

A Brief History of Anarchism¹

René Berthier

For a very long time now, I've been accumulating in my archives half a dozen educational documents intended to set out in a simple way the broad outlines of the history of the anarchist movement, or of its doctrine, *as I see it*. This "Brief History" is only one version among others.

Originally my text was entitled "A History of Anarchism for Dummies", but a very wise person pointed out to me that I was only stating *my* point of view and that the dummies were not necessarily the readers. That was absolutely right.

When I talk to myself, I call these projects, sketches and drafts my "mummies", because there they are, motionless on my hard drive, waiting, like the ancient pharaohs, to be resurrected, or whatever they did when they were placed in their pyramids.

I even have one hand-written version on paper, from the time when I didn't have a computer: that's how long it's been. The funny thing is that one day I compared these documents, and I realised that they don't say the same thing at all. In fact, I think it's impossible to explain anarchism in 50, or even 100 pages, because if you want to do a quick synthesis, you have to choose one angle of approach and abandon other angles of approach, which is terrible.

I even have a "Heterodox History of Revolutionary Syndicalism", something I wrote years ago because I'd been really irritated by the nonsense being spouted by certain authors claiming to be part of this current: Between those who say that revolutionary syndicalism, anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism are the same thing and that the first two are only variants of the third, and those who say that anarcho-syndicalism caused the defeats of revolutionary syndicalism and of the Red International of Labour Unions, we don't know where to turn.

In short, I decided to exhume one of my "mummies", just to give it a breath of fresh air and see what happens. Perhaps one day I'll decide to exhume others.

1 Original titre; *Une brève histoire de l'anarchisme*, Éditions du Monde libertaire, 2021. This English version has been slightly modified and extended.

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The history of anarchism began in the mid-19th century with the conjunction of two events:

- * On a practical level: the creation, by the workers of Europe and America, of their first organisations of resistance and struggle.

- * On a theoretical level: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's elaboration of a workers' philosophy advocating the total separation of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie and the State.

By "conjunction of two facts" I mean that these two facts occurred at roughly the same time, without one being considered the cause of the other.

The history of the anarchist movement is a tormented history that follows the struggles and accidents of the history of the labour movement. It does not "read" like that of Marxism whose destiny is linked above all to the thought of a man (two if one counts Engels). The ideas and facts presented here have been without much complacency: it seems to me necessary to show that things are not always simple and that the anarchist movement is fraught with contradictions. These contradictions are proof that the movement is alive and well.

The International Working Men's Association

In 1864, on the initiative of English trade unionists and French Proudhonian militants, the International Working Men's Association*, known as the "First International", was founded in London. The organization grew steadily, causing real fear among the capitalist class. The states of continental Europe were relentless in their repression of the workers' sections, often sending in the troops to shoot the strikers, as they did in Belgium against the Borinage miners. Far from discouraging the workers, the repression strengthened the International, whose function was above all to organize workers' solidarity across borders, notably through relief funds.

We can't yet speak of "anarchism", but the ingredients are there: workers must fight for their complete emancipation by organizing themselves totally free from interference by the state and capital. The legacy of Proudhon, who died in 1865, is also there. When Bakunin joined the IWA in 1868, he took up this legacy and radicalized it.

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Various currents coexisted within the International, but opposition soon arose between supporters of two “projects”:

- Those who wanted to maintain the International’s trade-union form, i.e. an organization that brought workers together on the basis of their role in the production process (Bakunin and his friends);
- Those who wanted to encourage the working class to seize power through elections and form national political parties (Marx and his friends).

The first option led to the assertion of the International as the proletariat’s exclusive tool for struggle under the capitalist regime, then as the organizer of society in a society freed from exploitation. This role of organizer was made possible by the International Workers’ Association’s twofold structuring, as Bakunin describes it: vertically, through company-based unions, and geographically, through “central sections” locality-based.

The second option was to turn the International Workers’ Association into a political instrument for parliamentary action.

Marx had never been more than the representative of a hypothetical German federation in the IWA, but he eventually assumed control of the IWA’s General Council (based in London), where he wielded power out of proportion with his “working-class base”, which was non-existent in fact, insofar as there was never a German federation in the International: the Social Democratic Party theoretically represented the German federation, but Bebel wrote in the *Volkstaat* of 16 March 1872 that the Germans had never paid their dues to the International; and on the eve of the Hague congress which was to exclude Bakunin and James Guillaume, Engels was stunned to discover that there were only 208 contributors!²

The German socialist leaders were all the more disinterested by the IWA because a law forbade German nationals to join foreign organizations. It should be noted that the IWA was prohibited in almost all other countries, which did not prevent workers from joining it.

To Marx’s centralism, Bakunin and his followers opposed federalism, i.e. a system of organization based on both the autonomy

2 Engels to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 22 May 1872; Marx & Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 44, p. 376.

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of sections and their coordination – a principle that would be applied by the Paris Commune in 1871.

Once again, we cannot yet speak of anarchism, but just as the theoretical ingredients were to be found in Proudhon's work, the practical ingredients are to be found in Bakunin's descriptions of the workers' movement of his time – descriptions which, astonishingly, foreshadow what revolutionary syndicalism was to become shortly afterwards, and anarcho-syndicalism later.

At the IWA's Basel Congress in September 1869, 63% of delegates rallied around Bakunin's theses, compared with only 31% for Marx.

For Marx, this situation was unacceptable, so he set up a series of intrigues to have Michel Bakunin and his closest companion, James Guillaume, excluded from the International.³ The Hague Congress (September 1872), at which Bakunin and James Guillaume were effectively expelled, was a monument to the falsification of mandates and manipulation.

The Saint-Imier Congress

In response, the Jura Federation immediately convened a congress in Saint-Imier, Switzerland, which rejected the Hague decisions. On the afternoon of same day and in the same place, an international congress was held which disavowed the Hague decisions that had excluded Bakunin and James Guillaume. The congress amended the organization's statutes and decided that it should continue to exist. This International is known as the "Anti-Authoritarian" International. Marx and Engels retorted by excluding the Jura Federation, then after a while all federations that did not accept the Hague decisions: in other words, they excluded from the First International the entire organized labour movement of the time! As a result, the "Marxian" IWA eventually disappeared.

The formation of the so-called "anti-authoritarian" IWA in Saint-Imier in 1872 was not a new International resulting from an "anarchist" split, as can often be read in bourgeois and Marxist publications, and unfortunately also sometimes in anarchist literature. This is incorrect. The Saint-Imier congress was nothing more than an extraordinary congress, which decided to reject the decisions of the

3 See René Berthier, *Social-Democracy and Anarchism in the International Workers' Association, 1864-1877*, Merlin Press, 2016.

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previous ordinary congress and amended the organisation's articles of association. The "anti-authoritarian" International was the same as the one founded in London in 1864, and the congresses that followed merely continued the numbering of the previous congresses.

The English federation took part, advocating participation in elections but approving the idea of federations' autonomy in choosing their orientations. In reality, it was Marx and his friends who split.

It was at the Saint-Imier International Congress that anarchism began to emerge, which the recently founded Italian Federation had already claimed. This congress affirmed that "the autonomy and independence of workers' federations and sections are the first condition of workers' emancipation". The congress also proposed the conclusion of a "pact of friendship, solidarity and mutual defence between free federations", establishing direct correspondence and joint defence between them, for "the salvation of this great unity of the International".

Finally, the congress declared that "the destruction of all political power is the first duty of the proletariat", that "any organization of a so-called provisional and revolutionary political power to bring about this destruction can only be one more deception and would be as dangerous for the proletariat as all the governments existing today", and that "the proletarians of every land must establish solidarity of revolutionary action outside of all bourgeois politics."

