

A mano armata

Armed

Alfredo M. Bonanno

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The human's true weapon is its hand.

The human is an animal that nature has selected with a hand whose thumb is opposite the other fingers.

An animal that grasps, wants to take, hold, make its own.

So basically the weapon is the prosthesis that increases the active capability of the hand. In Greek prosthesis means the act of putting forward. When you think about it, from our far-off ancestors' arrows with their tips made from suitably sharpened pieces of flint to today's sophisticated weapons that strike from a distance thereby multiplying the single target of the past by thousands, the line of technological development is unbroken and uninterrupted.

Using a weapon is easy. So even a fool can be armed. In fact, in most cases, there is almost always a fool behind a pointed weapon, or at least someone cornered with their back up against the wall.

Society produces constant marginalisation, its ruthlessly competitive mechanism pushes a huge number of people towards the extreme periphery of survival.

Lack of work is only part of the problem, often a cliché and an alibi.

Whoever does not have a job makes do somehow, lowers their expectations, essentialises their demand for goods, carves out a niche for themselves in society which, in this case, is even willing to come to their aid, help them with some miserable subsidy but only after ascertaining their willingness to stick to the deal.

The job itself can be such that it involves carrying weapons. Think of the soldier, the policeman, the bodyguard, jobs that involve the use of weapons institutionally and for which there is even a risk allowance that augments the basic salary, albeit slightly.

When they put the weapon in their pocket in the morning and pick up the service machine gun, those who wear a uniform, any uniform, don't give it a thought. These are conditioned movements, dulled by the job into blunting the moral significance that the gesture might present in the light of a little reflection.

Being armed is therefore a problem of reflection, a stirring of the conscience, a moment, albeit extremely concentrated in time, in which the person holding a weapon tries to understand why they chose that particularly violent and aggressive prosthesis.

Coming back to the question of the prosthesis, it seems clear to me that there can be a residue of stupidity even in the most articulate choice. There is never a clear-cut position in this order of things. Nothing is black and white. Life is nuance and modulation, also in stupidity.

I have seen comrades whose human availability and revolutionary commitment I appreciated handle a weapon with voluptuous care and obvious satisfaction, caressing its burnished smooth steel, admiring its structure and power. A form of imbecility that is far more widespread than one might imagine, even among comrades.

So, between the fist that grips the weapon and the weapon that is gripped in the fist, in the hand that hosts and masters it there must be a contact, a sort of psychological boundary ever present in the consciousness of the individual wielding that weapon, who has decided to wield it.

This contact can never change direction. The object can never prevail over the critical aspect that prompted its use, defining its positive elements a technological prosthesis capable of enhancing the user's capabilities.

Of course, the very nature of this facilitation can lead to quite a degeneration of the initial critical condition. The weapon makes one feel strong and invincible, and if prolonged over time and incremented by a certain availability of tools, this condition of subservience to the prosthesis can reach the extreme where whoever has made a habit of carrying a gun feels almost naked in its absence.

And, as well as being a chance occurrence, nudity also often creates a psychological condition of inferiority.

The increase in power due to physically holding in one's grasp, the very contact between skin and object, should never escape the above critical condition, on pain of subordination to the prosthesis and lack of ability to see the limits that this entails.

There can be no doubt, of course, that grasping a weapon in one's hand does not, per se, mean readiness to use it. This is all the more true in relation to the deadly power of the prosthesis itself. The increase in the illusion of power, at times ludicrously boundless, does not obviate the need for a careful moral assessment of the consequences of the actual use of the weapon.

These two elements, which might seem mutually exclusive, do not cancel each other out but face each other forcefully and often, when imbecility has not already prevailed, end up in an irresolvable contradiction sometimes laden with deadly consequences for those who have unwittingly drawn the weapon without realising that they are not prepared to use it.

In itself, the ferocity with which the weapon is used in many cases (just think of mass slaughters or executions, or banal obedience to orders as far as soldiers are concerned), is the exact opposite of understanding and deciding what one is doing. Not knowing what to do and doing without knowing are the same thing and, in the long run, the bestial efficiency of the soldier and the professional killer ends up finding its destination.

The use of the prosthesis I am talking about, the weapon in my grasp, is a question of conscience. But what is a question of conscience? It is acquired knowledge of reality made one's own, that is, critically introjected into the wide range of the latter's relations.

