

# Bonnot and the Evangelists

Survivors have always hounded social movements. Survivors of battles considered lost, survivors of decomposed ideologies, survivors of unrealized utopias, sorry figures who present their own personal defeat as if it were a historical defeat with the aim of finding some public justification for their human misery. As is known, since life is over for the survivor, it is necessary to consider how to face survival, and some of them can't resist dedicating themselves to literature.. If their experience and knowledge did not serve yesterday to make the revolution, let them at least serve today for getting by!

One of these good people is Valerio Evangelisti, a well-known science fiction writer, creator of the character Eymerich the Inquisitor. And that's not all. He also curated the "Project Memory: the Commune", was

president of the “Marco Pezzi” Historical Archive of the New Left in Bologna, is a collaborator in *Le Monde Diplomatique*\* as well as the editorial director of the magazine *Carmilla* (“literature, imagination and the culture of opposition”). There is a little thing gnawing at all these writers with radical cravings, the attempt to connect profit and militancy. But to be honest, we have to recognize an undeniable qualitative leap in him. Unlike those who have gone to the assault on the sales chart after having given up the assault on the heavens, Evangelisti has only had to give up an alternative academic career in exchange for work as a functionary of the Finance Ministry.

Like his colleague Pino Cacucci\*\*, former anarchist revolutionary, Evangelisti was born in the Emilian capital (Bologna), which holds the dishonorable record for having spawned a whole generation of “creative” recuperators (from Bifo to Luther Blisset to Helena Velena). Like Cacucci, he has taken an interest in the French illegalists anarchists of the early twentieth century known as the “Bonnot gang”. Cacucci wrote a novel that, a short while ago, could even be found on supermarket shelves between the bread and the toilet paper. Evangelisti dedicated an essay to them that appeared in an anthology that was meant to pay homage to the literary character created by the imagination of Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, Fantômas the King of Terror. “Fantômas and the Illegalists” is the title of this essay, which is a noteworthy example of Evangelisti’s passion: uniting fantastic fiction with political critique. It is necessary to say here that the fantastic fiction, evoked by Fantômas, is very much a pretext for

giving free rein to the political critique of illegalist anarchists. Of the six paragraphs that make up this text, only the first is dedicated to Allain's and Souvestre's. The rest of the text gives body to the nightmares of this left militant in the face of an anarchist revolt that is determined not to remain smothered in the dust of the archives.

Evangelisti's thesis can be quickly summed up: Fantômas, a criminal capable of committing the most heinous crimes at anyone's expense, was created in France in the early twentieth century; he was inspired by illegalist anarchists who filled the papers of the times with "crimes, at times gratuitous", committed to gratify their unconstrained individualism outside of any context of social struggle; this illegalism had experienced an earlier generation in which episodes of brutal violence had been limited (Ravachol and Henry) and, in any case, still linked to a class perspective, but had later suffered a degeneration that led it to defend undifferentiated violence against the exploited themselves, as witnessed in theory in the writings of Libertad and in practice in the actions of the "Bonnot gang"; illegalist ideas would remain completely circumscribed in a marginal sphere of the anarchist movement, not finding confirmation among other enemies of the state where "the revolutionary process is constantly conceived as mass action, even when the task of triggering it might be attributed to a narrow vanguard". This blind exaltation of violence in the name of an Individual attentive only to his own ease is, in reality, akin to the worst reasoning of the state, since "The bourgeoisie, made into the state, would be precisely

the ones to inaugurate the age contemporaneous with the most widespread and indiscriminate slaughter seen up to that time. They would be the ones to collectively embody the illegalist ideal, as much in the hatred of the weak as in an absolute freedom from moral obligations". The conclusion is unforgettable: "From a minority ideology, illegalism became the ruling thought, with all the blood that this entails".

You couldn't call Evangelisti's arguments very original. They merely repeat the anathemas most frequently showered on illegalist anarchists, anathemas hurled both by the more reactionary anarchists and by marxists of every stripe, haughty intellectuals hostile to the "lumpenproletariat". All these fierce enemies of the individual and loyal friends of the people have striven for nearly a century to spread the image of Bonnot as an alter ego of the savage bourgeois (kind of like in philosophical circles where there are those who have tried to present Sade as an alter ego of the savage nazi). As if an individual in revolt against society could ever have anything in common with a man of state drunk on power. As if those anarchists of the past (but in the author's hidden intentions, the reference is to a few present-day anarchists) were a gang of raging lunatics, hungry for blood, aspiring slaughterers. Perhaps it is time to oppose this lie with something other than the silence of indifference or the laughter of merriment. Evangelisi's text—a small anthology of errors, contradictions, slander, the whole thing seasoned with amusing blunders—supplies an optimal occasion for doing so.

