

Individuals or citizens?

[Worldless men] were and still are those who are forced to live in a world that is not their own, (...)

in a world for which they are present, on whose terms they are considered and used,

but whose models, aims, language and taste are still not their own, and are not granted to them.

Günther Anders

Worldless individuals, we are alone with ourselves. Our critics shake their heads before our *meager results* and scold us for our lack of willingness. But in the end, let's admit it, one gets bored. Is it possible that there isn't some small place in the sun for us as well? If many consider extremism an infantile disorder, it is by virtue of this banality: only in youth do we feel capable of refusing the

world, this world that is not our own. When we are full of strength, with the entire future before us, we fear nothing, neither police charges nor sleeping under the stars, and so even less, disdaining compromises. In this perpetual childhood, everything seems possible and within reach. This is why we refuse to throw our life to the bookkeepers of survival. We love with passion, we hate with fury. And if this exuberance, this proud love of ourselves, has the consequence of exiling us with our solitude, so be it! But then as the years pass, something intervenes. Energy is used up, stockpiles are reduced, ammunition is lacking, we notice that we have very little within reach for confronting what is left of the future.

Meanwhile, the social winter advances, covering the landscape with frost. In some way, it is necessary to put forth a remedy. Then staying at the margin of this world is not so very comfortable; perhaps at times the heart warms up, not the bones. Community will even be a therapeutic place, curing and removing “deviance”, but that torpor within it, the guaranteed meals, the dry beds! And so, bit by bit, with almost unnoticed movement, we approach the *polis*. If earlier this world could not count on our sympathy, if earlier it drew all our hostility, now it can rely on our understanding: the critical eye has given way to the entranced gaze, the biting word has been replaced by persuasive discourse. And once one has entered the *polis*, it is necessary to lose all the old habits and acquire new ones. Life in community requires respect for schedules and good manners. It is necessary to know how to tolerate if one wants to be tolerated. It becomes indispensable to avoid behaviors that might provoke public indignation and to close one’s eyes before the unwelcomed behavior of others.

“The one who does is always right,” says a widespread commonplace. It is like maintaining that “the one who speaks is always right”. What is valued is not the intrinsic quality of the movement or speech, but their mere existence. And yet silence is revealed to be golden when you don’t know what to say: better to remain silent than to let yourself go on in endless, idiotic babbling. If this is so, then why fret so much when one doesn’t know what to do? Why dedicate oneself to activism, to this compulsory doing, to this constant, omnipresent mobilization, which, indeed, fills the emptiness of our existence, but without giving it a meaning that our own, that is autonomous, that bears the mark of the difference, the uniqueness, that stands at the origin of every true action?

The fact is that outside the philosophical fogs, there is a horror of the “creative nothing”, in which we do not see the opportunity for reaching our fullness, but only the promise of falling headlong into the void. Better then to trust in the perpetual motion of the urgency of things where there is no time to reflect on ends because it is necessary to think about how to organize means. Utopia is beautiful, but it really isn’t practical.

THE PRACTICE

In France, it is called citizenism, a term that indicates a movement made up of a vast and multiform archipelago of associations, unions, collectives, press organs and political currents, whose aim is to fight for the restoration of “democracy betrayed”. The fact that our planet is at the end of its rope from the social, political, economic and ecological point of view, is now not hidden from anyone. The citizenists trace the cause of this situation back to a lack

of respect for the “popular will” which—once it has fallen into the hands of politicians hungry only for power, in cahoots with businessmen greedy only for profit—would be disregarded, manipulated, denied.

Enemies of these politicians and businessmen (more than of the social system of which they are mere expressions), the citizenists are convinced that democracy—in its most genuine, roughest form—is effectively the best of all possible worlds and that it is possible *to improve and moralize* capitalism and the state, by opposing their obvious harmfulness and abuses effectively. But on two conditions: that this democracy expresses itself through a political rebirth that is modelled more after Pericles’ Athens than Machiavelli’s Florence, or with greater direct participation of the citizens, who should not just elect their representatives, but should also constantly act to put pressure on them so that they truly stick to what they were elected to do. This pressure can be exercised in the most varied manner, including those acts of “civil disobedience” that make the most loutish reactionaries spit venom and that cause so much admiration in the movement.

