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Kick It Till It Breaks

An introduction to Angry Brigade

Ravage Editions

July 2012

On the night of January 12, 1971, coverage in the *Times* is explicit: “Two bombs devastate Carr’s house on day of protest.” Robert Carr was then Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity in the newly elected conservative Heath government. He was responsible for the proposal for the Industrial Relations Act earlier in the day, leading to many workers’ demonstrations. This direct attack is claimed by a group named “the Angry Brigade” in a context of widespread social tension such as England has not experienced since at a time when all over Europe and on all the continents many groups were organizing themselves to physically attack the structures of capital and a certain moral order that the times of 68 had not succeeded in dissipating.

Waves of massive protests appear more or less everywhere, youth disillusioned with a system that continues to develop ever more effective means for crushing individuals and burying people’s dreams of another world, but a youth excited by the prospect of a radical transformation of the existent. Some take the path of urban unrest on specific themes or against the old world in general, others specialize in revolutionary theory,

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others specialize in clandestine or semi-clandestine agitation, others still navigate between these various methods in consistent roundtrips.

“Armed Struggle”, as it will be called, is an ambiguous term in the sense that it covers more than a simple acceptance of what the term might suggest. Armed Struggle is not just the fact of fighting with weapons, it has also become an ideology, promoted by different groups. Groups that have distinguished themselves by their marxist-leninist-maoist or nationalist influences (ETA, IRA etc.), sometimes all at once. So-called Armed Struggle groups of anarchist inspiration are virtually nonexistent, whereas the anarchist struggle in arms, that, has never really ceased to exist from the 1880s up to today. We could name but a few anarchist groups with signatures that persist in the history of the second part of the Twentieth century: the GARI, Azione Rivoluzionaria in Italy and the Angry Brigade in Britain. We are looking at the Angry Brigade here, but also, through its example, at the non-pacified England of the late 60s and 70s, a period that some were to call the angry years, and would soon be ousted from the collective memory by the IRA campaigns and bombings that succeeded them.

There are several reasons that led to the publication of this book. The story of the Angry Brigade, if it is not to serve some academics in their “radical” work to dust their discipline and advance research on behalf of the State must serve the present of a struggle that continues, with the desire to regain some of the enthusiasm of a time when revolution seemed to many to be at hand, and not a crippling mirage. Always critically, there are many things in this story that echo current issues, those that still shake the anti-authoritarian circles most carried to spreading antagonism, whether anarchist or not. We, who see in the aforementioned Armed Struggle groups, in also in many others, nothing but supporters of Power, certainly not the one standing, but that of their macabre authoritarian dreams, are interested precisely in the struggle of the Angry Brigade be-

or IRF. The spectacle of practices and logos continues, stifling the diffuse acts of revolt scattered throughout the world, including those of other anarchists trying to penetrate a spreading social tension and therefore through the angle of complete anonymity. This does not of course exclude claiming an action to explain it or the use of one-off signatures.

By choosing to call themselves Angry Brigade in a permanent way and to claim belonging to it as in any other formal and permanent organization, they participated in this spectacle. Also, in view of police history, one can easily say that carrying a name of the kind facilitates one’s own repression and loses some of the sense of the attack in question, putting the spotlight on the authors of the attacks rather than the attacks themselves.

There is obviously no question of throwing away the whole experience of the Angry Brigade here, or of making a sanctimonious vindication, as it is not a question of finding new idols, any more than models or a method to blindly reproduce, but of finding in a particular course of life and revolt whereof to rekindle the flame of a struggle that we do not want to see extinguish itself, despite the coating of social pacification.

Because it’s always time to storm heaven.

