

## THE VENICE CONNECTION

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### *Venice: Before, During and After*

By “Venice” I mean, predictably, the conference of studies and, more generally, the international anarchist gathering that is to take place in a month. And by “Before, During and After” (which is a paraphrase not of the well-known formula of the virginity of the Madonna but rather of Gauguin’s “Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?”) I would like to give the conference and the gathering a particular significance as the threshold between a before “Where do we come from?” and an after “Where are we going?”; as a particular point in the time space continuum of anarchism from which we can look at ourselves and our surroundings and ask ourselves “Who are we?”.

To assign such a meaning to Venice is, of course, quite arbitrary, just as is the setting of a certain age, whether 18 or 21 or any other, as the beginning of maturity. I am convinced that, in both personal and collective lifetimes, the “moments”, the individual events, are only conventional and symbolic signs of processes of mutation and transition. I have been talking about a “significance” and nothing more and, to reduce yet further the emphasis, which on re-reading the above seems to me excessive, I would like to state at once that I do not intend to overrate the actual conference and gathering in Venice. I do not expect great things of that conference (or of the gathering) in itself. I do not intend to surreptitiously give it the importance of a “Reformist Congress” for anarchism. Most definitely not. And, if for no other reason, this is because it will not be (and was never intended, nor planned, to be) a congress but rather a conference *of studies* and an informal gathering. The former will produce ideas rather than resolutions and the latter will be a meeting place not for delegates but for the individual members of the international libertarian tribes who, like the gypsies at Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer\*, will be representing no one but themselves.

I know (or I believe that I know) that Venice will be, at its best, a great emotional and intellectual feast and that it will not provide the solutions for any of the great theoretical or practical problems facing anarchism, that none of the wounds, deeper or shallower, of the anarchist movement will be healed, that we will, all-together-but-apart, meet, talk, even come to blows, but also that we will – I hope – have a taste, however fleeting, of a libertarian community. Many will go home feeling that nothing special has taken place (and, in a certain sense, nothing important *could* have happened in Venice), that they have taken part, or even just been present at, a rather chaotic collective brainstorming, within the framework of a festive, anarchist Tower of Babel....

And yet I still maintain that, symbolically, Venice (the gathering plus the work that has preceded it and the long, slow digestive process that will come afterwards) will represent a fundamental “passage” in the life of the anarchist movement.

I must repeat that it will not *be* that passage but only a representation of it. In fact, the anarchist movement, more or less throughout the world, has, for some years and quite independently of Venice, been coming to the realisation, in various ways and in varying degrees, of its deep-seated crisis. It is, paradoxically, from that very quantitative and qualitative rebirth of the 1960s and 1970s which saved it from extinction, that anarchism has drawn (or can draw) the elements which will allow it to see that what it believed was merely a slump was instead a structural crisis, and so draw the energy and the will and the imagination necessary (even if not sufficient) to resolve it.

Anarchism today is being (and is ever more aware of being) forced to a dramatic step from the old to the new, even if it is not yet sure just what is “new” and what “old” within it.

Now that 1968 (not, obviously, the year but the process of cultural change that began some years earlier, particularly in America, and which lasted until some years afterwards) has carried it over the quantitative and qualitative threshold of survival, anarchism must now pass that other quantitative and qualitative threshold that will transform it into a true agent of social transformation. And unless it can cross this second threshold it runs the risk of being, sooner or later, thrown back beyond the first one.

For some years now there has been a growing feeling (more or less conscious) that, in order to cross this second and critically important threshold, it is, above all, necessary to make, and to make as soon as possible, a qualitative *leap*. And it is this that gives its symbolic value to a gathering such as Venice; a

symbolic crucible for the different anarchist cultures, a symbolic ground for the blending of intellectual work and activist experience, of pragmatism and of deep-rooted traditions, of lucidity and passion, of good sense and utopia....

It is this that is the real significance of Venice or at least the significance that I and the many others who have worked for nearly two years to prepare this gathering hope that it will have. Over and above this general significance there will be many others. Each of us will interpret it in his or her own way. I too, obviously, have my own opinion and those who read my last editorial in *Volontà* a year ago will have an idea what this is.