The federalist, or "anti-authoritarian", branch of the First International was strongly established in Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium and France, with smaller groups in the USA, Argentina and Uruguay, and more marginally in Germany and the Nordic countries. A short-lived English federation, whose creation Marx had discouraged, appeared after the Hague congress, but on a parliamentary base.

The "anti-authoritarian" IWA survived for a few more years after the Saint-Imier congress, but in 1878 it was decided not to convene any more congresses. A lot had changed in terms of mentalities, but also in the society of the time.

The 1872 Saint-Imier congress had been a remarkable success for the IWA's federalist current. Various factors contributed to its decline.

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The English branch disappeared in 1873. The Belgians rallied to the electoral strategy. The Spanish Federation suffered ruthless repression. The Italian Federation faced repression after two pitifully unsuccessful insurrectionary attempts (1877), and was tempted to rally to parliamentarianism. The Jura Federation, which was the pivot of the Anti-Authoritarian International – it convened the congresses – decided to stop convening them, its membership having fallen to 126 by 1877⁴.

It was with the end of the International Working Men’s Association that the history of the anarchist movement as a specific political movement began.

But it was also at this time that, within the “anti-authoritarian” movement, a separation was established between two currents, one syndicalist in character, the other political, specifically anarchist: in other words, revolutionary syndicalism and anarchist communism.

Bakunin had always said that the International should not have a compulsory program, because the international labour movement was not homogeneous in its development. Only gradually could a program emerge, through the debate of ideas. Imposing a single program would inevitably lead the various currents to try to impose their own program, and ultimately to split, at which point, said the Russian revolutionary, there would be “as many Internationals as there were programs”.⁵ This is exactly what happened. The IWA had to focus absolutely on its task of uniting the proletariat of all countries into a single organization and implementing international solidarity.

The rift within the “anti-authoritarian” movement – which had existed for some years – took shape at the Verviers congress (September 1877), when those who now clearly called themselves anarchists led the IWA to adopt an anarchist program, thus doing precisely what Bakunin had criticized Marx for wanting to do. From being a class organization recruiting on the basis of members’ role in the production process, as in the trade unions, the so-called “anti-authoritarian” IWA had become an affinity organization, a political organization, recruiting on the basis of agreement on a program.

4 Michel Cordillot, “Essor et déclin de l’Association internationale des Travailleurs : quelques éléments de réflexion ” Cahiers Jaurès 2015/1-2 (N° 215-216), pp. 5 à 18

5 Bakunin, “Writings against Marx”, Nov.-Dec. 1872. Bakunin, Selected texts 1868-1875, Anarres Editions.

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Orphans of the International

When the “anti-authoritarian” IWA disappeared, many militants found themselves “orphans” of the International. They persisted in feeling attached to the great socialist family, and continued to take part in the international socialist congresses organized by social democracy – a fact disputed by the socialist leaders but not by the majority of socialist workers. In 1891, when the anarchists wanted to take part in the Paris and Brussels congresses, their presence was met by strong opposition from socialist leaders. Many English, Dutch and Italian workers’ delegates, outraged by this behaviour, withdrew. Still not feeling strong enough, the Socialists did not pass any binding measures on the parliamentary question. At the Zurich Congress in 1893 they thought they would succeed: they passed a motion which stated, among other things, that “all trade union chambers will be admitted to the next congress; [as well as] socialist parties and groupings which recognize the necessity of workers’ organization and political action” – i.e. parliamentary action.

At that time, the gulf between anarchism and social democracy had not yet been irreparably widened. In Europe in the 1880s, it was common for militants or local socialist groups to switch to anarchism. This was the case in France, Germany, England, the Netherlands and Italy. These switches were generally triggered by a debate on the practical value of taking part in electoral action. So this was not an academic debate between Bakunin and Marx, but a problem that was raised by the activists themselves, often after concrete experience. In short, it was not self-evident.

The socialist resolution of 1893, which required socialists to “devote all their efforts” to parliamentary action, thereby making it compulsory, not only sidelined anarchists, but also marginalized a number of socialists who were opposed to parliamentary action, or at least reluctant, as well as those for whom parliamentary action was just one option among others, and those who had tried it and found it inconclusive.

The final break came in 1896. Expelled by the door in 1893, the anarchists returned by the window in 1896, at the London Congress... as union delegates. Of the forty-three French workers’ delegates, twenty were well-known anarchists, including Émile Pouget and Fernand Pelloutier... It took three days of battle, which the socialists

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narrowly won, for a resolution to be passed excluding from future congresses any groupings, even corporative ones, which did not accept the need for parliamentarianism. Henceforth, the two currents of socialism would find themselves in permanent opposition.

However, the dividing line was not only on the question of parliamentary elections, but also on that of the general strike. For German socialist leaders, who were strongly opposed to the idea of a general strike, any supporter of this form of action was branded an “anarchist”.⁶

The 8-hour day

While the IWA had advocated a reduction in working hours, the first battles for the eight-hour day took place in the USA: hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike for this demand in the 1880s. On May 3, 1886, a meeting in Chicago was violently dispersed by the police, resulting in death and injury. A protest demonstration was organized, during which a bomb killed demonstrators and a policeman. Five anarchists, several of whom were not even at the demonstration, were sentenced to death for it.

A huge wave of international solidarity followed, leading to the establishment of May 1st as a day of remembrance and workers’ struggle.

In 1906, the French CGT organized a general strike in France for the eight-hour day. The strike resulted in the arrest of many union militants, as well as many anarchists. The famous Italian anarchist Malatesta was enthusiastic and came to take part in the demonstration, but left very disappointed when he realized that the eight-hour day had not been achieved at the first attempt. This attitude reveals the gulf that separated revolutionary syndicalism from part of the anarchist movement, unable to see that a demand of such importance never succeeds on the first try.

And yet, in many places, the strike had important “collateral effects”, rarely mentioned, in terms of higher wages and shorter working hours.

Another event helped confirm Malatesta’s unfavourable opinion of revolutionary syndicalism: the International Anarchist Congress in

6 This was particularly true of Rosa Luxembour, who actually hated anarchists. See also: “Rosa Luxembour anarchiste?”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article936>

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Amsterdam in 1907. This congress is best known for its “historic” debate between the young Pierre Monatte and the veteran Errico Malatesta. At issue was whether the trade union was sufficient as a revolutionary organization, whether the trade union was the basic cell of future society, or whether it was fundamentally reformist, or whether it should be coupled with a “specific” anarchist organization.

Malatesta returned from the Amsterdam congress with the reinforced conviction that syndicalism was inherently reformist, and it was no doubt after this congress that Monatte began to detach himself clearly from the anarchist movement. In truth, reading the proceedings of the Amsterdam congress reveals that there was another debate, probably just as important, if not more so: *should we organize or not?* A question Bakunin would never have asked himself, but one that reveals the state of the international anarchist movement at the time.

Anarchists against the unions

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of the founders of anarchist doctrine, is thought to have been opposed to strikes and some of his critics have twisted the meaning of some of his remarks on the issue. It is true that he is sometimes complicated to follow, but the essence of his speech can be summed up as follows: the workers will not fundamentally change their fate by resorting to strikes, they must take full control of themselves, that is: organize society by and for themselves. Others activists will say the same thing as Proudhon, such as Fernand Pelloutier, the organizer of the Labour Exchanges. It is significant that the revolutionary syndicalists, some twenty years after Proudhon’s death, will affirm their filiation with his thought⁷.