No aspect of this overall movement should remain in that grey area where we keep the most problematic elements of what constitutes our actions, often disturbing because they touch on correspondences we don't talk about but which are nevertheless within us and lead to not always predictable consequences.

Holding a weapon therefore means using a technological reinforcement which should belong to the responsible decision of the individual.

I say should because it is not always possible to reach sufficient critical depth in this field. In action therefore, no obedience to orders is acceptable, no delegation, no ranking of skills. Similarly, no imbecile becomes what he or she is not simply by holding a weapon.

Here we come up against two conflicting arguments, which are nevertheless linked by a worrying logical thread. The first concerns the simplification of decision-making, the second the exceptional nature of certain situations which impose a kind of hierarchy of competences. Let us develop them calmly.

The critical decision of the individual who takes responsibility for the acts they undertake is based on facts that should be identified by critical assessment, not brought to the fore by an ideological bias, which could hide inadvertent trivialisation.

If I decide to strike a person that is responsible for exploitation I might get rid of any critical light and just rely on the symbol. Not that carabinieri, that judge, that doctor, or that journalist, etc., but any carabinieri, judge, doctor, journalist, and so on. There is no doubt that the reasoning is sound, and has been made in the past and, within certain limits, can still be shared in abstract.

In practice, however, it entails a considerable risk, that of the critical zeroing, leaving the decision to banal ideological maximalism.

The willingness to examine the specific condition of the enemy one wishes to strike is not important in order to avoid striking a possible 'innocent' — because no one is innocent — but is so as not to trivialise the action itself by reducing it to a simple knocking down of tenpins, all alike in the night of ideological darkness.

And then there is another question, the recurring one of the imbeciles, who, with fervour and passionate enthusiasm, not by chance always espouse this thesis thereby sparing themselves all critical burdens which, due to their reduced mental capacities, they would not know how to deal with.

These considerations do not contradict the thesis of striking the pile, of which I remember an old controversy as, on the contrary, identifying the pile is a more difficult critical issue and not just a secondary approach to decision trivialisation.

We now come to the other question: the need for a hierarchy of competences in particularly difficult cases. Here, too, the problem must be dealt with through critical examination by the individual.

Again the tendency of the stupid person to consider themselves omnipotent reappears, partly because of the armed prosthesis that chance and not their own conscious choice has placed in their hands. The illusion of omnipotence leads directly to not understanding the complexities of the situation, to underestimating them precisely because of one's incompetence and considering oneself capable of doing what in fact one is not. The woes of this particular kind of imbecility are unimaginable.

Learning about difficulties is an essential part of critical analysis. Not being prepared to properly assess one's limits and avoid embarking in ventures beyond one's capability shuts off the open-mindedness required for learning. The same applies to all the occasions when critical evaluation is replaced by simple enthusiasm or, worse still, by a superficial love of danger or desire for risk.

Going back to the beginning of our discourse, I think we can now see the relationship between holding a gun in one's hand and our being able to understand more clearly.

I would like to point out, however, that every capacity of the conscience that moves into the field of possible relations through the intellect but does not stop there, crossing over into action in a continuous passage that never ends, cannot end, is only in a small part a gift of 'nature'.

Its essential component is effort, reflection, experience, trial, courage, the search for difference. If it is thought that all this analytical apparatus can be put aside as junk by taking up arms, because the burnished prosthesis makes us omnipotent, the error is serious and will not be long in making its harmful effects felt.

These effects are of two kinds, again only apparently mutually exclusive.

The first is given by the critical incapacity that turns the possession of the weapon into a mere protuberance capable of generating all kinds of inconclusiveness, from getting oneself killed, to killing without knowing why, waiting for the very fact of having eliminated an enemy to bring about the critical clarification that should have preceded its elimination.

The second is given by the fact that many comrades shy away from taking up arms and attacking because of the, mistaken, conviction that they are not suited to the use of these prostheses, believing them only to be appropriate for a certain type of person and not attributing their evident (sometimes even pathetic) inadequacy, as would be right, to a lack of critical examination.

Basically, the problem is still the same: no one gives us anything, there are no easy solutions to acquiring the knowledge indispensable for action, and simply seeing the weapon in its circumscribed (and marginal) technical characteristic of its application, is one way of running away from the fundamental problem of critical knowledge, the measure and active condition of any attack on the class enemy.