**DOWN WITH WORK!**

It has been noted time and again that the worst enemies of history are often precisely historians. Unlike those who make history, they limit themselves to recounting it. Their objects of study—other people’s adventurous lives—can sometimes become a mirror in which they see the banality of their own lives reflected. A mirror to break, its view is so unbearable. Aware of their own passive role of mere contemplation, they get their revenge on those who have lived in the first person and acted directly. So it isn’t surprising that Evangelisti, this history graduate, this prolific author of essays with historical themes, this director of a historical archive, mystifies the history of those distant anarchists. It isn’t clear what Emile Henry has to do with illegalism if this term is used to refer to the ensemble of extra-legal practices used to get money: theft, robbery, con games, counterfeiting. It wasn’t and isn’t the delusion of omnipotence or moral degradation that pushes anarchists toward illegalism, but rather *the refusal of wage labor*.

The worst blackmail that society subjects us to is that of choosing between working or dying of hunger. Our whole life is frittered away in work, in looking for work, in resting from work. How many dreams are shattered, how many passions shrivelled, how many hopes disappointed, so many desires left unsatisfied in the terrible daily condemnation to work that has always been the most savage life sentence. Some anarchists, rather than bowing their head and bending their back for their wage and someone else’s profit, have preferred to procure the monety necessary for living in another manner. And this choice of theirs has been shared and practiced by

many other proletarians. The priggish Evangelisti is careful not to recall that at the time, Paris was full of those who lived by their wits, for example, the majority of the proletarian population of Montmartre. As Victor Serge recalled later: "One of the particular characteristics of working class Paris at that time was that it was in contact with the riff-raff, i.e. with the vast world of irregulars, decadents, wretched ones, with the equivocal world. There were few essential differences between the young worker or artisan of the old quarters of the center and the pimps in the alleys of the neighborhoods of the Halles. The rather quick-witted driver and mechanic, as a rule, stole whatever they could from the bosses, through class spirit and because they were 'free' of prejudices." In fact, there were quarters in Paris that were more or less "at risk", mainly the northern outskirts of the city (Pantin, St.-Ouen, Aubervilliers and Clichy), in which many professional thieves and pickpockets, swindlers and counterfeiters lived, along with thousands of proletarians forced to prostitute themselves on occasion in order to scrape by. When not themselves a part of this world, Parisian proletarians were usually sympathetic to it and naturally hostile to the police, and they were not at all opposed to carrying out small thefts themselves.

Immediately following the first robbery carried out by Bonnot and his comrades, a French newspaper declared that the Paris police needed reinforcements since they had to deal with two hundred thousand outlaws (in a population of three million people). If many proletarians welcomed the anarchist theses about "individual reprisal" more than the morality of a Jean Grave (or a Valerio

Evangelisti), if they sympathize with people like Jacob or Bonnot, it is because *they understand where they are coming from*.

And yet, Evangelisti maintains that in the anarchist illegalists, the refusal of wage labor had become contempt for workers, transforming victims of the capitalist system into its accomplices. So the illegalists were supposed to have replaced the division between exploiters and exploited with the division between the accomplices of exploitation and rebels. Evangelisti's entire essay is a denunciation of this "clear-cut simplification", this "crude abolition of all analytical nuance", guilty of leading to the "blurring as much of the strategic perspectives of struggle as of the medium range tactical requirements". In short, Valerio Evangelisti assures us that his are not the words of a former functionary of the finance ministry who feels a chill running down his spine in the face of these anarchists, but rather those of a comrade accustomed to looking at the "well-structured picture of a society stratified into classes" and concerned that it doesn't get replaced with a "simplified profile". For the good of the revolution, needless to say.

## ILLEGALISTS, NOT EVANGELISTS

The trouble with Eymerich's creator is that of all gray, leftist militants. He doesn't understand that these anarchists didn't have time to wait patiently for the arrival of the "great night", i.e., the mass revolution that was supposed to resolve the social question freeing them from exploitation. They had no desire to hear the gospel of the

red priests, according to which liberation is inscribed in the capitalist process itself, constituting its happy ending. They had no faith in leaders, who from the height of their wisdom, observing, measuring, calculating, reached the unfailing conclusion that revolution would happen tomorrow, never today. They were in a hurry and wanted to live, not merely survive, here, in this moment. The first person to forcefully and continuously mock revolutionary evangelists in France was Zo d'Axa, creator of the weekly, *L'Endehors*, in which writers of the caliber of Georges Darien, Lucien Descaves, Victor Barrucand, Félix Fénéon, Bernard Lazare, Saint-Pol Roux, Octave Mirbeau, Tristan Bernard, Emil Verhaeren and many others collaborated (and to think that poor Evangelisti, in his academic ignorance, writes d'Axa off as a "secondary popularizer"! ). Persecuted by the legal system, charged with "association of malefactors", d'Axa didn't extol the virtues of future earthly paradises, but bitterly criticized the defects of the present social hells with the aim of inciting his readers to revolt.