One could say, in a certain sense, that citizenism is born of disappointment. In its most reformist variant, disappointment about the distance that increasingly separates those who are sent to the Palace from those who remain on the streets. There are many respectable people—to be clear, those who are convinced that it is power that creates and safeguards freedom, that the market should be based on ethical principles or that the military should respect a moral code—that no longer feel that they are represented by a ruling class which is openly accused of forming a privileged caste, of being deaf to the interests of the

common people, of being concerned only with maintaining their positions. These respectable people firmly believe in the state, in the necessity of the state, in the usefulness of the state, in the justice inherent to the state, but they are temporarily disappointed with it, holding that today it isn't guided by competent, honest, upright, loyal politicians. This is the source of their distrust for professional politicians, parties or unions, while still not abandoning their search for someone who will meet their highest demands.

Feeling neglected, the citizenists find themselves constrained to go down into the streets to defend their "rights". Their struggles always have precise objectives, are limited to saying a sharp NO to a specific state project that jeopardizes their health, without in the least wanting to call the social organization that produced it into question. They don't concern themselves with radical moments, subversive tensions. They are honest citizens, not "hooligans" or "terrorists". It goes without saying that, though they are ready to carry out formally illegal acts like street blockades, they are declared enemies of violence. They don't support the truncheon of the riot cop that suppresses any more than the sabotage of the rebel who rises up. The only acts of force that they accept are the controlled, minimal, integrated ones that they occasionally carry out to draw the attention of the adversary, or rather of the authorities. The acts of force can sometimes even be quite spectacular, but that wouldn't prevent the one who carries them out from competing in presidential elections in the future. In its less reformist variant, citizenism is the fruit of disappointment in a revolution whose historical project has been revealed as

bankrupt. Despite different expressions, in its principles, this project aimed at a reappropriation of the capitalist means of production by the proletariat. In this perspective, the proletariat is seen as the authentic creator of social wealth, which is, nonetheless, is enjoyed exclusively by the bourgeoisie; to the proletariat the effort of sowing, to the bourgeoisie the fruit of the harvest. With such a premise, social change could only be considered as a mere suppression of the usurping class. Therefore, the expansion of the production forces was seen as a step forward on the road to revolution, going along with the real movement through which the proletariat was constituted as the future revolutionary subject that would have realized communism and anarchy. The bankruptcy of this perspective began to peek out in the first half of the twentieth century, with the defeats of the revolutions in Russia, Germany and Spain. The final shock was the French May of 1968, which opened another decade of bitter conflict. The 1980s put an end to the last great assault on the heavens, marking the irretrievable decline and disappearance of this project of social liberation in conjunction with the restructuring of capital, which, through the introduction of automation, set up the end of the centrality of the factory and the myths linked to it. The orphans of proletarian revolution found a form of protest in citizenism that could console them in their mourning. Some of the ideas that circulate in it, like those about the “redistribution of wealth”, come directly from the old workers’ movement that planned to manage the capitalist world on their own behalf. In such concepts, one can glimpse a return, a continuity and even a highjacking

of former ideals by citizenism. This is what is called “the art of arranging the remains”.

Whether it is enlightened members of the bourgeoisie demanding more transparency in public affairs or disappointed proletarians wanting to fill the void left by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fact remains that citizenists, incapable of having a unique thought, at least have a common thought: *another state is possible*. If in this vast cloud, it is possible to find so many minds, sometimes even in contradiction, it is because citizenism expresses an integrated form of protest that hopes to be able to put the malfunctions of the economic system back into balance or to readjust its drifts through greater citizen participation. In this way, citizenism manages to cut across party lines, keeping protest and collaboration together. The protest spurs the collaboration; the collaboration satisfies the protest. This explains its success and its certain future. It is the only mediation that allows you to obtain immediate “victories”, however partial, through coming to terms with the institutions.