7 See:

- Daniel Colson, Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire, <http://1libertaire.free.fr/DColson20.html>
- René Berthier, “Syndicalisme révolutionnaire et anarchisme”, [https://monde-libertaire.net/?article=Syndicalisme_revolutionnaire_et_anarchisme_\(4e_partie\)](https://monde-libertaire.net/?article=Syndicalisme_revolutionnaire_et_anarchisme_(4e_partie))
- Saeul Hayat, “De l’anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire : une transmission problématique”, https://www.academia.edu/2636763/De_lanarchisme_proudhonien_au_syndicalisme_r%C3%A9volutionnaire_une_transmission_prob%C3%A9matique

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At the end of the 19th century, many anarchists were active in the unions, but some of them, probably the most “visible”, those who wrote in the movement’s publications, considered that the work of anarchists in the unions was not useful, even that it was harmful. Others thought that anarchists did not have to develop within the mass organization a coherent and concerted strategy. It was at best a question of using the trade unions as a place in which to make “anarchist propaganda”, in short, to recruit.

However, the vast majority of anarchists fought side by side with their fellow workers in the unions. Reports from the French police, dating from 1908, reveal that anarchist newspapers that did not talk about unionism had almost no readers left: the militants were practically all in the CGT, at least those who were wage earners.

Unfortunately, although many anarchists were active in the unions, they did not feel the need to organize to carry out a coordinated activity. This lack of global vision had dramatic consequences after the Russian revolution, because the syndicalists and anarchists were unable to challenge the Bolshevik penetration in the trade union organizations.

In France, the end of the International Workers’ Association was followed by a “lost generation”: for thirty years the memory of the federalist International and that of Bakunin had faded. This period, marked by anarchist attacks and bombings, saw the development of multiple and heterogeneous currents claiming anarchism: individualisms in various forms, free-love, vegetarianism, insurrectionalism, etc., each claiming that only *their* approach, to the exclusion of others, would allow the emancipation of mankind.

However, not all of these activists had such a dogmatic vision. There were activists who applied different “strategies” depending on the circumstances and contexts⁸.

While anarchism is a global political doctrine whose field of reflection encompasses society in its various manifestations, some anarchists split the doctrine into slices of salami; they decided to extract one particular aspect of the main body and to emphasize only this partial aspect of the doctrine. It is particularly the case with “individualist anarchism”.

8 See Gaetano Manfredonia, *Anarchisme et changement social*, Atelier de Création libertaire, 2009.

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On individualism

In Proudhon and Bakunin there is an extremely elaborate reflection on the individual, on individual freedom, but it is a reflection linked to their global doctrine: the theory of the individual is an element that fits into a global reflection.

For the great thinkers of anarchism, the human being is a social being that can develop and flourish only in society. If this fulfilment is hindered by obstacles created by political power or by society, men and women have the duty to revolt, but individual revolt is doomed to failure. Transforming society can only be the result of a common will. This idea is particularly clear in Bakunin.

Some anarchists believed in creating an anarchism-individualism in its own right as an exclusive path to emancipation. In fact, the so-called “individualistic anarchism” has emerged quite recently, long after Proudhon and Bakunin had died. This appearance is quite easily explained: it is the result of a number of cascading causes.

When Marx and Engels excluded Bakunin and James Guillaume from the First International, they created a trauma. Instead of attributing the defeat of the federalist current to deficiencies in the mode of organization, and in particular in the lack of control and rotation of mandates, it ended up, in successive stages, being attributed to the *very principle* of organization. In response to the bureaucratization and centralization that Marx had put in place, an opposition to any form of organization developed. But by advocating maximum decentralization, federalism was finally emptied of its content. The “anti-authoritarian” activists first retreated on the small group of affinities assuming to guarantee the absence of bureaucratization (of “authority”), then on the individual, after which there was nothing left to decentralize: all that remained to be done was to sacralise the Ego.

This phenomenon appeared in a context of dislocation of the labour movement and its organizations after the crushing of the Commune. It was at this time that an unknown German author appeared, John Henry Mackay (Prussian despite his name) who tried to rehabilitate Max Stirner, who was totally unknown. We are in the 1890s. Until then, *no one in the anarchist movement* had thought of calling Stirner as a reference author.

Mackay somehow established Stirner as an individualistic anarchist theoretician, which he really was not – neither anarchist nor

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individualist⁹; he hated Proudhon in particular. His concern was not the *individual*, but the *individuality*, which would make him rather a forerunner of Freud. His work, *The Unique and its Property*, is written in a language that is difficult to follow because it uses the codes of the Left-Hegelian movement of the 1840s and remains difficult to understand if one is not accustomed to this rather special discourse. I think that the “individualists” of the 1890s who read Stirner probably didn’t understand much, and they were not the only ones: at the time of the publication of *The Unique*, books were censored in Prussia, and this one passed the censorship because the censors didn’t understand it.

Here Engels appears, who was the one who placed Stirner “on the rails” of individualistic anarchism and who made great efforts to present Bakunin as a disciple of Stirner, while everything opposed the two men: Bakunin, *never* refers to Stirner in all his work¹⁰. Why did Engels, who had met the two men in the past and knew very well that they had nothing in common, do this? The most probable hypothesis is that at that time the Social Democrats were trying at all costs to expel the anarchists from the international socialist congresses in which they persisted in participating, and that they had to be discredited.

Anarchism as a doctrine is based on the idea that society pre-exists the individual and that it is this society that allows the individual, under certain conditions, to develop and flourish. Individualistic anarchism affirms on the contrary that the individual can only flourish *against* society. It will be understood that the same doctrine cannot be based on two antagonistic postulates.

However, whatever one thinks of it, the individualistic movement, which most of the time supported the supporters of the attacks, did exist from the end of the 19th century until the Second World War, despite its many forms, its often elusive character. The partisans of this current often played a very negative role: by participating in attacks, by trying to prevent the movement from organizing itself, by helping to forge in public opinion the image that anarchism was

9 Voir *Lire Stirner*, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article291>

10 Stirner’s name appears only once in Bakunin’s work when he cites him in an enumeration containing the names of a number of Hegelian left-wing personalities whom he describes as “nihilists”, an attribution which is extremely negative for him.

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reduced to individualism and attacks.

There were, however, men and women within the individualist movement who played a decisive role, and were often even precursors, in areas perhaps little frequented by so-called “social” anarchists: the right to contraception, abortion, propaganda for hygiene, free love, education, vegetarianism, anti-alcoholism, etc., although these fields of action were not the exclusive domain of individualist anarchists – although these were not the exclusive domain of individualist anarchists.

In truth, anarchism, as an emancipatory movement, includes all these “slices of salami”: it cannot be conceived without the education of the working class, without considering in certain cases and under certain conditions an insurrectionary activity, without strongly affirming the need to emancipate the individual, without insisting on gender equality, without excluding the possibility of reconsidering our eating habits, without asserting sexual freedom, etc. Anarchism is all this *at the same time*.¹¹

Terrorism

The International Workers’ Association had developed the idea of “propaganda by deed”, but this was not at all terrorism or violent action. Propaganda by deed was propaganda by *example*, through the implementation of constructive initiatives: the creation of unions, libraries, labour exchanges, schools, cooperatives, mutual aid organisations, and so on. Unfortunately, the expression was taken up by the propagandists of bombings, and “propaganda by deed” came to apply to the period of anarchist bombings, a very short period that definitively identified anarchism with terrorism and bombs.

This period can be explained by several factors. Firstly, we are in the period following the appalling crushing of the Paris Commune, which was followed by the execution of tens of thousands of Communards and the sending of countless others, including children, to the penal colony. In the aftermath of the Commune, on May 22,

11 Gaetano Manfredonia’s book establishes a typology of the anarchist movement that allows to find a logic in the different forms of action of the libertarian movement and in its strategic choices. (*Anarchisme et changement social* (Anarchism and social change), Atelier de création libertaire, 2009.)

