

# Anarchism & Social change

No doubt Schmidt and van der Walt are aware of the extreme complexity of the history of the anarchist movement and of the surprising variety of approaches from which the authors of the movement have considered the questions of doctrine. No doubt *Black Flame* is an attempt to find consistency in this movement. Other authors have tried: Sébastien Faure, for example, has defined an artificial and very unconvincing typology, but which may have provided a reassuring framework of explanation for generations of militants.

Schmidt and van der Walt provided their own explanatory framework, which is no less artificial and just as unconvincing as Sébastien Faure's. While the first wanted to make a synthesis of the different currents of the anarchist movement, the two South Africans proceed at the same time by exclusion and amalgam: on the one hand they say that what *does not fit* with their own definition of anarchism is *not* anarchism, and on the other hand they say that what *they* designate as anarchism *is* anarchism, whatever the concerned people think.

To a large extent, their approach is even more confused than that of Sébastien Faure.

Gaetano Manfredonia, proposes a reading grid that allows us to perceive the intelligibility that lies behind a complex situation and to provide a rational classification of the different anarchist currents.

His book, *Anarchisme et changement social: insurrectionisme, syndicalisme, éducationnisme-réalisateur* (Anarchism and Social Change, Insurrectionalism, Unionism, Educationism<sup>1</sup>), takes a radically different perspective from *Black Flame*, and seems to me to provide much more convincing explanations than Schmidt-van der Walt's theses, and also much more convincing than the rigid classification established by Sébastien Faure in his "synthesis". Manfredonia's book provides solutions to the methodological impasses in which the authors of *Black Flame* are committed.

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1 Atelier de création libertaire, 2007.

Manfredonia's book sweeps away all the typologies that were referred to until now, whether based on "platformism" or on "synthesism". Relying on Weber's "comprehensive sociology," he believes that it is necessary to "break with the usual interpretations of anarchism, which all put forward the history of ideas or the movements"; he proposes to turn "resolutely towards the study of militant practices". It is on the basis of this method that he defines three "ideal" types of libertarian militancy: the insurrectional type, the syndicalist type and the educationist type.

This new ternary typology is far more relevant than the interpretation enunciated by Sébastien Faure in 1928 in the *Anarchist Synthesis*, and which was at the origin of many clichés ... even if no serious historian used it. Faure founded anarchism on the artificial coexistence of three currents: individualist, communist and syndicalist. This typology responded more to a *desire* for conciliation in the polemic context of the time, than to a serious approach. It was than a matter of lighting a counter-fire on Makhno and Archinov's Platform, which wanted to renovate anarchism on the basis of the experience of the Russian Revolution.

Concerning the "typologies" applying to the anarchist movement, if we often talk about the "synthesis" of Sébastien Faure, we refer much less to that of Voline, which seems to me more realistic<sup>2</sup>. Like Sébastien Faure, Voline considers that there is in anarchism three separate "currents": syndicalism, communist anarchism and individualism, but for Voline, these currents are not rigidly separated. Voline means to define the *main ideas* of anarchism, that is to say the syndicalist principle as "method of the social revolution", the communist principle as "base of organization of the new society in formation" and the individualistic principle aiming at "the total emancipation and the happiness of the individual being", which is designated as "the true aim of the social revolution and the new society": no one can be opposed to this last point, on the condition of recognizing that the emancipation of the individual can not be distinguished from collective, social emancipation. There is thus no question of "individualist anarchism" as a specific current of the anarchist movement but of the emancipation of the individual as the goal of the social revolution. It's not the same thing at all. Voline wanted the anarchist movement to *debate* these questions (*just as Makhno wanted the Platform to be debated*) in order to achieve a real

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2 « De la Synthèse », *La Revue Anarchiste*, Mars-Mai 1924. 25 « De la Synthèse », *La Revue Anarchiste*, Mars-Mai 1924.

See also: *Le débat plate-forme ou synthèse*, in [Voline, Itinéraire : une vie, une pensée](#), n° 13, 1996,

synthesis, that is to say, something different from the mere sum of its constituent elements. Unlike Sébastien Faure, Voline has a dynamic vision of the “synthesis”.