SOMETHING HAS BEEN LOST

In Italy, citizenism took its first step in Val Susa, with the struggle against the high speed train (TAV). To tell the truth, the struggle against the TAV in the Piedmontese valley began more than ten years ago in a completely different way, with some acts of sabotage against the earliest construction sites. Small actions brought into the limelight of the newspapers with the arrest of those presumed responsible, three anarchists who later proved to be unconnected to the events. In the course of the investigation, two of them committed suicide. The clamor these events

provoked at the time, sufficiently well-known that we don't need to go over them, drew attention to the state project in Val Susa. This gave birth to a protest movement that—though it met with quite a bit of sympathy—remained limited, for the most part, to the militant milieu for several years. But starting in November 2005, when the real work on the TAV line began, this movement managed to break the dam, assuming a mass character. What happened in Val Susa provoked a general enthusiasm that led many to think that they had finally discovered the magic formula that merely had to be repeated in other contexts to get the same results. From this came the spread of committees, assemblies, popular initiatives against “harmfulness” that are filling the agenda of the movement throughout Italy. But what is behind all this unbridled activism that in July 2006 was coordinating in the Pact of Solidarity and Mutual Aid? The primary discourse is that of creating a “new” and “real” democracy, i.e., the citizenist discourse. The Pact is presented by many as a libertarian text, but its text is a perfect example of a political document, marked by the ambiguity of those who have a foot in each camp in order to satisfy all palates (and if seeing that so many citizens have taken a step outside the institutions can only bring us joy, what are we to think of those rebels who, in solidarity, take a step into the institutions?). There are anarchists who exult in reading “The National Pact of Solidarity and Mutual Aid is certainly not an attempt to stealthily infiltrate into the politics of the palace, nor does it intend to get hosted in the palaces of politics. It has no friendly governments to which to look with trust. It has no parties to which to give a blank slate delegation, and it certainly has no intention of going down a road that

would lead it to becoming a part itself”, without noticing that this merely affirms the cross-party and lobbyist nature of citizenism. Citizenists are balanced people, they don’t want to become a party, but rather to put a certain type of pressure on parties. They are well aware that fighting in the political arena is not exempt from unpleasant consequences. And the way to avoid this risk is to assume the form of a pressure group that is careful not to directly exercise power. This is why they cannot present “blank slate delegations”, since they don’t want to talk with a favored few. Anybody who listens to them may be okay. This is why it is pointed out immediately afterwards that the Pact “does not, for this reason, avoid politics and confrontation, and is able to distinguish those who operate with transparency from those who try to contain struggles. The model that it proposes is at the same time the only method that it is willing to accept; that of the active participation of citizens”. In fact, citizenists don’t avoid politics, not at all; they simply no longer want to be made fun of: clear understandings... Far from supporting abstentionism, they preach participation. So it is no accident if the anti-TAV protest in Val Susa is clearly still too rooted in the old world, if after having clashed with the forces of order and devastated the unborn construction sit at Venaus (a moment of rupture that later vanished in the pro-Val Susa narratives, which preferred to dwell on the more presentable popular assemblies), this protest later flowed into the ballot box where the high turnout at the polling stations recorded there in the last elections saw the triumph of the left that was most present. Thus, clashes and barricades (for now?) have not fueled the revolt against all parties, but has rather favored some of them.

