

THE HIPPIES' SPEECH

The first time I saw the hippies was in Prague. In the hall of a hotel where I was staying two young foreigners entered with their long hair past their shoulders. They passed through the hall, reached a secluded corner, and sat at a table. They remained there for half an hour, observed by the other customers, among them myself, and then they took off. Neither, while passing through the customers in the hall and while sitting in their secluded corner, said a word (maybe—even if I do not remember it—they whispered something, but, I suppose, something very practical and unexpressive). In that particular situation—which was totally public, or social, and I would say “official”—they did not need to talk. Their silence was rigorously functional. It was that way simply because the spoken word was useless. The two of them used another language than the one of words to communicate with the customers.

What was substituting for traditional verbal language, making it useless—and finding an immediate collocation in the world of “signs,” in the realm of semiology—was *the language of their hair*. It was a single sign—the length of their hair—in which all the possible signs of an articulate language were concentrated. What was the meaning of their silent and exclusively physical message?

It was this: “We are two hippies, we belong to a new human category that is appearing on the face of the earth these days, and that has its center in America, while in the provinces (like, for example—actually, above all—Prague) it is ignored. So for you we are an apparition. We bring forward our apostolate, already full of knowledge, that fulfills and exhausts us completely. We

have nothing more to add orally or rationally to what physically and ontologically our hair is saying. The knowledge that fulfills us will one day belong to you too, also thanks to our apostolate. For now it is a novelty, a big Novelty, that creates in the world a scandal, a waiting, which will not be betrayed. The bourgeois are right to look at us with hatred and terror, because the essence itself of the length of our hair challenges them. But they should not think about us as impolite and wild people; we are aware of our responsibility. We don't look at you, we remain among ourselves. You should do the same and wait for the Events."

I was the receiver of this message and I was also able to decode it: that language was without lexicon, without grammar, without syntax; it could be understood right away as well, because, from a semiotic point of view, it was nothing more than a form of that "body language" that humans have been using since day one.

I understood and I felt an immediate antipathy for the two guys.

Then I regretted it, and defended the hippies from the attacks of the police and the fascists: I was, in principle, on the side of the Living Theatre, the Beats, etc., and the principle that made me stand by them was a rigorously democratic one.

The hippies became quite numerous, like the first Christians, but they kept being mysteriously silent; their long hair was their one true language, and it was not important to add anything else to it. Their speaking was their being. Their inflexibility was the rhetorical art of their protest.

What were the hippies of '66-'67 saying with the inarticulate language that consists of the monolithic sign of hair?

They were saying this: "We are fed up with this world made out of consumerism. We protest in a radical way. We are creating

an antibody against this world through refusal. Everything seems to go for the best, eh? Our generation should have been integrated? But instead here is how things really are. We oppose madness to a destiny made of 'executives.' We create new religious values in the bourgeois entropy, exactly when it was about to become perfectly secular and hedonistic. We are doing it with a revolutionary violence (the violence of nonviolents!) because our critique towards our society is total and intransigent."

I do not think that if interviewed according to traditional verbal language, they would be capable of expressing their "hair point of view" in such an articulate way: but this is substantially what they were saying. As for me, even though I was suspecting that their sign system was produced by a subculture of protest that was opposing a subculture of power, and that their non-Marxist revolution was also suspect, I continued to be on their side for a while, taking them at the least as an anarchic element of my own ideology.

The language of their hair was expressing leftist "stuff," maybe of the New Left, born inside the bourgeois universe (in a dialectic created maybe artificially by the Mind that regulates, outside the conscience of historical and particular Powers, the destiny of the bourgeoisie).

1968 came. The hippies were absorbed by the Student Movement, they were carrying red flags on the barricades. The language was expressing more and more leftist "stuff" (Che Guevara had long hair, etc.).

In 1969—with the Milan killings,¹ the mafia, the emissaries

1. In Piazza Fontana in Milan, a bomb killed 17 and wounded 88. As usual, communists and the Left were accused. But though the terrorists never have been identified or condemned, the slaughter is believed to have been the work of the fascists and right-wing anarchists.

of the Greek colonels,² the complicity of ministers, the fascist plot, the provocateurs—the hippies started to spread: even if they were not the majority in terms of numbers, in reality they were, because of the specific ideological weight they had. Now the hippies were not silent anymore: they were not delegating their capacity to communicate and express themselves to the sign system of their hair. On the contrary, the physical presence of the hair was, in a certain sense, downgraded to a distinctive function. The verbal language came back. And I am not saying language by pure chance. We spoke a lot from 1968 to 1970, we spoke so much that for a while we can afford to even avoid speaking: we used verbality to the limits, and verbalism was the new rhetoric of the revolution (*gauchisme*,³ the verbal disease of Marxism!).