### *The Pride in Being Anarchist*

In September 1972, at a conference organised to commemorate the centenary of what is (once again conventionally) considered as the birth date of the anarchist movement, I concluded my address with a call for pride in being anarchist. Of those hundreds of people who applauded my address (but who really – and quite rightly – applauded their own sense of pride as anarchists) few are still here twelve years later. Many of the older ones have died, many of the younger ones have obviously taken their pride elsewhere – although I doubt that they now have the same cause for pride. Few are left (although not so *very* few). And, nevertheless, I still feel the same pride in being anarchist, not (I hope) due to premature senility – “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” – and not just (I hope) because I am, in this as in other things, rather out of date (consistency, it seems, is no longer a virtue), but because I can see no reason to modify my rational judgement of anarchism nor my emotional attachment to it. On the contrary, that pride, now filtered through the experiences and reflections of these dozen years, is more solid now than it was then, less nourished on enthusiasm and perhaps because of this more solid.

This reference to what I said in 1972 is not merely a pretext for a somewhat narcissistic reaffirmation of faith. It is rather that it seems to me that that very pride in being anarchists, in the sense that I asserted it then and that I assert it again now – that is, not a self-satisfied pride but a proud assertion of identity – must now, more than ever, be systematically declared and cultivated. Just as it is not true that courage is something that one has or does not have it can be given – so it is with pride. We can and must “give ourselves” a sense of pride in being anarchists. Only with a strong, widespread and proud sense of identity as anarchists will anarchism be able to go through that deep-reaching transformation that I believe (as many of us feel and believe) is urgently needed, without losing that which makes it different and unique, without being assimilated or absorbed. Anarchism must change but must still remain unshaken by the reigning cultures (christian, marxist, liberal, muslim...).

This pride which I am talking about, which will serve us before, during and after Venice (that is, throughout the entire process of transition from the old to the new) is not presumption or arrogance. On the contrary, it allows that intellectual humility that is necessary if we are to remain open to doubt, to discussion, to verification, to curiosity about everything both inside and outside of ourselves. Because, contrary to what it seems, it is only those who are secure in their own identity who can permit themselves this humility. Those who do not have this sense of security waver before the opposite poles of a dogmatic closedness (an armour against the “other” of a weak identity) and a continual Zelig-like mimesis of the other.

The pride which I am talking about (a pride which is fully justified, if not on the grounds of strict rationality, at least on those of reasonableness. Even if, in our more than one hundred years of history, we have neither won nor convinced the world our balance sheet is paradoxically more positive than that of those who have done so); the pride which I am talking about is therefore a collective state of mind which is functional in the anarchist “mutants” and their “enlarged offspring” and, in particular in the ambivalence of the present crisis, of which Venice is to be the symbolic moment.

Pride in one’s own identity is, moreover, useful for the existence and collective action of every social group. Our thoughts go immediately to the pride in being black, in being woman, in being gay.... But we can also, more traditionally, think of the pride of the bourgeoisie (during the period of its rise) and of course the pride of the working class. In the past this latter was expressed in the *proud* passing on of a trade or at least of a social position from father to son. How many fathers today dream of a future for

their sons as boilermakers and how many would rather they become doctors or at least civil servants? The pride of the worker is on the road to extinction together with Cipputi\* and the traditional working class. And speaking of workers...

### *The Worker and the Bicycle*

In past generations of anarchists, blue collar workers were an important element, and in certain times and places the great majority, whatever marxist historiography may maintain. And today, when we are far more likely to find a teacher rather than a boilermaker within the movement, there is still a ghost among us: the Worker as a rhetorical figure, the Worker as a category in our nostalgic libertarian imaginary, partly inherited from traditional anarchism and partly adapted from the culture of the marxist left, owing to a mistaken ideological continuity. When reading and listening to the words of many comrades (including, to tell the truth, my own of some years ago) especially, although by no means exclusively, within the realm of “Latin” anarchism, it would seem that this Worker does indeed correspond to a working class (*the class*) which is to have the task of changing the course of history and the face of the world.

To me it now seems that this Worker, at this moment in time, is only an obstacle in the way of our understanding reality (although not of our understanding our roots and our past, of which He explains a great deal) and which inhibits our discussions, our actions. I am talking of that mythical Worker, not of those flesh and blood workers, whether revolutionary or not, libertarians or not. Libertarian syndicalism (and perhaps even revolutionary syndicalism in certain social and political contexts) is quite realistic, even if recent history – including that of the CNT – does not leave much room for optimism, but only if the theory and practice of those models and myths which, to put it kindly, have not worked, are overhauled. This is, obviously, my own opinion and may not be shared by those who come to Venice. But it is certain that the idea of the Great Proletarian Revolution is one of those that is tottering everywhere in the international libertarian community (as well as in the far wider sea of the various contemporary societies where libertarian currents are fermenting).