And if the large presence of subversives in Val Susa has given the opposition a particularly lively color, the struggles that followed elsewhere mostly seem to be fed by the nonsense of the Grillo boys*. For example, in Vicenza, where the struggle against the expansion of the US military base is going on. The No to Molin Committees expressly state that they demand “respect for the Union** program” and are coming out against “the project that from the environmental point of view violates the directives already acknowledged by our regulation 2003/35/CE,” all in order to “promote change and affirm a new alternative project in defense of the values and common good of the collectivity”. Their nature as aspiring governors is such as to cause them to sponsor their initiatives under the aegis of “AltroComune” [“Other Municipality”–translator]. With such a premise, it is no surprise that these Committees, having designated themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the struggle against the US military base, have excommunicated the authors of some acts of sabotage that were carried out against the base last April. Distancing themselves from the acts was clearly not enough. Nor is it strange that any scum with an institutional pedigree gets invited into their paid campgrounds to babble in the name of democracy. Even less, one can get indignant if during the periodic protest marches that parade through the Paladin city, like the one of last December 15 [2007], they play the role of firefighters, coming to openly block demonstrators who intend to sabotage the expected walk. If anything, it is astounding that, after having maintained the No to Molin Committees (with a court-registered trademark!), published their initiatives, expressed their solidarity,

spread their slogans—clearly having lost confidence in the possibility of an autonomous intervention in what is a struggle against the US military base and not the No to Molin struggle, which is merely the reformist expression of the larger struggle—is the hope to provoke a sudden radical “turn” with regard to their objectives (among which is the demand for a moratorium, whose principle has been valorized within the movement precisely by the Pact of Solidarity and Mutual Aid, part of which will be translated below).

THE MISUNDERSTANDING

As was already said, citizenism starts out as a *political* reaction from below to the so-called “crisis of representation”. A reaction that aims to overcome and cure this crisis through new forms of representation. From this point of view, it arises as a natural heir to the parties and unions in the recuperation of more radical and subversive tensions. But this doesn’t take away from the fact that the contexts in which it is manifested present elements of extreme interest, because they are potentially pregnant with favorable opportunities. The citizenist doctor appears where the political invalid is in the throes of agony. Its presence alone is a surefire indication of the opportunity for action. In fact, while the doctor is busy prescribing remedies, couldn’t one take advantage of the confusion to carry out a healthy euthanasia on this patient? So it is understandable that many subversives have decided to intervene in these situations of struggle with the intent of exploiting the occasions, of radicalizing citizenist objectives, of getting beyond them and making them face their contradictions. But how?

This problem has perhaps been underestimated. One hypothesis of this sort is a reposing of the old theory of “accidents along the way”. Even though a movement is born on reformist bases, it can always jump tracks and change course. After all, it has been noted time and again how banality has been the calling card of revolutions throughout history. This is certainly true, but... it isn’t a good reason to begin supporting banality. As to accidents along the way, historical experience teaches that subversives are often the ones to willingly suffer them. These subversive, frantic to take part in reformist movements with the aim of radicalizing them, have often ended up changing course themselves. And this is inevitable when one adapts to events instead of trying to force them by maintaining one’s ideas (at the risk of remaining at the margins of the “mass”). Unfortunately, this aspect leaps before our eyes now as never before. Laying aside individual insurrection, one now supports the direct democracy of the people, takes part in more or less massive political demonstrations that one used to call others to desert, hosts the academic professionals of separated knowledge, who one used to despise, in one’s initiatives. One is no longer proud of one’s qualitative difference, but of one’s quantitative identity. One no longer launches radical critiques with the intent of provoking conflict; instead one silences blasphemies to find harmony.

In Val Susa, for once, after such a long time, subversives weren’t chasing after the struggles of the “common people”, but rather the common people were joining with subversives in their struggle. The presence of the “masses” must have gone a bit to the heads of the subversives since, after they had maintained for years the necessity of keep-

ing hold of the critical aspect in every situation of struggle with the aim of strengthening, in Val Susa this did not happen. Instead, the subversives allowed some conceptual corpses like “the people” and “direct democracy”, in their various ideological adulterations, to be put back in circulation.

