

Alfredo M. Bonanno

Destruction and Language

1996

(. . .) The structure of domination, the conditions of conflict and the composition of the exploited class have changed to such an extent that an operation like “the taking of the Winter Palace” in the marxist sense or a liberation from the bottom in the anarchist sense have become utterly inconceivable. These two endeavors are antithetical, but they share the idea of taking over the means of production and placing them in the hands of the representatives of the exploited class who will organize liberated society. So what remains?

What remains is destructive attack . . . and this is a most ambiguous point . . . What does destruction mean? What does it mean to knock down a trellis, when a hundred thousand, perhaps a million of them are still standing? What is its significance?

I think we will have to reflect a bit, take a step back. Every one of us has built a positive and a negative conception of reality inside of ourselves. We live in a context that we assume to be real (unless we accept the concept of the butterfly and the dream), real and positive, i.e., corresponding to a constructive dimension provided with characteristics that evolve over time, and we define this evolution as history. From the mists of a hypothetical negative dark, middle age, we have reached modern civilization. Now there is penicillin, and people no longer die of the plague or even malaria, at least within certain limits, since there are still parts of the globe where people do die of these things.

Thus, within ourselves, we give a positive value to the constructive, since we are an organization (even from the biological viewpoint) and are afraid of death as the extreme concept of destruction. We think that our life is an accumulation of the positive. We are babies, we grow, we get stronger, become adults, then old people, and then we die. The last is always relegated to the future, but in the course of our lives we only want to acquire . . . recognition (but not real estate, since as anarchists and revolutionaries we don't own property). But this isn't all we want to do. From the moment that we think of growth and acquisition as positive, we consider quantity positive. In other words, if we know three languages, we consider ourselves better than someone who only knows one or two. We don't realize that there is a functionalist hypothesis, a utilitarian hypothesis, in all this. There are residues of that old 18th century process which thought that by pursuing what is useful in the single individual one gets an increase in what is useful overall in humanity. This is a most nefarious concept that has had many negative consequences. What happens when we consider quantity, everyday quantity, as the quality of our life?

In the agonizing desire to have something to possess, we have lost something for being someone, we have lost the quality of being someone, and we are no longer able to distinguish this reality of ours, this thing for which it is worth the trouble to live.

Here is why we fear destruction: First, because it reminds us of death. Second, because it reminds us of the refusal of functionality. One who destroys is not functional to anything

It is not, in fact, true — at least not completely — that knocking down a trellis does real damage to the interests of ENEL.¹ There is no equation by which “one less trellis” equals “one more injury to ENEL.” An absolute relationship of this sort does not exist, and anyone who tries to prove such an equation is talking rubbish. So why do we fear destruction? We fear something within ourselves, not something outside ourselves. We can understand quantity, growth and acquisition through reason. We can understand the critique of all this through reason, leading to the weak thought I mentioned earlier, the uncertainty, the doubt, etc. We cannot understand destruction through reason, because to understand the concept of destruction in its most radical sense, every one of us would have to feel a sense of revulsion for our offended dignity, in order to understand the meaning of destruction, each of us would have to be personally involved.

We cannot destroy something if we are not willing to destroy ourselves in the moment that we destroy that thing. In my opinion, this is the concept of involvement in the destructive act. We can separate the acquisitive, constructive act from ourselves and say: “Look, I possess a house and a library of 10,000 volumes”, but we cannot separate the idea of destruction from ourselves. In other words, we can use language to illustrate the acquisitive concept, the house, the books, the culture, the growth, the three tongues we have mastered, but we cannot use language to illustrate the problem of destruction. My words make no sense. This is why they rain down on your heads as if deprived of meaning, because speaking of destruction makes no sense except through another type of language. This other type of language . . . is not merely formed of words, but of that extraordinarily complex combination that is realized between theory and practice. The totality of each one of us, of our being human, the deep being of our body and our thought, is the symbiosis of theory and practice, not only the risk, but also the desire, the pleasure, the lust for living our life fully, this is a different language. And it is not a language that can be classified in words. . .

. . . Destruction is not a metaphysical idea. Destruction consists of going into a place and wrecking something, but the process that can allow us to carry out this action is a process that must involve us in our totality, as complete human beings, as men and women capable of expressing ourselves in completeness, not in the separation that wants to distinguish us from what we have acquired, from what we know, from what we possess, not in this separation, because the language of words dominates in this separation. And this is a language dictated by the rationality of

¹ The Italian electric company. — translator

centuries of oppression, in short, Cartesian language of those who built prisons, torture chambers, inquisitions; the language of priests, Franciscans, Dominicans who sent Giordano Bruno to the stake in Campo di Fiori. But in destruction another language prevails, in destruction another language is necessary.