Some days ago I read in a newspaper the results of a survey of “the Milanese on two Wheels”. The social and occupational make-up of those Milanese whose normal means of transport is the bicycle put office workers in first place (30.3%) followed by students (25.6%). Workers came second-to-last with only 2.5% and yet many will remember, as I do, the days not so long past, when in Milan the bicycle was almost the symbolic workers’ vehicle. You may say that the worker on his motorbike or in his car is no different from the worker on his bicycle (which is not altogether true) but this is not the point. For me, that statistical curiosity is symbolic of the deep-reaching cultural transformation of the working class in the advanced industrial societies and, even more, as a transparent metaphor. The manufacturers of bicycles have, in the last thirty years, changed either their product or their clientele. We cannot continue producing bicycles in the old style and expect to sell them to the same clientele. To be sure, the metaphor proves nothing. And it is by no means sure that we are faced with the drastic choice between giving up “producing” anarchist ideas or radically changing our clientele. It may well be that we can think and act (and live) as anarchists without renouncing any audience, directing our efforts towards all the various categories of the vast and differing peoples of the oppressed. Nevertheless I like the metaphor. I have a weakness for metaphor and I have a suspicion that I will resort to yet more before the end of this article.

### *Thinking as Anarchists*

Today it is just as important to think as anarchists as to act as such, in the realm where acting does not only mean activism, propaganda and struggle but the whole framework of life, that is of interaction with the human and natural environments. In fact I feel that thinking is by far the most urgent need, given the dramatic delay that we have accumulated in the last half century, of which the intellectual efforts of some individuals over the last ten or fifteen years, many of them excellent (and it is quite without false modesty that I include among these the work promoted and carried out by the Centro Studi Libertari),

have only scratched the surface. We need thought in every direction and on every level. Thinking in order to act, naturally, but *thinking*, not just banal chewing of the cud or a cribbing of incongruous elements. And we need to think *as anarchists*; an opening up, neither dogmatically nor uncritically, towards every aspect of contemporary culture which is or seems to be moving in a libertarian direction and the confrontation of every aspect of reality with that extraordinary interpretative criterion that is our radical critique of domination. Thought for the day: the true realist is a man who knows both the world and his own dreams! (Ursula Le Guin).

There is one task that seems to me to be particularly urgent if we are indeed to be able to “think as anarchists”. This is the settling of accounts with our roots so as to gain for ourselves an identity devoid of nostalgia for the past, an identity reduced to the essential and, for this very reason, more suited to every time and place, to every situation, to every context. Our anarchist identity at present is a heavy load, a mish-mash of essential and non-essential elements that are universally valid and of those which are historically dated and/or specific to particular geopolitical realities. I have already used the examples of the Worker (with a capital W) and the Revolution (with a capital R), both mystifications of a certain reality or at least of a potentiality connected to a European social context which existed during the second half of the last century and the early decades of this one (emblematically up to the Spanish Revolution) but there are innumerable other examples to be found.

Our luggage then is rich but it is also cumbersome and contradictory if taken as a whole. One need only think of the apparent irreconcilability in anarchist tradition of individualism and communism, of the class analysis and humanism, of violence and non-violence.... Our luggage is cumbersome and apparently contradictory and so, every now and then, someone tries to lighten it and to make it unilaterally coherent by throwing out this piece or that, but in doing this we risk throwing away, each time, a bit of anarchism.

And yet the load must be lightened. We have a long journey ahead of us in unknown territory and we can only take the essentials; we may well enrich our load *en route*, depending on what we find in front of us in all the directions in which we set off. The problem is to decide what is essential because if we keep too much or too little we will not manage to go far. And I believe that our journey is to be a *very* long one. Abandoning the metaphor, the immensely delicate task which is facing us today in “thinking as anarchists” is that of identifying the essence of anarchism, that which defines the anarchist identity over and above the concrete historical and geopolitical manifestations of anarchism to date. Our task is not to disincarnate anarchism, reducing it to a pure philosophic essence for contemplation but to reimmerse it in the differing forms of reality which alone can give it the possibility of becoming a real expression and instrument and reference for all existing forms of theoretical negation of and practical resistance to domination in any social context.