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1871, Adolphe Thiers telegraphed to the prefects¹² of the new French Republic: “The ground is littered with their corpses; this dreadful spectacle will serve as a lesson.”¹³

A period of mass terror followed the installation of a government that ferociously repressed anyone accused of belonging to the International. It was also a period of unimaginable oppression, during which any challenge to the established order was tantamount to condemnation. It was a period of great misery for the working class, when the bosses and their henchmen, the engineers and foremen, had all the power and were totally arbitrary in the workplace. It was a time when stealing a rabbit was worth eight years in prison. Inevitably, such an oppressive situation provoked visceral reactions. Spontaneous reactions of rage drove workers to defenestrate an engineer, to revolverize a foreman. For the police, these attacks were well timed, as they were systematically blamed on anarchists. In truth, the anarchists didn't invent bombing; they merely took up the spontaneous practices of the proletariat.

Moreover, when we examine the fifty or so attacks recorded in France during the period 1881-1914, in which some twenty people were killed, sometimes in atrocious conditions, few of them can really be attributed to anarchists. The imbecility and pathos of a few militants transformed the perpetrators of these attacks into heroes for whom songs were written. And in the process, we forget that Ravachol was not tried and executed for his bombings, but because he had murdered a 90-year-old man in horrific circumstances.

Some of these attacks were surprisingly amateurish, many missed their targets and some perpetrators were blown up by their own bombs. The death toll from so-called anarchist attacks rises by a dozen if we add those of the Bonnot gang¹⁴. The attacks rightly or wrongly

12 A “préfet” is a civil servant responsible for representing the authority of the State in the “départements”, administrative divisions roughly equivalent to counties.

13 Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste*, tome XI, *La Guerre franco-allemande (1870-1871)*, p. 478, publications Jules Rouff et Cie, 1901-1908.

14 The Bonnot gang, after its leader Jules Bonnot, was a group of French anarchists known for their bank robberies in the period 1911-1912. They were the first to use cars and repeating rifles. They were responsible for murders, bank robberies and car thefts. In their view, the state had no legitimacy, so they could break any law they wished. Apprentice

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described as anarchist killed many more innocent workers than judges, bosses or statesmen. But they also killed far fewer people than capitalism and the state during the same period.

One of the main motives for the attacks was undoubtedly revenge. To avenge Ravachol, the anarchist Meunier detonated a bomb on April 25, 1892, killing a typographer and a restaurant owner, both of whom died in excruciating agony. Émile Henry carried out an assassination attempt to avenge Vaillant. Argentine anarchist Simon Radowitzky was sentenced to 21 years in prison for the murder of Ramon Lorenzo Falcon, the police chief responsible for the massacre of workers during the May 1st demonstration organized by FORA¹⁵. Revenge again in 1923, when Kurt Wilckens killed Lieutenant-Colonel Varela, responsible for the murder of 1,500 striking farm workers in Patagonia.

While the so-called “anarchist” attacks stimulated an unhealthy revolutionary romanticism in some, in truth they greatly annoyed the overwhelming majority of anarchists, those who struggled against Capital and the State in the workplace and in their neighbourhoods. In 1913, a congress was held in Paris to unify the French anarchist movement. This congress, totally overshadowed by the trial of the Bonnot gang which was taking place at the same time, was marked by a very firm distancing from both individualism and terrorism.

The tragic consequences of two other attacks (which were not of anarchist origin) are well known: in 1914, Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria; in 1933, Dutch ultra-left militant Marinus van der Lubbe, a member of the Left Workers’ Opposition (LAO), set fire to the Berlin Reichstag. In both cases, it would be naïve to believe that, had those responsible for these acts refrained, the events that followed – the declaration of war in 1914 and Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 – would not have taken place.

Insurrectionalism

Some anarchists retain from the body of the global doctrine of anarchism only one of its aspects – insurrection – to make it the only

mechanic at the age of 13, Bonnot participated actively in social conflicts, he was registered as anarchist and unionist by the police and therefore experienced long periods of unemployment.

15 An Argentine anarchist workers’ organization.

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way to ensure the emancipation of the people. This current has always represented an extreme minority in the anarchist movement but, for obvious reasons, it has represented a spectacular current. This is probably why some anarchist authors consider it to be a current in its own right within anarchism, along with so-called “social” anarchism, but it had very close links with individualism and was generally opposed to organisation.

Bakunin is often taken as an example of a supporter of insurrection. It is true that he participated in several insurrections, but in two cases, in 1848 and 1849, he was not yet an anarchist.

Bakunin was a former artillery officer. In Dresden in 1848, he tried to dissuade the insurgents because he understood that the insurrection was doomed to failure, but having failed to convince them, he took part in it all the same. In Dresden in 1849, he found himself leading the insurrection against his will, without believing in its success either, and succeeding in limiting the losses, a fact that is widely recognised, including by Engels.

Chronologically, the Lyon Commune was the first of the insurrectionary communes in France in 1870-1871, established in 1870 under the impetus of moderate republicans, anarchists, radicals and socialists.

Then he happened to be in Lyon where the very first insurrectionary commune was formed in 1870, under the impetus of moderate republicans, anarchists, radicals and socialists. It is to Bakunin’s credit for having tried to steer it towards the social revolution – a fact confirmed by a Bolshevik historian, Iuri Stekhlov.

In January 1874, Italian militants had formed a Committee for the Social Revolution which organized several attempts at popular uprisings with small groups of men supposed to awaken the people from their torpor. Bakunin was last present at an insurrection that year, in Bologna. He was dragged there by his Italian friends, without believing in its success, and he then strongly criticized its pathetic lack of organization.

On April 5, 1877, about thirty armed men, including Malatesta and Cafiero, roamed the mountains of the Italian province of Benevento, invested two villages, burned the deeds of ownership of a small village, distributed the contents of the collector’s box, tried to apply a “libertarian communism in miniature”. The same scene took place in

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several villages with the same total absence of enthusiasm of the population. Our revolutionaries then wandered for a few days in the countryside, numb with cold, and were finally arrested.

At the end of their trial, they even suffered the insult of being acquitted, which shows how much their equipment had threatened the established order. Despite the total fiasco of this type of insurrectionary action, it seems to have impressed many anarchists. Bakunin has always insisted that insurrection was only one option in revolutionary activity and that only a mass movement of the organized proletariat could succeed. So insurrection is not at all at the heart of his doctrine¹⁶.

However, the issue of insurrectionism should not be confused with the issue of terrorist attacks. The insurrections that were attempted were of a relatively collective character and the Benevento fiasco was addressed directly to the people and did not seek to harm them. The terrorist attacks, on the contrary, had another motive: they were perpetrated by individuals, often by a desire for revenge, striking individuals or symbols of oppression without considering that there could be innocent victims because the perpetrators of these attacks considered that “nobody is innocent”.

In the typology that has been formed, some authors assimilate terrorist attacks to insurrection, and this devalues the notion of insurrection, which retains in spite of everything a “noble” meaning, if I may say so.

Revolutionary syndicalism

The formation of revolutionary syndicalism is a complex issue. Some authors claim that it dates from the time of the International, the years 1860-1870, and that Bakunin was its “founder”.¹⁷ They also claim that revolutionary syndicalism is so intimately linked to

16 See: “Michael Bakunin against insurrection”, <https://libcom.org/article/michael-bakunin-against-insurrectionism-rene-berthier>

17 An idea that can be found in Gaston Leval, “Bakounine fondateur du syndicalisme révolutionnaire”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article3>

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anarchism that it is a “variant” or “strategy”.¹⁸ This is an extremely dogmatic view of things and is a matter of faith, not of historical analysis.

It is true that revolutionary syndicalism has points in common with the practices of the anti-authoritarian AIT; it is also true that Bakunin has made of these practices a description that surprisingly anticipates those of revolutionary syndicalism. But it is to forget that Bakunin was merely observing and theorizing the movement that was taking place before his eyes: in no case did he create it. To attribute to one man the merit of “founding” a vast class movement does not make sense. Nevertheless, it does not detract from Bakunin’s merit.