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enter the revolutionary pantheon and feed official history. This issue is not new. In our opinion, and as Jean Weir points out, “head of the Laboratories at Woolwich Arsenal, main witness for the prosecution in the trial of the supposed Angry Brigade, was forced to admit that in addition to the 25 bombings between 1968 and mid-1971 attributed to them, another 1,075 had come through his laboratory.” But today, what remains are the 25 explosions attributed to the Angry Brigade rather than the 1,075 others. To put a name in the public space in this way is in some way equivalent to taking all the praise for oneself. Action Directe, the RAF, the CCC, RZ and other armed struggle groups in Europe were in fact the trees hiding the forest of autonomous groups of attack, far more numerous and diffused. On the one hand, one can find interesting the possibility mentioned in the communiqués that anyone can appropriate the signature Angry Brigade: “Where two or three revolutionaries use organized violence to attack the class system ... there is the Angry Brigade. Revolutionaries all over England are already using the name to publicise their attacks on the system.” (*Communiqué No. 6*) and “The AB is the man or woman sitting next to you. They have guns in their pockets and anger in their minds.” (*Communiqué No. 9*). But on the other hand, one can doubt the usefulness of creating an entity and identity based on a fixed signature. And if “revolutionaries throughout England already use this name to publicize their attacks against the system”, the opposite is also true, and this is all the better, because it decentralizes the attack and makes it less legible to the eyes of cops, preventing them from being able to attribute socially diffuse practices to a particular group.

To come back to the present time, we can cite the example of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire and Revolutionary Struggle in Greece, that we keep hearing about in antiauthoritarian circles around the world despite the hundreds of fires that ravage power unclaimed each year. But also, the various groups around the world recognizing themselves under the logos FAI

cause it would seem very difficult to classify them in the crude container of Armed Struggle. In its desire to replicate State terror, armed struggle-ism immediately posed itself as the reflection of the State, but without being able to give itself the latter’s strike force, because made up of small groups. No revolutionary group has ever won in head-on close combat with the State. To think that the revolution could come about by the action of a group of professional revolutionaries is a coup logic that goes against an insurrectional logic. Saying this does not at all question the necessity of attack, individual or collective, and even less its diffusion. For anarchists, it is unimaginable to destroy the State while reproducing the latter’s own methods such as terror, militarism, hierarchy, delegation, representation, specialization, in a word, politics, even with bombs. By this we do not intend to attribute responsibility for the burial of the Years of Fire to the emergence of armed groups who, by their actions, would have “forced” the State to unleash itself on the said entire social movement, like the eternal militants still rotting in their obsolete outdated organizations like to maintain. If we do not have a miracle answer to this question, we can still talk about a lack of continuity in the transmission, and the intense work of recuperation / integration / assimilation of rage by the left, to transform it into ballot and channel it out of danger for power. By making believe that there was no choice between absolute clandestinity and boy scout leftwing militancy, the armed struggle-ist organizations participated in the murky desert that was the eighties and nineties. But it would be too easy to attribute the reflux of perspectives and revolutionary tension to the left and the armed organisations, because each course is individual.

Unlike the aforementioned groups, the Angry Brigade never elaborated a program, never lived like a vanguard of the workers movement or whatever and always emphasized sincerity in the struggle as opposed to strategic coldness. It never sacrificed pawns to win a game. Also, in the manner of GARI in Western

Europe, it never rejected the joy of the struggle by giving its practice a good overview of its goals, also reminding us of the good words of an old Italian anarchist, 'hurry to arm yourself, hurry to play [1]. Not being afraid of irony, so rare in many revolutionaries, the Angry Brigade did not hesitate to scribble wacky drawings in its communiqués, little comic strips (another point in common with GARI), humorous turns of phrase and insults of puerile vulgarity but cathartic. You will not find fifteen page communiqués of the Angry Brigade containing all the marxist-leninist and often nauseating anti-imperialist theories, coldly clinical with scientific pretensions. In that way the Angry Brigade certainly wanted to show that it was possible to carry out serious actions that require a lot of organisation without for that locking themselves up in a militaristic, organisational, ideological cold straightjacket. Not for that were its actions a joke, the damage was real and sometimes massive, and the message was crystal clear. Not for that will we prevent ourselves from making a few criticisms of them in this introduction, but further on.