So perhaps a different metaphor will serve us better than our load.... Our task is to distil anarchism in all its manifestations, both past and present, because the essence of anarchism is to those manifestations as pure alcohol is to the innumerable alcoholic drinks which, infinite thanks be to human nature, have been invented at all (or almost all) latitudes and longitudes. And, just as pure alcohol is undrinkable so, probably, is ÇpureÇ anarchism, and just as the various peoples have produced and still produce alcoholic beverages of differing concentrations and flavours to suit differing environmental and climatic circumstances, so has anarchism, in the past, given rise to differing forms of thought and action and so will it, in the future, be able to give rise to forms of thought and action which are immensely more diversified and so more functional and more enjoyable. But whether it comes from grapes or coconuts, from agave or from rye, from corn or from apples, whether it is diluted or concentrated alcohol is the essential element of all alcoholic beverages. All the producers and consumers of wine, beer, vodka, cachaca, tequila, cider, whisky... have always known it intuitively – and today there is the scientific and technological evidence to prove it.

Now, to take the metaphor still a little further, whatever may be the tastes of those who set out on a long voyage towards unknown shores, it would be better for them to carry concentrated alcohol (like the barrel of rum on a pirate ship) than alcohol in a diluted form which is less functional, even if the overall proportion of alcohol per volume is perhaps more agreeable. And it would be still better to take the knowledge necessary to produce alcohol in any new context. Anarchism is going to set out (it must set out and will perhaps do so whether we, the more or less legitimate heirs of the tradition, wish it or not) on a long voyage of thought and action in various directions. It would be better for anarchists to fill

their flasks with a high-strength anarchism and their heads or notebooks with the knowledge essential for the fermentation and distillation of anarchism in any situation of domination and revolt.

### *State and Anarchy*

Distilling anarchism does not, of course, mean reducing it to a simple formula. Anarchism is a philosophy of man and society (and is, or should be as Bookchin rightly points out, of nature as well). It is a view of the world which it would be ridiculous to try and reduce to one or even a few formal definitions. It is, nevertheless, possible and indeed necessary to identify the essential structures, to prune away the ambiguity and vagueness from the founding values and the key concepts.

For example: it is, I believe, quite evident that it is not enough to speak of equality, freedom and diversity to define our axiological foundations. We must clarify just what these three much-abused terms mean in the *specific* context of anarchism. It is not enough to speak of direct action and direct democracy (even Ghaddafi talks of direct democracy), it is not enough to say that anarchism is against power and the state if we do not clarify what we mean by power and by the state. And, speaking of power, the Centro Studi Libertari has promoted original and well-considered studies which exemplify the type of work to be done. On the subject of the state, Colombo's essay published here is, in my view, exceptionally important. His idea, clearly developed from an intuition on Bakunin and Landauer, is that the state is above all – essentially – a principle of the organisation of social reality: (today, in fact, it is *the* principle which explains and “rationally” organises the society of domination in all its diverse concrete forms) and in this way the anarchists' seemingly ingenuous and out-dated radical negation of the state regains a formidable scientific validity.

That same article puts forward the idea, potentially very fertile on an epistemological level, that anarchism is to be considered above all as an organisational *principle*, as the central element of a social imaginary – the anarchist one – which is completely alien to the dominant state imaginary. In this way State and Anarchy, the titles of the two plenary sessions at the Venice conference, can be seen, not as an anachronistic ideological-manichean opposition, but as two different and incompatible ways of thinking and of organising reality.

This, and many other aspects (less general perhaps but no less important) will be discussed during the conference of studies in Venice. I cannot list them all here – not only would I be repeating the programme but I would also abuse the space allowed for an editorial. I will limit myself before finishing to pointing out two methodological elements which, while they are implicit in the previous pages, may perhaps be missed or misunderstood. First – the key to understanding “Venice” that I have outlined is not only my personal approach but also, and in fact principally, the hypothesis (debatable certainly but equally certainly worthy of serious consideration) on which the Centro Studi Libertari has worked since 1976. All the conferences, seminars, study groups and research programmes organised by the centre have sought to promote “anarchist pride” (the pride in our cultural roots and in our history) and, *together*, the underestimated research into the new, a research open to the international libertarian (not only anarchist in the narrow sense) culture.

And secondly, the task of “refounding anarchism” is not the task of a handful of intellectuals but the collective task of the entire anarchist community, the task not of one conference (or of two or of three) but of a generation: ours. This is a historical task which is both fascinating and terrifying. On the theoretical level (not in terms of years) we are the fourth generation: the first laid the foundations, the second built on them, the third has lived off the income. We now have a choice: either to squander what is left or to rebuild the theoretical patrimony of anarchism. To Venice, to Venice!

\* A small French town where thousands of gypsies gather every year.

1 *Lasciamo il pessimismo per tempi migliori* - Let's Leave Pessimism for Better Times), Volontà, 1983/3.

\* Cipputi is an Italian comic strip character who represents a typical middle-aged blue collar worker (more or less communist).