After him, it would be Albert Libertad's turn. But unlike Zo d'Axa, who essentially remained a loner, Libertad was able to give his action a constructive form and a social impact, increasing the range of his ideas. Evangelisti himself was forced to recognize that his "fairly well-distributed" newspaper managed to "win approval in some popular sectors". A collaborator in the libertarian press, active in pro-Dreyfus agitation, in 1902 Libertad was among the founders of the Anti-militarist League and, along with Paraf-Javal, founded the "Causeries populaires", public discussions that met with great interest



throughout the country, contributing to the opening of a bookstore and various clubs in different quarters of Paris. On the wave of enthusiasm raised by these initiatives, he founded the weekly, *l'Anarchie* three years later. On the occasion of the July 14 anniversary, this newspaper printed and distributed the manifesto "The Bastille of Authority" in one hundred thousand copies. Along with feverish activity against the social order, Libertad was usually also organizing feasts, dances and country excursions, in consequence of his vision of anarchism as the "joy of living" and not as militant sacrifice and death instinct, seeking to reconcile the requirements of the individual (in his need for autonomy) with the need to destroy authoritarian society. In fact, Libertad overcame the false dichotomy between individual revolt and social revolution, stressing that the first is simply a moment of the second, certainly not its negation. Revolt can only be born from the specific tension of the individual, which, in expanding itself, can only lead to a project of social liberation. For Libertad, anarchism doesn't consist in living separated from any social context in some cold ivory tower or on some happy communitarian isle, nor in living in submission to social roles, putting off the moment when one puts one's ideas into practice to the bitter end, but in living as anarchists here and now, without any concessions, in the only way possible: by rebelling. And this is why, in this perspective, individual revolt and social revolution no longer exclude each other, but rather complement each other.

This conception of life requires an agreement between theory and practice that infuriates the various evangelists

who think that they can be revolutionaries while continuing to be bank clerks, university professors, departmental bureaucrats or flunkies for large publishing houses, leaving the task of transforming reality to an external historical mechanism. As Libertad himself said: “our life is an insult to the weaklings and liars who take pride in an idea that they never put into practice”. In his memoirs, Victor Serge recalls the fascination that Libertad’s ideas exercised in this way: “Anarchism gripped us completely because it demanded everything from us and offered everything to us; there wasn’t a single corner of life that it didn’t illuminate, at least so it seemed to us. One could be Catholic, Protestant, liberal, radical, socialist, even syndicalist without changing anything in one’s life, and consequently without changing life: after all, one only needs to read the corresponding papers and frequent the appropriate cafes. Riddled with contradictions, torn apart by tendencies and sub-tendencies, anarchism demanded, first and foremost, the agreement between actions and words.

## NEITHER SLAVES NOR MASTERS

According to the evangelists, masters are the ones that create slaves. Only when those who command disappear will those who obey also disappear. But as long as masters exist, the only thing slaves can do is bow their heads and wait patiently to die. For illegalists, on the contrary, slaves also create their masters. If the former were to stop obeying, the latter would disappear just like that. This is why illegalists usually tend to let themselves lose the persuasive tone that evangelists love so much, since the former don’t intend to convert the exploited, but rather to

excite them, to provoke them, to stir them up against the old world.

At first view, it almost seems to be a difference of nuance, but in fact it is about two opposing perspectives that entail completely different practical consistency. When an evangelist curses the master and praises the slaves, he does nothing more than criticize the actions of the former and salute the resistance of the latter to the whip. The master is wicked because he oppresses; the slave is good because he endures. And since the evangelists reject the individual revolt of slaves, who are only granted collective rebellion, all together at the same time—a time that is postponed endlessly by those who don't love “simplified profiles”—what follows from this? That the slaves have to go on being good, i.e., enduring, in the hope that sooner or later...