As we have seen, I have tried to focus my attention on the problem of the arm in the hand, of why, at a certain moment in their life, a person aware of what a weapon signifies, of its deadly destructive potential, decides to take one in their hand and, above all, to use it.

I believe I have at least helped people to think about the mechanisms behind this decision, logical and emotional processes that are sometimes unclear and taken for granted as banalities that should not be thought about at the moment of action.

But these banalities are the banalities of theoretical analysis, of the critical examination of the situation as a whole that is being faced, and to define this aspect secondary or unimportant, so much so that at a time when we are "armed" the stronger we, owners of the magic prosthesis, are, is a tragic mistake.

The weapon, because of its close connection with the theory that penetrates the world critically, is therefore something more — as we have seen — than a simple piece of metal, and this something more can take on more complex consistencies and forms than the burnished heavy object that we usually call a weapon, i.e. it can take on the aspect of a relationship, a codification of relationships in view of the achievement of common ends, in other words it can take on the aspect of organisation.

The organisation is also a prosthesis and all the above considerations also apply to it, with a few more nuanced and difficult precisions which I shall endeavour to make below, hoping for the attention of my few comrades who are willing to accompany me in this line of reasoning.

The problem of expectations reappears. There are those who imagine that everything depends on the outside world and that a force unknown to them and for this reason alone imagined, beyond all human measure, comes to give meaning to their lives, which up until then were banal and subordinate to prevailing opinions. An expectation that systematically ends up in disillusionment.

They are hopelessly condemned to stand by even when they advance, chest thrust out, on to the proscenium of what they mistake for History, and declare war on the world in the name of a force that exists only in their unfertile imagination.

Beyond this nonsense, beyond every pompous display of one's own ignorance, there is concrete reality, and here, in the same movement that produces critical insight, the form of specific organisation is born in relation to a project.

It is not this form that determines the project, but it remains one instrument of the project, even if at times it knocks on the door of the attention and emotivity of the individual comrade, demanding greater significance. The flexibility of the organisation's form is therefore an essential element if it is to be an instrument of a project and not, on the contrary, steal from it all the care it deserves, keeping it for oneself in an obtuse quantitative growth.

I do not want to go into specific organisational choices here. Personally, as an insurrectionalist anarchist I have reached the conviction that the best solution, and therefore the most suitable form of specific organization, is the "informal" one. Others may be convinced differently, and perhaps prefer more rigid structures, deluding themselves into believing that they will get more concrete results in the short term: with acronyms, communiqués, claims, campaigns,

and all the old junk to which a not exactly recent epoch of history common to each of us had accustomed us. Each to their own, of course.

If someone thinks that the prosthesis is useful in function of its rigidity, let them come forward, seriously propose and discuss seriously, instead of affirming or revamping gradations of value. But, please, do not start from the instrument, start from the project that must employ that instrument, otherwise everything is trivialised in the flattening of the thesis that “any cop will do”.

Starting from the project means analysing reality critically. And here the problem comes back to chew its tail. Anyone lacking the possibility of carrying out this analysis in depth has two alternatives: either they choose what is being elaborated, i.e., more or less roughly what is in circulation in the debate among comrades; or they decide alone to find the means to think differently, but really differently, because the suggestion, good for all tastes, of always and in any case limiting oneself to saying no is just a pathetic reversal of banality.

Now, on the table is both the discussion on informal organisation as a revolutionary instrument of struggle for an attack on the institutions and the men [and women] of power and, at a low ebb, the structured hypothesis of a more rigid organisation: acronyms, political declarations, underlying strategic choices, campaigns to be claimed, etc. In short, an organisation that speaks about itself and has no margins for critique, an organisation that knows what it has to do and acts in the name of efficiency.

After all, if not, what kind of prosthesis would it be? I ask myself, and I ask you: can an imbecile, or worse still, a stubborn ignoramus certain of knowing the world precisely thanks to their own ignorance, accept the first hypothesis, that of the informal organisation which would force them into a critical examination of reality which they themselves, in the first place, recognise that they are incapable of? Of course not. They prefer the second solution, which is the only one that “thinks in place of them”, or at least gives that impression.

That is why I have put these texts together², because the comrades mentioned here were all capable of thinking for themselves, above all when they found themselves with weapons in their hands.

I hope that, for once, this reading will be an opportunity to reflect on what needs to be done and not just become another way of fantasizing about the past.

Catania, 31 July 1998
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