Revolutionary syndicalism was born in France at the end of the 19th century, in the labour exchanges. It is the product of multiple and interlocking causes that have shaped the characteristics of this movement. But one could just as easily say that it was born in Spain as heir to the Spanish Federation of the First International. It is the product of the crushing of the Paris Commune, the ruthless repression that followed, the reaction against the attempts of electoral recovery by the radical bourgeois and socialists. It then became an international phenomenon on the one hand because the same causes produce the same effects, but also thanks to the different waves of emigration that affected especially the countries of Latin America.

James Guillaume, Bakunin’s companion, had moved to Paris after noting the decline of the Jura Federation. He was very close to the revolutionary syndicalist movement, and from 1903 began to publish Bakunin’s forgotten texts, and began to write his monumental work, *L’Internationale, documents et souvenirs*¹⁹.

In 1907 – the revolutionary syndicalist movement is then booming – Guillaume published “Politics of the International”, which Bakunin had written in 1869. This article, and others, helped to shake up the anarchist movement. A bitter debate ensued: at first the anarchists were enthusiastic, because they considered that this text demonstrated that revolutionary syndicalism was anarchism in action.

18 Michael Schmidt et Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame, The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, 2009. For a critical analysis of these two authors’ viewpoint, see: (in English), “Concerning *Black Flame*”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?rubrique66>

19 Éditions Gérard Lebovici.

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But revolutionary syndicalist militants (among whom there were many anarchists) began to develop the idea that the union was enough for everything, which clearly meant that parties, but also anarchist groups, were not useful. The same phenomenon appeared in Argentina, but took greater proportions than in France. Gradually, some French anarchists came to reject the unions, to accuse them of being intrinsically reformist and to reproach the anarchists for “losing” themselves in union action.

However, the anarchists had played an essential role in the beginnings of the trade union movement. If they had not founded the labour exchanges, they were numerous in them and contributed decisively to their strengthening when they formed a National Federation of Labour Exchanges in 1892. The anarchist Fernand Pelloutier took the direction in 1894 and contributed greatly to its expansion. This same Pelloutier launched in 1899 his famous “Letter to the anarchists” to encourage them to invest in the labour movement. Many had answered his call – certainly those who were not *already* in the unions.

In 1895 was founded the CGT, which remained for some years a fragile structure, loosely organized. At first the anarchists of the National Federation of Labour Exchanges were hostile to the CGT but when the two organisations merged in 1902, they contributed greatly to the strengthening of the trade union movement and they quickly found their place there.

It was at this time, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, that revolutionary syndicalism was formed, an original form of trade unionism which based its practice on direct action – understood in the sense of action directly exercised by the workers –, on opposition to the State, on anti-parliamentarism, and on the idea, already developed in the time of the AIT and by Bakunin, according to which the trade union organization, today organ of struggle against capitalism and the State, will in the future be the basis for the reorganization of society.

However, it should be pointed out that anarchists were not the only ones to “invent” revolutionary syndicalism: activists of other currents shared the same objectives.

The revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists of the CGT, as worthy heirs of Proudhon and Bakunin, affirmed the need to organize the proletariat outside the influence of the bourgeoisie and political

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parties. This independence of the trade union movement, which had already been proclaimed in previous texts, was confirmed in a resolution voted in 1906 at the Amiens Congress, known as the “Amiens Charter”. This resolution was aimed at countering the actions of Guesdist socialists who wanted to pass a motion that would have led to the union’s subordination to the party.

The “Charter of Amiens”, voted by an overwhelming majority (thus also by the anarchists), was in the total continuity of the federalist International; it essentially affirmed that the union, today a resistance group against the employers and the State, would tomorrow be responsible for the organization of the society emancipated from exploitation.

However, what I think is a misinterpretation of the Amiens Charter needs to be corrected. While it is presented as the text that most clearly sets out the principles of revolutionary syndicalism, as the text that marks in a way the apogee of revolutionary syndicalism, I think on the contrary that it is a compromise text that the revolutionary currents of the CGT (anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists) were forced to accept. Indeed, the reformist current in the confederation was strengthening considerably, and in several ways. On the one hand powerful federations, controlled by the reformists, had joined the CGT and contributed to reverse the balance of forces. Then, through the process of electing mandates, revolutionary elected officials were gradually replaced by reformists.

Finally, a series of major failures in strikes from 1907-1909 followed by intensive repression, helped weaken the revolutionary syndicalist movement. If the latter, and especially the anarchist current, still retained some strength, this force inexorably declined: at the outbreak of the war in 1914, it is no longer possible to describe the CGT as “revolutionary syndicalist”.

The Amiens Charter, in truth, was a compromise to which the revolutionaries were forced to submit in an attempt to preserve at least the notion of union independence, but also to avoid a split of the reformists. In reality, when one reads the very satisfied comments of the socialist leaders on the Amiens Congress, one understands that it was a defeat of the revolutionaries and, despite all that one could say, the act establishing the division of labour between unions and parties, division to which the anarchists of the CGT and the revolutionary

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syndicalists had always opposed. Recall the words of Guesdist Victor Renard, who declared shortly after Amiens, that “the anarchists who predominate in the CGT have agreed to put a muzzle”²⁰.

Other trade union organizations, which appeared in the world at the same time, adopted different lines: in Argentina, the FORA, and in Spain the CNT, were trade union organizations that had libertarian communism as their objective. In Cuba, the anarchist movement was very strongly rooted in the trade union movement. Cuban anarchists published their first newspaper in 1886. In China students who had studied in France spread anarchist ideas: the libertarians were very established in the south of the country and played a big role in the great strikes of Canton in 1927.

The anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement was powerful in Bulgaria, it contributed greatly in the struggle against the Turkish occupation by insisting on the social dimension of emancipation. They did the same during the Second World War: by 1945 they were printing a 30,000-copy weekly. The Chinese, Bulgarian and Cuban anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were liquidated by the communist power.

The IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) also developed in the United States, Chile, South Africa and Australia. In Sweden, the SAC, a very minority organization, fought against the hegemony of the reformist central, LO.

Anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism in Argentina

The non-European anarchist movements are not mere imitations of the anarchist movements in Europe: it was the adaptability of emigrant European anarchists that made it possible to develop anarchism by integrating local elements. A characteristic example is that of Argentina, where anarchism developed under the influence first of exiled French Communards, but above all under the influence of Spanish anarchist militants, forming over time a specifically Argentinean anarchism.

20 “L’anarchosyndicalisme, l’autre socialisme”, Jacky Toublet, Préface à *La Confédération générale du travail* d’Émile Pouget, Éditions CNT Région parisienne, 1997. <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article25>

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The Argentine anarchist movement has developed original forms of organisation that did not fit the usual patterns. Contrary to the generally accepted idea, the Argentine Regional Workers' Federation (in Spanish *Federación Obrera Regional Argentina*) or FORA was not an anarcho-syndicalist organisation; it defined itself as anarcho-communist and referred to itself as a globalist anarchism, i.e. one that acts in the Argentine "world region". Despite this particularity, it joined the International Workers' Association, which was founded in Berlin in 1922.

In May 1901, the *Federación Obrera Argentina* (Argentine Workers' Federation) or FOA was founded in Buenos Aires, made up of around forty anarchist and socialist workers' societies. But in April 1902, at the Second Congress, cohabitation came to an end: differences between the anarchists, who were in the majority, and the socialists led to a split. The anarchist workers' societies (7,630 members) remained in the FOA, while the socialist workers' societies (1,780 members) formed the General Labour Union (UGT).

In 1904, at the Fourth Congress, the organisation changed its name to FORA (Argentine Regional Workers' Federation). The idea was to show that Argentina was just one *region* of the world, in reference to the First International. FORA was made up of "workers' societies" that did not consider themselves to be trade unions at all and was radically opposed to the creation of anarchist organisations, which led to extremely violent confrontations.