And what is the *people*? It is an ensemble of subjects characterized by the will to live under a single legal system. The geographical element is not enough to define the concept of the people, which requires the *consent to the same rights and a community of interests*. The people is a political and historical identity, which has access to stories and memories, the right to commemorations, demonstrations and marble gravestones. The people is visible and speakable. structured in its organization, represented by its delegates, its martyrs and its heroes. It is no accident that its myth has been embraced by authorities of every stripe, or that it was abandoned decades ago by libertarians (at least by the less lobotomized ones). Its uninhibited exaltation in Val Susa has had the consequence of the immediate appearance of the syndrome of populism. Generally, this term is used to refer to any political formulation based on the premise that virtue resides in the people—considered as a homogeneous social aggregate, the sole agent of positive specific and permanent values—and in its collective tradition (Val Susa as land of the partisans...). In populism, often the rural element is predominant since those who have remained in contact with the land, with the mountains, look with some suspicion and hostility on those who live in an urban environment. Populism is ecumenical. It excludes any class conflict since it considers the people as a homogeneous mass. From the

historical viewpoint, it tends to spread ideologically in periods of transition, as well as those of strong tensions between metropolis and province when processes of industrialization are going on, because they offer a reason for cohesion and at the same time for warning and coagulation. Populist formulas revive whenever a rapid mobilization of vast social sectors and an intense politicization outside of existing institutional channels is seen. The appeal to the regenerating force of myth is lurking even in the most articulate and complex society, ready to materialize in the moment of struggle. And the myth of the people is the most appealing and the most obscure at the same time, the most groundless and the most functional in the struggle for power.

All these characteristics are very much present in Val Susa, exploited by the many sides involved that don't want to let the delicious occasion of a general mobilization with certain potentialities escape them. Even from the anarchist side, there are those who have not flinched, placing confidence in libertarian populism that knows its distinguished theorists and has its best expression in popular assemblies. Starting from Val Susa, the feeling has spread that every individual can have control over the decisions that determine the destiny of our society: it is enough to know how to discuss with others. This conviction has led to the revival of direct democracy, of *politika* in the Hellenic sense, of the myth of the agora—the civic space in which citizens can gather informally to discuss, exchange ideas and involve themselves in useful relationships, in view of those popular assemblies where they will confront the common questions with the aim of reaching agreement in a direct, face-to-face way. In short, what the flabbiest, sorriest an-

archist militants have describes for years as “non-state public spheres”.

It is certainly no accident that the Greek word for assembly is *ecclesia****. If the most perfect organization in the universe can be called God, then the link between politics and religion is emphasized. Less obvious is the attractive force it exercises over those who intend to subvert this world from top to bottom. The monstrous aberration that causes men and women to believe that language is born to facilitate and resolve their mutual relationships leads them to these collective gatherings, where they debate how to face the affairs of life. That theses affairs are experienced in different ways among those present, that the debate cannot be equal since capacities will not be equal (those who know more and speak better dominate the assembly), that the minority has no reason to accept the decision of the majority... all this gets noted only when one doesn't frequent the agora. As soon as one sets foot there, perhaps prodded by events, old perplexities dissipate; a miracle that occurs much more easily if one discovers that he has a fine “capacity for oratory”. And yet there are still those who go on thinking that this effort to unite individuals into a community, to supply them with something to share, to render them equal, is odious. Because it is dripping with hypocrisy. The same hypocrisy that, after ignoring the slaves that allowed the ancient Greeks to deliberate non-stop, after removing the amorphous and anonymous plebeian unworthy of being a part of the people, is now prepared to overlook the fact that human beings can join together only if they renounce their respective worlds—sensitive worlds, without supermarkets

and highways, but rich in dreams, thoughts, relationships, words and loves.

In political reason as in religious faith, the leading idea is that equality comes from identity, from common adherence to one vision of the world. We are all equal because we are all children of God, or citizens of Society. The opposite possibility, which has also cropped up in the course of history, is never considered. That general harmony of humanity might originate in the division of individuals pushed to infinity. Individuals are equal either when they are all identical or when they are all different. In the assembly that unites everyone, reason—the *Logos*—is evoked through discussion. Speaking, reasoning, arguing, this is where problems melt like snow in the sun, conflicts are settled, agreements are made. But how many compromises, how moderation, how much realism are necessary to reach a common agreement, to suddenly discover we are all brothers?

