advantage.

Considering this discourse as a machine which devours and produces history, we could check on whether or not it has used materials pertinent to other concerns, or whether it hasn't, in fact, let other processes and effects slip through on the pretext of melting them in the final crucible. It's all too easy to get rid of revolutionary discourse, treating it as an excrescence, the monstrous excess of a reason which could flow freely without it. Hence technocratic and reformist corrections which substitute progress for dialectic, socialism for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the autonomy of the political for the myth of the working class, or conflictual rationality for dialectical reason, as if the older term, trusted in the past, were not made of the same stuff as the new one. What if revolutionary discourse, leaving behind the Christian eschatology of exile and return, has had the effect of locking its subjects into a permanently unhappy state of exile, in which they await the future (or the revolution, or socialism) with a militant sense of guilt, but also with all the arrogance of those who know they are invested with grace? In fact, it's precisely this combination of grace and guilt, this continual recalling of its own public to their duties and, consequently, the representation of a moral in a discourse that pretends to be scientific, which never fails to amaze us in those who proclaim themselves the subjects of the revolutionary process. These criticisms hold not only for those who still speak explicitly the language of revolution, but even more so for those who, having abandoned its harshest teachings, keep intact the sense of investiture, the mandate to interpret historical truth. However, this prophetic arrogance is only the most visible aspect of revolutionary discourse. Its most conspicuous effect, even from the cognitive point of view, is its *scorn for the world*, which issues mainly from its conception of history as the imminence of the kingdom. I don't mean asceticism, but that way of thinking which treats reality as an eternal appearance, or the superficial ripples of a stream of truth which will eventually see the light. Behavior, facts, events, discourses are not just what they are, but are what they mean in the truth machine. Hence the passion for depth, the scorn for the surfaces, the obsession with authenticity, for the real achievement of the direction of history. This holds not only for traditional revolutionary topics: the true essence of the state, the authentic proletariat, the real meaning of speech or thought in the perspective of history, but also for the new ones which surface in the language of those would-be post-revolutionaries: the real needs of the masses, authentic interpersonal relations, authentic sexuality, meaning, truth.

We must, then, begin to reflect on the distraction effect of every truth machine which aims to actualize an occult truth: revolutionary discourse, which invites us to disdain our worldly being in favor of a return to truth, but also all discourses of transformation, all change-mechanisms. What is at stake in this reflection is simply the restoration of the capacity to see that which exists as also unformed, senseless, superficial, and thus to be done with that duplication of appearance and reality which makes us scorn the former under the illusion that we can ally ourselves with the latter.