It was at its Fifth Congress in 1905 that FORA affirmed its libertarian communist orientation: "The Fifth Congress of FORA declares that it not only approves but recommends to all its members, in the broadest terms, the propaganda and illustration by example of the economic-philosophical principles of anarchist communism" (*principios económicos y filosóficos del comunismo anárquico*).

The foundation of the UGT should not be seen as a step towards strengthening the Argentinean libertarian movement, but rather as part of a strategy to liquidate anarchist influence. The UGT was a socialist creation that moved towards "revolutionary syndicalism", but a revolutionary syndicalism inspired by intellectuals influenced by Georges Sorel. The UGT had a short-lived existence, but lived long enough to "bore from within" (as Schmidt and van der Walt say) the FORA and, in September 1909, to bring together the UGT unions, a

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dozen FORA unions and several autonomous unions to hold a congress that led to the foundation of the “Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina” (CORA), with statutes very similar to those of the FORA.

The CORA was known as “revolutionary syndicalist”, but it should be said that this revolutionary syndicalism had little to do with what is usually understood by this term, as Ariane Miéville shows. This is why she writes “revolutionary syndicalism” with quotation marks when she refers to the Argentine movement: “the ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ that developed in Argentina is a questionable interpretation of this doctrine, which is why we use quotation marks. There are no quotation marks when we speak of revolutionary syndicalism in general.”²¹

In addition, as Guillaume de Gracia notes, “it should be noted, however, the proportion of so-called ‘independent’ or ‘autonomous’ unions, amounting to nearly half of the existing unions [I emphasize] in the middle of the 1910 decade, which, despite a certain proximity to the libertarian ideal (for many at least) refuse to federate.”²² We are therefore very far from the “hegemony” that the FORA was supposed to exercise over the Argentine proletariat.

Unable to get rid of FORA’s hegemony, CORA eventually dissolved itself and became integrated into FORA:

“In 1914, CORA dissolved itself and its members joined FORA. Using this stratagem, a year later, in 1915, they succeeded in getting the principle of ideological neutrality adopted by the 9th FORA congress. The abandonment of the anarchist goal was not accepted by all militants and, in 1916, a number of unions decided to reject the resolutions of the 9th Congress and to maintain the declaration in favour of libertarian communism adopted at the 5th FORA Congress. From

21 Ariane Miéville, “Anarchisme globaliste contre 'syndicalisme révolutionnaire' Un combat de la Fédération ouvrière régionale Argentine (FORA)”. D’après un texte paru dans *L’Affranchi* n° 9 (octobre-novembre 1994) http://sipncontait.free.fr/article_1549.html#nh15

22 Guillaume de Gracia, “Onomastique des principales organisations libertaires en Argentine (1870-1943)”, *Dissidences* [En ligne], 6 | 2013, publié le 30 décembre 2013 et consulté le 13 septembre 2023. URL : <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/dissidences/index.php?id=344?>

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then until 1922, there would be two FORAs: the FORA 5, also called the 'communist' FORA, which brought together workers' organisations claiming to be libertarian communists, and the FORA 9, or 'syndicalist' FORA, which favoured ideological neutrality."²³

Then the 9th Congress of FORA was marked by a split in 1915. A revolutionary syndicalist majority eliminated the reference to libertarian communism as FORA's goal.

From then on, there were two FORAs:

– The reformist FORA of the 9th Congress, made up of "revolutionary syndicalists", a minority of socialists and a few communists (known as the FORA-9o or FORA "sindicalista").

– that of the Fifth Congress, which remained faithful to the principle of anarchism (known as FORA-5o or FORA "comunista"). FORA 5 had in the 1920s up to half a million members.

The two FORAs co-existed until 1922, when the FORA of the Ninth Congress merged with other unions to form the Unión Sindical Argentina.

FORA's ideas were based on two assertions:

– Opposition to Malatesta's distinction between an anarchist organisation and a neutral trade union organisation: according to FORA militants, there were no neutral trade unions, they were inevitably subservient to a party and anarchists could not carry out propaganda in them anyway.

– Opposition to the existence of specifically anarchist groups because workers' organisation replaced them. They were therefore unnecessary. The existence of anarchist groups was only conceivable when, for one reason or another, it was not possible to be active in the social movement.

FORA's point of view was sufficiently dominant to prevent the formation of an anarchist political organisation in Argentina for a long

23 Ariane Miéville, *Anarchisme ouvrier contre 'syndicalisme révolutionnaire'*. – *Un combat de la Fédération ouvrière régionale argentine*, Ariane Miéville *L'Affranchi* n° 9, octobre-novembre 1994, pp. 18-26, <http://laffranchi.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/LAffranchi9.pdf>

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time. It was only in the 1920s that the Argentine Libertarian Alliance was created, and in the 1930s the Argentine Anarcho-Communist Federation, both of which were opposed by FORA.

FORA and syndicalism

In Argentina, the relationship between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism did not follow the same pattern as in France. Whereas revolutionary syndicalism was a natural production of French working class, in Argentina it was a corrupt import of the original doctrine.

There is perhaps one point in common between France and Argentina: the class organisation of the Labour movement was initially an anarchist-type organisation: only, this situation ceased to be effective in France from 1902 onwards when the National Federation of Labour exchanges merged with the CGT, giving the latter its revolutionary impulse.

Whereas in France revolutionary syndicalism was the product of a fusion between anarchism and other currents firmly attached to the autonomy of the trade union movement in relation to the state and the parties, in Argentina there was no rapprochement between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism: on the contrary, they found themselves in opposition.

This opposition can be explained by the fact that the revolutionary syndicalism that was “imported” into Argentina was a theorisation by a certain number of more or less Marxist intellectuals around Georges Sorel, who considered the general strike to be a useful myth but nothing more. Sorel and his followers thought that parliamentary socialism and the conquest of power through elections were a *deviation* from Marx’s ideas – which runs counter to the historical facts, since Marx was an authentic founder of social democracy. For these intellectuals, revolutionary syndicalism was the embodiment of the true Marxism of their time. It was this kind of revolutionary syndicalism that was imported into Argentina, a body that was totally alien to the working class.

It was therefore within the Argentine socialist movement that ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ developed and, from 1905 onwards, it published a periodical, *La Acción socialista*. The revolutionary syndicalists then entered the UGT, a socialist trade union centre, where they took over the leadership and won the rejection of

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parliamentary action. Several attempts at unification with FORA failed in 1907, 1909 and 1912: FORA was totally opposed to the idea of trade union “neutrality” which, in France after the Congress of Amiens, had ultimately led to the legitimisation of parliamentary strategy.

It is with this in mind that we must interpret the vigorous opposition of FORA militants to revolutionary syndicalism.

Besides, FORA did not adhere to one of the most important points of revolutionary syndicalism: it rejected “the postulate that the trade union would constitute the embryo of the future society: the idea of replacing the power of the State by that of the trade union went against its anti-authoritarian principles. Its activists supported the free association of producers and the free federation of producer and consumer associations. For them, trade unionism is the product of the capitalist system and must disappear with it”.²⁴

So we can find in the “doctrine” of FORA viewpoints that are close to Malatesta’s, with whom they diverge on other points: For example, “FORA separates itself from a whole tradition of the libertarian movement which, following Malatesta, absolutely wants to differentiate trade union organisations from specific anarchist groups”²⁵. In fact, FORA militants were opposed to anarchist groups devoted to propaganda, to “specific” groups, which, in their view, were only interested in taking over from the anarchist workers’ organisation when action in the social movement was not possible:

“Their position is based on one observation: where anarchism was essentially driven by philosophers, even those of the stature of Kropotkin, or by ardent propagandists like Emma Goldman or Johann Most, i.e. in Great Britain and the United States, it did not develop much. On the other hand, Spain and Argentina, which had very few anarchist theorists, had a powerful movement. FORA concludes that anarchism does not spread well from the top downwards, from the intellectuals to the people, and that it is preferable to spread it directly among the proletariat, because it

24 Ariane Miéville, *op. cit.*

25 Ariane Miéville, *op. cit.*

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corresponds to its latent aspirations.”²⁶

Ariane Miéville quotes Emilio López Arango and Diego Abad de Santillán, who write that anarchism is not a “laboratory discovery” but “a spontaneous movement of the oppressed and exploited”; philosophy contributes to the realisation of the latent aspirations of the rebellious masses, “but it has no right to appropriate the concepts of anarchism”²⁷. For FORA, there can be no organisational division of labour between theoretical development and action. The two activities form an indissociable whole. To establish a distinction would be tantamount to creating a hierarchy comparable to that which exists between parties and trade unions in the social-democratic model.