It is difficult to establish with certainty or precision the specific reasons that led to the formation of this group in England in the seventies, although the analysis of context proposed by Jean Weir a little further on seems rather satisfactory (despite the inherent limitations of contextualization for those born too late like us and have not lived at the time in question), with the rise of new questioning and new forms of struggle that break with traditional patterns of the late workers' movement and the institutional and extra-parliamentary left. Breaking also with the official libertarian movement and its 'clumsy' survival reflexes, such as respectability and dissociation. The message of the Brigade is clear, "Our role is to deepen the political contradictions at every level. We will not achieve this by concentrating on 'issues' or by using watered down socialist platitudes." (*Communiqué No.6*)

sarily an end in itself). Technically, we can note a certain lack of creativity in the choice of the tool bomb being sanctified in spite of so many others, like many other armed groups of the time, at least those that official history has retained. One might ask why to have made the almost exclusive choice of explosives. First, the bomb can be a dangerous tool for the person who places it, but above all for others. Then, it requires technical know-how that can be close to expertise, both in its making and in its handling. In this, by its degree of sophistication, the bomb attack is only very poorly reproducible and diffusible, it therefore raises the essential question of specialization. For example, we see today a "scene" of anarchist bombers, with its charismatic prisoners (sometimes in spite of themselves), its martyrs, its heroes, wherein internal communication is done almost exclusively with bombs, and from which are excluded defacto those who use equally effective but less sexy means. In fact, the latter do not participate in the creation of a counter-culture attached to this or that form, which in itself says nothing in the end. One might wonder about the tool, especially when other, more basic, less risky means for oneself and others, but also less risky in terms of repression, are able to match the damage caused by the latter, they even surpass them. We can mention for example Rote Zora in Germany, who also favoured the bomb over all the other tools in the toolbox and in February 1987, blew up the front of the State office of the management of asylum seekers while a few months later, Revolutionäre Viren only needed a few well-placed cans of petrol to burn the same premises out completely, criticizing in act, by the effectiveness of their attack and the simplicity of the method chosen, the obsession for explosives of so many armed groups.

You could ask a simple question: why bother with guns to strafe a glass façade as the Angry Brigade, Action Directe or others did when a simple domestic hammer would have done? One could also question the usefulness of a permanent name, if not perhaps the unconscious — or just unspeakable — will to

tion of President Carnot by Caserio who will then himself be executed then avenged etc.. This vicious circle, although it participates, through the damage it causes, in the destruction of domination, seems entangled in a sacrificial logic that is not to our taste. We prefer attacks that aim coldly at undermining the material and moral foundations of the system of domination, preferring damage to symbol, action to reaction. Of course, all this is not an entrenched vision, and revenge is not an unhealthy sentiment against which we would have a moral position.

What interests us in particular about the Angry Brigade, is its remarkable ability to not just hit as pure vengeful negativity, but to see direct action as a support of social struggles, as the opening towards new possibilities, such as proposals and suggestions, thus avoiding the infernal cycles we talked about earlier. Attack where it hurts to support a hard strike, blow up a luxury store for the simple reason that it is a luxury department store, and generally demonstrate originality in the choice of targets and in the choice of their words to communicate their reasons.

If the group attacked judges, politicians, banks, embassies, bosses, businesses, army or police, it also attacked targets that show that their angle of attack was not only that of the economy and its concrete infrastructure, but also that of more latent social mechanisms. For example, patriarchy and entertainment with the attack at the Miss World pageant, or consumerism and fashion by attacking a Biba store in the trendy areas; excerpt from the communiqué: “Brothers and sisters, what are your real desires? Sit in the drugstore, look distant, empty, bored, drinking some tasteless coffee? Or maybe BLOW IT UP OR BURN IT DOWN. The only thing you can do with modern slave-houses — called boutiques — IS WRECK THEM. “(*Communiqué No. 8*)

However, the Angry Brigade is far from having been original in every way (we are not suggesting that originality is neces-