On the other hand, when the illegalist curses both the master and the slave, he doesn't do so to compare their responsibility, but to urge the latter to change his life immediately, to act against the master, because the illegalist maintains that it is always possible to do something to free oneself from the yoke. Because commanding is shameful, it is true, but so is obeying. Because before the whip, tolerance isn't acclaimed, but rather revolt. There is nothing admirable about the honest worker who lets himself be exploited, or the honest voter who lets himself be governed. What is admirable is the capacity to rebel, to desert imposed social roles in order to start being oneself; a capacity that always has the opportunity to express itself. Behind the scorn of Libertad's words (and those of anarchists

like him) for what the exploited allow to be done to them, there is always the passion for what they could do. One may share this approach to the social question or not, but stating that it is an operative indication(?) against the exploited, a theorizing of blind and indiscriminate violence is an aberration worthy of an idiot or a slander worthy of a wretch. Evangelisti has shown himself to be both; for instance, when he equates bourgeois warmongers with anarchist illegalists, forgetting that if the first feed “hatred for the weak”, the second feed hatred for the powerful. Again, after Evangelisti enrolled Emile Henry into the illegalists, he had to admit that when Henry declared himself in favor of “acts of brutal revolt”, he also pointed out that his only targets were the bourgeoisie. As to his victims, the least that can be said is that in the eyes of the evangelists, their blood had to be more gruesome than that spilled by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists. What was so different about what fifteen comrades did later in Barcelona in the spring of 1923, when they burst into the Hunters’ Club, the customary retreat of the most reactionary masters, and opened fire on those present?

In any case, Evangelisti launches his anathemas fist and foremost against the French illegalists who went down in history as the “Bonnot gang”. Now leaving aside the fact that the “Bonnot gang” as such never existed, being a pure journalistic invention, who were these anarchists? Bonnot had worked a number of jobs and often got fired for his intolerance for masters. Garnier was a draft dodger, a laborer who had taken part in numerous strikes, with a record for offense and incitement to murder during a strike, and had a union card, Callemin already had pre-

vious convictions for theft and for conflicts with the police during a general strike. Valet was a smith, always present at demonstrations. Dieudonne was a carpenter and had taken part in several strikes. Soudy was a grocery boy, with a history of offenses, resisting arrest and distributing flyers during a strike. DeBoe was a printer who had been imprisoned for some anti-militarist articles. Carouy worked in a garage. Medge, also a draft dodger, worked as a cook. They were all mere proletarians, active in the movement of the time, who collaborated in various ways in subversive publications, frequented the venues, took part in conflicts with the police such as the events that followed the Tragic Week or Liabeuf's execution. They were all comrades, blacklisted as agitators and hotheads. For this reason, finding work was an even more difficult undertaking for them. So there is nothing surprising in the fact that they decided to resort to individual reprisal. The fact that some of them at times ran up against less than pleasant "mishaps" does not in itself make an individual choice completely consistent with anarchist ideas infamous.

## THE MISADVENTURES OF A HISTORIAN

The historian Evangelisti can do no less than get on his high horse to give lessons. So by reading his essay, one gets instructed about many interesting, though often contradictory and sometimes utterly absurd, things.

Already, there is no understanding what Fantômas has to do with the illegalists. First, if "murder, and not theft, is the axis of his criminal activity", contrarily, theft is the

axis of illegalist activity, murder being only an unforeseen contingency (whether avoidable or not, this is another question) that happens at times. Second, if “Bonnot’s men” (sic!) “appeared a few months after” Fantômas saw the light of day, how the hell did they inspire him? So who were these anarchist illegalists who were supposed to have filled the newspapers, “stuffed” with their misdeeds, provoking Allain’s and Souvestre’s fantasy?

Then, as usual, there is Max Stirner, black beast of all those who love the popular masses, because they intend to lead and domesticate them. At the beginning he is described as “the obligatory reference” for Fantômas and, therefore, according to Evangelisti, for the anarchist lovers of “crime” themselves. But then, a bit later, we see that “not even Stirner can be recognized as the inspirer of the illegalists”. And what is there to say about illegalist ideas? Are they a “theoretical corpus of considerable depth” or do they form a “limited theoretical stock”?