According to Jorge Solomonoff, quoted by Miéville, the Spanish case would represent an illustration of the “separation of tasks” model, where the FAI would engage in ideological activity and the CNT in trade union activity.

In my opinion, the problem is more complicated. The FAI was originally set up less to assume the role of ideological leadership of the anarcho-syndicalist movement than to act as a counterweight to reformist influence. The repeated failures of the FAI’s insurrectionary attempts in 1931-1932 and in January, May and December 1933 do not argue in favour of the strategic foresight of the specific organisation that was supposed to provide the ideological guidelines for the mass organisation. And the programme that triumphed at the Zaragoza congress in 1936, when the FAI was in charge of the CNT, did not reveal a vision that was very much in tune with the social reality of the time.

This political programme was inspired by the concepts of communal autonomy directly inspired by Kropotkin, and in particular by the *Conquest of Bread*. The resolutions of the Zaragoza Congress expressed ignorance of the economic mechanisms of society and contempt for economic and social reality. In its final report, the congress developed the “confederal concept of libertarian communism”, based on the model of the plans for the organisation of future society that abounded in nineteenth-century socialist literature. The foundation of the future society was the free commune: Each

26 Ariane Miéville, *op. cit.*

27 Emilio López Arango, Diego Abad de Santillán, *El anarquismo en el movimiento obrero*, Ediciones Cosmos, Barcelona, 1925, p. 106.

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community was free to do what it wanted: Those that refused to integrate into industrial society outside the “convivencia colectiva” (collective conviviality) agreements would be able to “choose other ways of living together:

“Those communes which, resistant to industrialisation, adopt other types of conviviality, such as naturists, will have the right to autonomous management, free from general compromises. As these naturist communes, or other types of communes, would not be able to satisfy all their needs, however limited they may be, their delegates to the Congress of the Iberian Confederation of Autonomous Libertarian Communes could conclude economic agreements with other agricultural and industrial communes.”²⁸

The report of the Zaragoza Congress could have been written at any time. It was absolutely timeless.

Conversely, if we stick to Solomonoff’s description, political and ideological reflection was not part of the CNT’s remit, which was far from being the case in practice. It was because the CNT, after Franco’s coup d’État, took no account of the “anarchist-communist” orientations of the Zaragoza congress, and stuck to the “collectivist” line of the former IWA, that it was able to achieve the things it did.

Argentina offered a perfect model of the fusion of industrial action and ideological organisation, preventing the creation of specifically anarchist organisations, at least until the 1920s. Such a model does not fit with the usual pattern according to whom revolutionary syndicalism was a “strategy” of anarchism.

Until 1930, the FORA-50 was particularly important, initiating general strikes and numerous mass demonstrations: in the 1920s, it had almost half a million members out of a population of around nine million. Unfortunately, it was considerably weakened by a succession of splits and recompositions, and also by the repression of anarchist

28 “The Confederal Congress of Zaragoza”,
https://ia600809.us.archive.org/12/items/CNTSaragosse/CNT_Saragosse.pdf

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militants: assassinations, deportations, destruction of premises. This decline was reinforced by General Uriburu's coup d'État and by the integration of trade unionists into the state and Peron's populism, which completed the destruction of the FORA.

Support for the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution was an event of enormous significance for the international labour movement, and in particular for the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist movement, whose enthusiastic support was based on what activists knew about the events unfolding in Russia – which, at the time, wasn't very much. Many militants thought that the soviets were a kind of labour exchange and that Lenin was a Bakuninian... So, for a while, there was a certain amount of confusion, since in May 1920 the French police arrested the leaders of a “Communist Federation of Soviets” and a “Communist Party”, both of which had... anarchist tendencies!

Gradually, however, information filtered through and the reality of the regime became apparent – to those who wanted to see, anyway. The anarchists were the quickest to open their eyes, but within the revolutionary syndicalist movement, a profound break occurred. At the initiative of the Bolshevik party, a Communist International (known as the Third International) and its trade union counterpart, the Red International of Labour Unions, had been created. Should we support this Trade Union International? Part of the revolutionary syndicalist current, led by Pierre Monatte, supported the Bolsheviks in spite of the informations that were by then available, and was in favour of joining the Trade Union International, while another part, led by Pierre Besnard, was opposed. This division favoured the Communists, who were thus able to take over the leadership of the CGT-U, a split in the CGT dating back to 1921.

The Confédération générale du travail unitaire (CGT-U) was a French trade union organisation that split off from the CGT and existed from 1921 to 1936. It was born out of the desire of a very large minority of the CGT (over 40%) to penalise the confederal leadership for having supported the sacred union during the war. The syndicalists constituted a large majority in the new Confederation, but unfortunately a division arose within the organisation over the question of membership of the Red International of Labour Unions, linked to the Communist International. The pro-communist

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revolutionary syndicalists and communists allied themselves against the revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists,²⁹ which led the latter to create the IWA in Berlin in 1922. The CGT and the CGT-U reunited in 1936 in the wake of the Popular Front.

However, many anarchists had not not accepted the 1921 split and remained in the “historic” CGT.

By this time, information on the situation in Russia had become accessible, and those revolutionary syndicalists who supported membership of the Red International of Labour Unions did so with full knowledge of the facts: they were supporting a trade union International founded by a regime that repressed dissident syndicalists!

Revolutionary syndicalist organizations had taken part in the founding congress of the Communist International: the German FAUD, the Spanish CNT, the Italian USI... The delegates of these organizations, aware of the repression suffered by the Russian workers and peasants, refused to join. It was therefore decided to set up a new international organization in Berlin in 1922, in the spirit of that of 1864, to be called the International Workers’ Association. Thirteen organizations joined, representing one and a half million workers.

The organizations that agreed to join the Red International of Labour Unions were all, after a time, “Bolshevized”, controlled by the Communist parties that had sprung up. Pierre Monatte himself, following the logic of his choices, joined the French Communist Party, which needed the backing of historic syndicalist figures to attract workers. But he was soon excluded when he was no longer needed.

The split in the revolutionary syndicalist movement between supporters and opponents of the Red International of Labour Unions led to the founding in France in 1926 of a new organization, the CGT-Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire (CGT-SR), with Pierre Besnard and his

29 • Guillaume Davranche, “Les anarcho-syndicalistes perdent la CGTU”, <https://www.unioncommunistelibertaire.org/1922-Les-anarcho-syndicalistes-perdent-la-CGTU>.

• Jacky Toublet, “Autour du Congrès constitutif de la CGTU (Saint-Etienne, 1922)”. <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article28>.

• René Berthier, “Syndicalisme révolutionnaire et anarchisme”

(8e partie), Monde libertaire, <https://monde-libertaire.fr/?>

[article=Syndicalisme_revolutionnaire_et_anarchisme_\(8e_partie\)_](https://monde-libertaire.fr/?article=Syndicalisme_revolutionnaire_et_anarchisme_(8e_partie)_)

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friends. The 1924 murder of two anarcho-syndicalist activists by communists at a meeting was one of the reasons for its creation. The CGT-SR never had a large membership – 15,000 at its best, most often 5,000 – but it was very active and played a major role in supporting Spanish libertarians during the civil war.