Deepening contradictions, highlighting conflictuality, carrying its own radicalism wherever it could make sense, but always at the heart of wider social struggles not necessarily in politicized forms, right to breaking with the old world. In a context where labour struggles were becoming more and more violent, accepting less and less the usual compromises such as negotiation, consultation, delegation or union mediation, the brigade found the space to express that “the system will never collapse or capitulate by itself.” noting that “More and more workers now realize this, and are transforming union consciousness into offensive political militancy”(Ibid). In its rather classist discourse, the Angry Brigade managed to avoid the recurrent travers of it. In stating: “WE BELIEVE IN THE AUTONOMOUS WORKING CLASS. WE ARE PART OF IT. “(*Communiqué No. 7*), it does not put itself outside the said class, as many marxists who make specific intervention in the struggles through a kind of vanguard do, condemning themselves to the inaction of passive waiting. By setting their activities at the heart of social antagonism, the brigade does not however confine itself to sticking to the particular context of a struggle, to reproduce the methods and level of violence. Quite the contrary, it is able to develop an autonomous action that maintains an intelligent relationship with a given context, escaping both charges of vanguardism and “above ground” activity. At the beginning of the brutal reign of the Thatcher era (which lasted from 1979 to 1990), several communiqués come out, signed again Angry Brigade. A new generation that will be noticed after placing explosives in the Leeds and Manchester headquarters of Thatcher’s Conservative Party in 1981, the bombing of the Prison Officers’ Training College, a screws’ school in Wakefield in 1983 or the explosion of an electricity pylon north of Maltby in 1984, causing temporary paralysis of the high-voltage grid of the region.

The practice of violent direct action, whether expropriative or destructive as the warlord Trotsky himself said, enters into

direct conflict with the pro-democratic tradition prevailing in the history of the labour movement. It has become customary over the decades to hear organizations and official theorists complaining about minority or individual action in general and violent in particular.

In the contemporary period, the mania of the official organizations of the libertarian movement to assert their non-participation in severely repressed acts, or only publicized (like the Anarchist Federation in France concerning the sabotage of the SNCF in 2008 or the Italian Anarchist Federation against anarchist attacks in general etc.). It is the same as the almost unanimous condemnation of the Angry Brigade by leftist movements and libertarians of the time, at the moment the repression struck.

Described as “terrorism” by the State as well as by the most marxist and collectivist parts of the political spectrum, violent direct action that is not carried out by some messianically awaited “masses”, a sort of coming of the revolutionary Millennium, has always been subject to recuperation by both sides. Most often, and certainly, in the direction of the wind, that of the social scarecrow against the lucidity that pushes the freedom-loving individual to take responsibility in the face of the choice that this society leaves him: domination or the struggle against domination. Trotsky appropriates the term “terrorism” on the pretext of the impossible “mass”: if we understood in this way terrorism as any action inspiring fear, or doing harm to the enemy, then, of course, the entire class struggle is nothing but terrorism. “ After making an apology for the good” terror “of the masses, he speaks of “individual terror”, which according to him, *belittles the role of the masses*.

The 60s and 70s saw the rise of the old practices of direct action, with the certain hope of putting an end to social roles, but also with the “masses”, waiting extras of the passage to action. With, for the record, the fact that sabotage and class violence have always been weapons of the exploited, at the in-

dividual as well as at the collective level. “If it is enough to arm oneself with a gun to achieve one’s goal, what is the point of class struggle? “Trotsky certainly did not know how right he was. It is that the individual is not part of the “scientific” means proposed by the alchemist Karl Marx to lead capitalism to its end, as if by magic. Since everything in politics is a matter of strategy — “of course, we only repudiate individual terrorism for reasons of expediency. “ — many rebelled against political separation by opposing reasons of the heart, the desire to be free.

The Angry Brigade was an anarchist group, it placed the deed in the tradition of propaganda by the deed, of insurrectional guerrilla, or more broadly the direct action of anarchist history.

Without wanting to add grist to the mill of false criticisms of this world, one can afford to have reservations about a particular practice or another, one can also express doubts about the “effectiveness” of certain acts without for that putting in question the need to attack this world. We believe it is necessary to pose the question of symbolic actions (we are not talking about actions that are merely symbolic, having no other interest than feeding the spectacle of the spectacle). For example, the diagram (going back to the Belle Epoque, and which we see reappearing today on the international level, moreover in a degenerated version, that is to say through interposed blogs) of the act of vengeance, followed by the execution of its author, itself leading to many reprisals, and so on seems to us to be severely limited. In 1892 Ravachol avenges those executed at Fourmies with a series of bomb attacks against judges. After his execution, Meunier blows up the restaurant Very, Léauthier stabs a Serbian Minister and Vaillant detonates his bomb at the Chamber of Deputies. The death of Vaillant, guillotined, is avenged by Henry who blows up the café Terminus and a police station. The arrest of Henry is followed in retaliation by a bomb placed by Fénéon at Foyot Café and by the assassina-