Even if the hair—absorbed by the fury of the verbal language—was no longer speaking autonomously to the receivers, I found the strength to improve my decoding capacities anyway, and in the madness I tried to listen to the silent speech of that hair, which by then was growing and growing.

What was it saying now? It was saying: "Yes, it's true, I'm saying leftist stuff; my meaning is a leftist meaning. But... But..."

The speech of the long hair was stopping here: I had to complete it myself. With that "But" it wanted to say two things: 1) "My ineffability reveals itself more and more as one of the irrational and pragmatic kind: the pre-eminence that I silently attribute to the action is of a subcultural sort, therefore mainly of the right wing; 2) I have also been adopted by the fascist

2. The "colonels" refers to the Greek military junta that ruled Greece through the '60s and only came apart with the student Polytechnic Revolt in 1973.

3. That is, leftism.

provocateurs, who have blended with the verbal revolutionaries (the verbalism can also lead to action, especially when it mythifies it): and I constitute a perfect mask, not only from the physical point of view—my chaotic flowing tends to make every face similar—but also from the cultural point of view: in fact a right-wing subculture can easily be confused with a leftist subculture.”

So I understood that the language of the long hair was no longer expressing “leftist things” but instead something quite equivocal, a Right-Left, that was making the presence of the provocateurs possible.

Ten years ago I was thinking that among ourselves of the previous generations, a provocateur was almost inconceivable (unless he was a great actor): in fact his subculture would have distinguished itself, *even physically*, from our subculture. We would have recognized him from the eyes, the nose, *the hair!* We would have taken away his mask and we would have given him the lesson he deserved. Now this is no longer possible. Nowadays no one could ever distinguish, from the physical presence, a revolutionary from a provocateur. Left and Right have physically merged.

We arrived at 1972.

This past September I was in the city of Isfahan, in the heart of Persia, an undeveloped country, as they horribly say, but ready to fly, as they also horribly say.

On the Isfahan of 10 years ago—one of the most beautiful cities of the world, if not the most beautiful—a new Isfahan has been born, modern and very ugly. But on its streets, at work, or while walking, towards dawn, one could see the boys that one used to see in Italy 10 years ago: sons full of dignity, and humble, with their beautiful heads, their beautiful faces under

innocent hair. One night, while walking on the main road, I saw two monstrous beings among all those ancient and beautiful boys full of human dignity: they were not really hippies, but they were showing off a European haircut: long on their shoulders, short in front, sticky because of the artificial stuff they put on.

What was that hair saying? It was saying "I do not belong to those bums, those poor underdeveloped guys, stuck in the middle ages. I am a bank worker, a student, the son of people who need to make money and who now work for the gas industry, I know Europe, I read, I am a bourgeois and here is my hair that testifies to my international modernity of the privileged kind."

That long hair was hinting at right-wing "stuff." The cycle is concluded. The subculture in power absorbed the subculture that was in opposition and took possession of it with devilish ability, and passionately made of it a fashion that, if we cannot really call it fascist in the classic sense of the word, is after all extremely right-wing.

To bitterly conclude: the horrible masks that the young people put on their faces to make themselves dirty like the old whores of an unjust iconography, objectively recreate on their features that which they only verbally had condemned forever. The old looks of priests, of judges, of officials, and fake anarchists, fool clerks, mercenaries, crooks, and gangsters came out. Meaning: the radical sentence that they pronounced against their fathers—who are the history in evolution and the preceding culture—by raising against them an insuperable barrier, ended up isolating them, preventing them from a dialectical relationship with their fathers. Now, only through this dialectic relationship—even if it is extreme and dramatic—could they

have had an oral historical consciousness of the self, and they would have moved on, "exceeded." On the other hand, the isolation in which they closed themselves—like a world apart, in a ghetto reserved for youth—kept them still at their historical reality: and this implied, fatally, a regression. In truth, compared to their fathers, they went back, resuscitating in their soul terrors and conformism, and in their physical appearance conventionality and miseries that had appeared to have been gone forever.

Now the long hair is saying, in its inarticulate and obsessed language of non-verbal signs, in its vandal symbolism, the "things" of TV and commercials, where it is now inconceivable to foresee a young person without long hair, something that nowadays would be a scandal for the power in charge.

I feel a deep and endless pain (I'd say a desperation) in saying this, but now thousands and hundreds of thousands of young Italians resemble more and more the face of Merlin. Their freedom of having their hair as they like is no longer defensible, because it is not freedom anymore. The moment has come to say to the young people that the way they wear their hair is horrible, because it is servile and vulgar. The moment has come that they themselves should realize it and should free themselves from their anxious guilt in obeying the degrading order of the horde.

1973. Translated by Flavio Rizzo