But, as I said, Makhno and Arshinov also wanted the different points of their Platform to be debated. The refusal of the activists of the time to discuss it is more significant of the state of decay of the anarchist movement than of the “authoritarian” character of the Platform itself<sup>3</sup>.

Manfredonia allows a perspective that goes far beyond the Platform/Synthesis antagonism and does not fix the different forms of anarchism in rigid “boxes” as is the case with the “synthesis” of Sébastien Faure. It does not draw a hermetic partition between the different “strategies” but seeks to grasp their coherence. His approach thus seems to me more apt to define what anarchism is in its reality; it offers convincing elements to decipher what coherence there is in anarchism in its diversity – what neither Sébastien Faure in the 1920s with his “synthesis” nor Schmidt and van der Walt more recently, do.

Manfredonia does not speak of “currents” in the anarchist movement, he defines a typology based on standard ideals (insurrectional, syndicalist, educationist) that are combined in varying proportions, according to circumstances and necessities. As a result, bridges can be formed between the different types as needed, without any being petrified in a sealed compartment. And without any of these types claiming to represent anarchism alone.

These different types of activities specific to the libertarian movement are not opposed, they can evolve and interact as circumstances require: insurrectionism, unionism and educationism are not opposed, they can succeed chronologically or cohabit in combinations depending on the needs and the political and social context. In a very schematic way, it could be said that an increase in repression may lead the libertarian movement to tend towards rather insurrectionist tactics, a period of prolonged social peace may encourage educationist tendencies and periods of social conflict predispose activists to adopt trade union action. Anarchism thus appears as an eminently adaptable movement.

With the approach proposed by Manfredonia, one could say that the French libertarian movement before 1914 has passed by an initial insurrectionist phase (1878-1886), a “trade unionist” reorientation from 1888, a

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3 I wrote somewhere that the “Platform” was not more “authoritarian” than the rules of a football club and that there was nothing “authoritarian” about applying a decision once it has been taken.

brief return to insurrectionism with the attacks of 1892-1894, then the definitive installation in the syndicalist vision, punctuated by brief irruptions of insurrectionism when the social conflicts sharpened.

The other advantage of this approach lies in the fact that a coherence is created where there seems to be a certain inconsistency. It should be noted that Manfredonia's ideal-types do not include individualism, even though this author is a specialist in individualistic anarchism, on which he has a PHD!

The three types that Manfredonia describes, and their different combinations, constitute in a way the different possible strategies of anarchism adapted to the circumstances that make them necessary. So we are not locked in compartments where everyone claims that it is *only* through insurrection, *only* through unionism or *only* through education that we can achieve human emancipation: the strategy adopted by the anarchist movement can refer depending on the circumstances, to one or more of these ideal-types, and to varying degrees.

It can be considered that the existence of an anarchism claiming to be "individualistic" is meaningless, since anarchism is a global political doctrine that includes a very thorough reflection on the individual. However, one cannot deny that such a current existed, whatever one might think of the conditions of its genesis within the anarchist movement<sup>4</sup>. But this question is in a way "settled" by its "relegation" to the Educationist type, in which it appears as a marginal element.

Schmidt & van der Walt could at best accept Manfredonia's typology, but not his thesis that anarchism dates back to 1830-1850 with Godwin, among others. On this precise point I think, like Schmidt-van der Walt, that Godwin can not be described as anarchist, but like Manfredonia I think that he can not be excluded from a serious reflection on the *genesis* of anarchism: defining him as a precursor could be a good compromise.

The reservation I would make concerning the conclusion of Manfredonia's book is that he seems to consider it indisputable that the gradualist solution remains the only one possible today. It is true that "the erosion of an autonomous class consciousness of the workers" can suggest that this gradualist option is the only one left to the libertarian movement. But precisely, the task of the libertarian movement is to fight this erosion, to recover the lost ground in the class consciousness and in the organization of the proletariat.

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4 This question is developed in the main document from which these pages are extracted.

We know that we cannot “trigger” a revolution in a voluntarist way: it simply happens. The question then is whether the anarchist movement will be ready or not. The massive development of what Manfredoonia calls “libertarian practices” could be an undeniable advantage, but although these libertarian practices, according to Bakunin, can not suffice in themselves, the greater or lesser preparation of a revolutionary organization and its greater or lesser integration into social struggles can make the difference between success and failure.

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