Thus, after having so thoroughly criticized the conviction that one can return to a science of social transformation, after having affirmed that there are no laws that control social events, after having refuted the illusion of an objective historical mechanism, after having cleared the field of all the fetters that get in the way of free will, after having sung the excess that repudiates every form of calculation, one goes back and takes a yardstick in hand to measure the steps carried out. The participants at initiatives get counted, the media coverage received is controlled, continuous forecasts of the balance are made. Clearly then, the passions were not so wicked, the desires were not so wild, interests were not so distant.

Nor is it understood why direct democracy, as a mediation between various forces in the field that arises in the course of an insurrectional rupture (as has happened historically) should become an ideal to realize here and now in collaboration with various mayors, local authorities and politicians put on the spot by disillusioned citizens. Direct democracy is a sham good idea, It shares with its big sister, Democracy in the broad sense, the fetishism of form. It holds that the manner of organizing a collective pre-exists the discussion itself, and that this method is valid everywhere, at all times, and for every kind of question. Defending direct democracy, counterposing—as “real” democracy—to “false” representative democracy, means believing that our authentic nature can finally be revealed when it liberates from the constraints that weigh on us. But being liberated from these constraints supposes a transformation such that at the end of the process we will no longer be the same, or better, we will no longer be what we are in this civilization based on domination and money. The unknown cannot be reached by known routes, just as freedom cannot be reached through authority. Finally, even in accepting the possibilities of establishing an effective direct democracy, there would still be an objection: why should a minority ever adapt itself to the desires of the majority? Who knows, perhaps it is true that we are living in an ongoing and terrible state of exception. However, it is not the one decreed by power in the face of its own rules—rights are a pure lie invented by the sovereign who is not held to be consistent with this lie—but rather that of the individual in the face of his own aspirations. It is not living as one would like to live. It is not saying what one would like to say. It is not acting as one would like to act. It is

not loving who one would like to love. It is having to lower oneself, day after day, to compromises with the tyranny that condemns our dreams to death. Because here it is not about winning or losing (a typical obsession of militants), but of living the only life one has available, and living it in *one's own way*. Small gestures and common words can hold crowds and crowded streets together, but can we only seek these gestures, these words, outside ourselves to satisfy a new sense of belonging to a community? Not unless we want to give the individual a blank check, only in order to later let them know that it was really toilet paper.

* The Grillo boys are similar to Michael Moore–translator

** The old name of the Democratic Party of Italy, before the *Rifondazione Comunista* split off–translator

*** Which also means “church”, hence, the word “ecclesiastical”.–translator

EXCERPT FROM THE “NATIONAL PACT OF SOLIDARITY AND MUTUAL AID”:

At the end of the Venuas-Rome NO-TAV Caravan, the Committees, Networks, Movements and Groups assembled here in the room of the Protomoteca of the Municipality of Rome, on this day of July 14, 2006, in common agreement, determine to create a PERMANENT NATIONAL NETWORK AND A NATIONAL PACT OF SOLIDARITY AND MUTUAL AID in order to affirm in our country:

- The right to precautionary information and active participation of the citizens with regard to every intervention that wants to operate on the territory on which they live, sharing the common goods (water, air, land, energy);
- The use of systems of promotion and consumption that valorize territorial resources, minimize environmental impact and the movement of merchandise and people, and that are not based on exploitation, particularly of the South of the world.
- The beginning of a national moratorium on the carrying out of large public works and on the localization of energy plants [*...here I left out a list of specific types of energy plants, because I couldn't find translations for most of the Italian words in any of my dictionaries...*] both due to the lack of a national energy plan and to prevent the business logic of the few from devouring the resources of the many.
- The urgency of the cancellation of the Objective Law, the Environmental Proxy Law, the Central Release Law, Green Certificates for incinerators and the radical modification of the Design Law on Energy.

On these bases, we are giving life to a National Coordination (with website and e-mail) constituted of a representative from every participating organization and we invite all other Committees, Networks, Movements and Groups to join together in this National Pact of Solidarity and Mutual Aid.

[<http://apioludd.blogspot.com>]

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