In destruction, the language of gratuitousness, of dismantling, the language of myth, of Dionysus, blossoms. Dionysus is the god of strangeness, the god who comes like a thief in the night, who penetrates into us. Dionysus is the god of women, not of men. This is because this concept of destruction is more comprehensible to women than to men who are much more fearful than women.

Why is the concept of destruction linked to Dionysus, the god who came in the night like a thief, the god who had no place of worship but was a stranger everywhere and everywhere penetrated into the cults of other gods? Because the cult of Dionysus is essentially based on destruction, indeed, on the tearing to pieces (*sparagmós*) of the enemy. The victim is dismembered, shattered, smashed, and this is the effective meaning of destruction, in which we see the Dionysian involvement in the primordial act of radically destroying the enemy at its deepest root. This has nothing to do with quantitative attack.

For the first time, we are entering into an order of problems that are different, that have nothing to do with the traditional critique of the party, the union, etc. Of course, when we speak of destruction, since it is a dangerous minefield in which there are many objections, the discussion could go on endlessly. This is why I want to conclude by saying that the concept of destruction is expressible through the totality of the person who carries it out in deeds, and at the moment that she carries it out in action, it is theory, the possibility of being understood by the other. Unlike the constructive concept, which can be separated from the one who carries it out, who can then be very good at talking about the problems related to construction, and so on.

. . . I want it to be well understood that there isn't just the language of words that we all experience, but other possibilities for communicating as well. It could be said that each one of us has his own language. This is why, when we understand what destruction is, when we understand that it is not just about smashing computers, when we become aware that this is just the playful aspect of the problem, but that there is something else that we need to consider, something that involves us personally at our deepest roots, and that this has its initial impulse in that part of ourselves that relates to the wounded dignity of which we are surely aware, because otherwise we wouldn't be here, we wouldn't even be one of the comrades, then we are already in possession of destructive language, we can begin to be destructive.

Have you ever asked yourself why you are disgusted when you see a fascist? He is a human being, like you, like me. Or rather, since fascists are sometimes

even beautiful young men and women, why do they disgust you? Why do the police disgust you? Because they are dangerous? Because of what they say? No. This is something that is not well understood. When I am in prison, the worst thing that comes before my eyes is the man in uniform. This is why I shut my door to avoid seeing them, to avoid hearing them speak. They may even say intelligent things (a difficult fact in itself), but there is something that cannot be comprehended, something that disgusts.

When speaking of the problem of destruction, there is also the objection that it isn't possible to make a distinction between the vandal who smashes everything and the revolutionary who attacks after a precise reasoning process. The problem remains and is not easily identified. An "objective" difference between the destructive revolutionary act and the act of vandalism cannot be nailed down, without running into some very great difficulties. We cannot seek an "objective" difference that reassures us once and for all. We cannot say that smashing the police van and knocking down the trellis are revolutionary acts in themselves, whereas fighting in the sports stadium is hooliganism. Gratuitousness is not a decisive factor in how one determines the distinction between hooliganism and the revolutionary act. If it were, once again the functionalist hypothesis would be there, the goal to be reached would entirely occupy the space of reasoning. If we think that by cutting down an ENEL trellis, we knock out the heart of the state, then we are truly off in outer space, even if it were hundreds of trellises. It isn't mathematical logic that counts.

It is important to understand that the difference that exists is to be sought in the individual maturity of the people who carry out these acts, in what they sense, what they desire, and even in what they are able to project practically, transforming the dream into concrete activity.

There is no doubt that in the hooligan one finds, and opposes, a strange accumulation of feelings. There is the gratuitousness of the act, the ignorance, the inability of the vandal to grasp the elements that determine the reality that surrounds him. But there is also a sense of rebellion. This is not to suggest that this rebellion takes precedence, since often in the hooligan, the herd instinct prevails. It is not, in fact, true that those who fight in sports stadiums run riot individually. They are almost always regimented through mustering processes, financed by various clubs, brought together through team structures, symbols, slogans, bits of old ideologies, etc.

The comrade who acts by attacking a structure of the enemy, while not wanting to have recourse to the identification of a purely "objective" plan, starts from different motivations, from a more articulate social maturation. If, in the individual sphere, the hooligan doesn't know how to spend Sunday pleasantly, the comrade, instead, involves his entire being in attacking an objective. Entering

into the destructive dimension makes a break with the persistent tradition of the quantitative, growth and the institutionalization of life regimented by others. This is the difference.

In my opinion, the key of the explanation is sought in behaviors that have a subjective importance, without such behaviors having to abandon themselves, for this reason, to atomization, to the elementary condition of single components without cohesion between them. And it is obvious that we are afraid to acknowledge that it is possible for an individual motivation to be a turning point. And we are afraid because for a hundred and fifty years they have pointed out to us that it is necessary not to start from the individual, but from the class, from objective analysis, from history, from the intrinsic mechanisms in history, from that thing called dialectical materialism. We have still not freed ourselves from this heritage.

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