To create a no-man’s-land around individualist and illegalist ideas, Evangelisti finds nothing better to do than appeal to the big names of the anarchist movement, recalling the “nothing analogous is to be found in Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, or in the contemporaries, Malatesta and Reclus”. As if saying that, in the face of these founding fathers, these delinquents wouldn’t be true anarchists at all! And yet it was Proudhon, in declaring that property was theft, who laid the foundations for the concept of individual reprisal. And what about the unchaining of the wicked passions invoked by Bakunin? Kropotkin theorized the necessity of planting the seeds under the snow, but

also that “everything is good for us when legality doesn’t exist”. As to the “contemporary” Reclus, he maintained that “the ultimate cowardice is respect for the law” and had this to say about Ravachol: “I admire his courage, his kindness, his greatness of spirit... I know few men who pass him in nobility... he is a hero of uncommon generosity” (while the nephew Paul asserted that “in the current society theft and work are not substantially different. I rebel against the claim that there is an honest way of earning a living, work; and a dishonest way, theft or fraud...”) Besides, what sense is there in getting so worked up about Armand (among other things, the most candid of the illegalists) when it is known that the other “contemporary” Malatesta appreciated him to the point of asking “why does Armand continually speak of ‘anarchist individualism’, as a distinct body of doctrine when generally he just sets forth the principles common to all anarchists of any tendency?”

As if that were not enough, the Bolognese fantasy writer actually manages to confuse the anarchist Raymond Callemin with the situationist Guy Debord! Here he inserts: “Perhaps it is no accident that in 1912, Jules Bonnot’s right-hand man, Raymond-la-Science, in an ironic ballad, praises another of Henry’s endeavors, the attack against the mining offices in Carmaux, describing the civilian victims of the act as *poulets vulgaires*.” Here the historian Evangelisti has made a historical blunder, giving his best: 1) the ironic ballad was written by Debord, who jokingly signed it with the name of Bonnot’s “right-hand man” (some people can’t help but think in hierarchical terms...); 2) *poulets vulgaires* means vulgar

cops and is a reference to the local police and the low-level officer that died in the explosion; 3) the only civilian victim was the business's delivery man who helped the cops transport the bomb to the police station.

The contrast that Evangelisti makes between Libertad and Pouget is also amusing. The first is an illegalist, the second an anarcho-syndicalist; what a surprise when Pouget's thoughts get described as "much more balanced". One could ask if Evangelisti ever read Pouget's paper *le Père Peinard*. This is what a contemporary wrote in 1905 about this anarchist paper, the most scurrilous with the greatest number of readers among the working class: "Without any display of philosophy (which doesn't mean it doesn't have one it has openly played with the appetities, prejudices and rancors of the proletariat. Without reservations or deceit, it has incited to theft, counterfeiting, tax and rent refusal, murder and arson. It has advised the immediate assassination of members of the parliament, senators, judges, priests and army officers. It has called unemployed workers to take food for themselves and their families wherever they find it, to supply themselves with shoes at the shoeshop when the spring rains bathe their feet and to do the same at the clothing store when winter winds bite. It has called workers to throw their tyrannical employers out the door and to appropriate the factories for themselves; farmworkers and vinedressers to take possession of the farms and vineyards and to transform their owners into fertilizer; miners to take possession of the mines and to offer picks to the stockholders when they showed they were willing to work as comradely friends, otherwise to dump them down unused shafts; conscripts



to emigrate rather than do their military service, and soldiers to desert or shoot their officers. It praised poachers and other transgressors of the law. It told stories about the deeds of old-time bandits and outlaws and exhorted contemporaries to follow their example.” If only there were still such balanced anarcho-syndicalists today.

As to the bourgeoisie that was supposed to embody the “illegalist ideal” to the point of triggering off the first World War, to get an idea of how contemptible this hypothesis is, it is enough to recall that in France the anarchist interventionists (those who supported anarchists taking part in the war) were neither illegalists nor individualists, but precisely the anarchists bigots like Jean Grave. Only those who loved the masses to the point of following them and justifying them in every vile action accepted the idea of supporting the war. Libertad’s and Bonnot’s greatest critics were the ones to maintain that an anarchist could be a soldier, but not a robber. Behold, the evangelistic double standard.

## FINALLY

Nearly a century later, the revolt of those distant anarchists continues to burn. As voluntary servitude reaches over six billion, as social, technological and environmental catastrophe threatens the mere survival of humankind more every day, as on every side we see the rich respecting the misery of the poor and the poor respecting the abundance of the rich, it is incredible that there are still fire-fighters who, in the name of revolution but really on behalf of their quiet lives, rush to put out the illegalist fire. Will

the calls to tranquillity by the evangelists of militancy ever be able to stop the urgency of the social war?

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\*A French language journal that is one of the main sources of current leftist theory in Europe today.

\*\*Author of *In ogni caso nessun rimorso*, translated into English as *Without a Glimmer of Remorse* (Christiebooks), a novel about the Bonnot. Unfortunately, it seems that some people in the US take it for a nonfiction account, despite the fact that the author intended it as fiction, and the English-language publisher advertises it as fiction.

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