Anarchists in Russia

Anarchists played a decisive role during the Russian Revolution, in the soviets, among the soldiers, and above all in the factory committees. But they were never sufficiently organized and united to play a leading role. What's more, the divisions that marked the movement's syndicalist and anarchist-communist currents in Europe were also reproduced in Russia. It was in Russia that the term "anarcho-syndicalism" first appeared, to designate not an anarchist militant active in a trade union, but a *movement*.

Anarchists were numerous among the Kronstadt sailors who opposed Bolshevik rule, demanding freedom of propaganda for all left-wing organizations, free soviets, equal food rations for Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks, and so on. The Kronstadt uprising was savagely suppressed by the Communist authorities.

The same happened in the Ukraine, where there were two major insurrectionary movements: that led by Nestor Makhno, mainly in the countryside, and that of Maryusa Nikiforova, mainly in the cities. Maryusa Nikiforova played a decisive role, as a fighter, in the Revolution and in the civil war that followed. Her fiery speeches to an audience of over 10,000 sailors were instrumental in rallying the Kronstadt sailors to the revolution on July 3, 1917. Although she was better known than Makhno at the time, she was expunged from the history of this period by both communists and anarchists, with the exception of Makhno, who paid tribute to her.

Crushed by the Red Army, the wounded Makhno managed to escape and settled in France. Nikiforova was captured by the Whites and executed, along with her husband, on September 16, 1919.

The failures of the anarchist movement in Russia prompted Russian and Ukrainian anarchists to radically reconsider the theory, organization and strategy of the anarchist movement, adapting it to the modern context of the time. Voline, who worked alongside Makhno, attempted a "synthesis" of the different currents of the anarchist movement. So did Sébastien Faure, but in a completely different

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spirit. Makhno and his companion Arshinov drew up an “organizational platform”, known as the “Arshinov Platform”, which was very poorly received in Western Europe, where it was considered too Bolshevik-inspired.

We should also mention the decisive role played by anarchists in the council movements in Germany, where the FAUD existed, an organization with up to 200,000 members; in Italy, where revolutionary syndicalism organized 150,000 workers in the USI; and Hungary, where an important council movement emerged, with a strong anarchist presence: the anarchist Gustav Landauer, education commissioner of the Munich Commune, was assassinated in 1919, shortly after Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The poet Erich Mühsam spent years in prison and died in a concentration camp in 1934.

Spain

Spain was a land where anarchism had maintained a permanent presence since the establishment of IWA sections by the Bakuninians, virtually without interruption from 1868 until the fascist coup d’État of July 1936. The libertarian movement was then present, first in the form of an heir to the IWA federations, then in the form of a trade union organization created in 1910 under the name of Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour), whose membership exceeded one million in 1936. The CNT played a decisive role in the fight against Franco.

The revolutionary workers’ movement thus had 70 years of experience of struggle and organization. A workers’ and peasants’ revolution responded to the Fascist coup d’État by taking control of the entire economy, including agriculture, in areas not occupied by the Fascists – in other words, half the country.

Spanish anarcho-syndicalism accounted for a large proportion of Spain’s militant proletariat. It was the assault groups of the CNT and FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) and, to a lesser extent, those of the minority POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification), who put a stop to Franco’s fascist coup d’État on July 19, 1936. They stormed barracks, occupied strategic points and armed the working class.

It was on the initiative of the CNT that production, both in industry and agriculture, was organized, enabling a three-year struggle that was ultimately lost: but the fact remains that Spain is the only case in

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history where an organized proletariat was able to break – albeit temporarily – the rise of fascism.

Spanish anarcho-sindicalism succeeded in almost instantly organizing socialized industrial and agricultural production in the regions where it was established and which did not fall into Franco's hands, essentially: the Levant, Catalonia (one of the main industrial centres along with the Northwest) and Aragon where, out of a population of 433,000 in the Republican zone, there were 200,000 peasants grouped together in agricultural collectives. The UGT played an undeniable role in this process, as an ally of the CNT, until it fell under Communist control.

It was years of experience of struggle within the CNT that enabled the proletariat to be materially and ideologically prepared for this situation. Spanish anarcho-syndicalist militants had constantly reminded workers and peasants that one day they would have to fight to defend their interests and the cause of socialism, and that to do so they had to organize in their unions to take over production. And when, for tactical reasons and to avoid breaking the “anti-fascist unity” shamelessly flouted by the other components of the Republic, the leadership of the libertarian movement tried to put a stop on the collectivization of the economy that the working class and peasantry had put in place, Spanish proletarians knew not to heed these injunctions.

The communists did not have this kind of scruples: we know the misdeeds of the brigade commanded by the communist general Lister who went through Aragon destroying the communities using looting, requisitions and murder³⁰.

In Spain, this is only because CNT activists managed to quickly organize industrial and agricultural production on collectivist and libertarian bases that the war effort could be supported for nearly three years – regardless of the military avatars of this war. While in Russia the Bolsheviks were unable to resolve the contradiction between the countryside and the cities, in Spain most of the land was socialized, which allowed the supply of the cities. Without the mass organization of one million members that constituted the CNT, fascism would have been established throughout Spain in July 1936. At that time, the communist forces were insignificant.

30 Felix Carrasquer, *Les collectivites d'Aragon Espagne 36-39*, published by CNT-Région parisienne?

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We can go on and on about whether the failure of Spanish anarchism is or is not due to the intrinsic nature of anarchism. However, the international context of the time is more convincing. The revolutionary cycle that had begun with the end of World War I, the German revolution and the Russian revolution was ending on the eve of World War II. Those who contributed to the failure of the first two revolutions are ill-advised to criticise the failure of the third. Which does not mean that we should refuse to be critical.

For the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists had to face many enemies and they had no allies. Franco, actively supported by Hitler and Mussolini beat them in the face. But they were beaten in the back by Stalin who did everything to prevent the success of a revolution that he did not control. They were also hit on the bias, one might say, by the bourgeois democrats. The neutrality of the French People's Front, which refused to deliver the weapons needed by the Spanish workers, is also to be taken into consideration. So it is already a miracle that the Spanish workers and peasants were able to last three years.³¹

After WWII

The Second World War had catastrophic consequences for the libertarian movement. The anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations that were in the countries where fascism was established were literally exterminated: Spain where the CNT had up to 1.5 million members, Portugal where an anarcho-syndicalist CGT existed with 200,000 members, Italy, etc. In all Latin American countries where military dictatorships came to power, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were liquidated or went underground, countless militants were executed, imprisoned, tortured or forced into exile.

In the Eastern countries, any libertarian movement disappeared with the Soviet occupation. Everywhere, anarchism as an organized force was reduced to almost nothing; the communism of Russian or Chinese obedience became for a long time the only voices of opposition to capitalism. Yet, as after the Paris Commune, the flame of anarchism was smouldering under the coals. Small groups of activists had never stopped coming together, publishing, disseminating ideas and setting an example through their practices.

31 The International Brigades had an entirely symbolic function. Revolutionary Spain had no shortage of men, but it did have a shortage of weapons.

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Exiled activists maintained contact with those in the “interior”, those who had remained after fascism or military dictatorships were established – despite the inevitable conflicts this type of situation creates. The leaders in exile often claimed to assume the leadership of the internal movement, while those who had remained in the country intended to be the only ones to decide the strategies to be put in place, stubbornly continuing to organize underground and to wage struggles.

This was the case in particular in Spain when Franco died, anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism reappeared, not with the same force as in the 1930s, and divided.

In France the post-war period was marked by major upheavals linked to the reconstruction of the anarchist movement. From the end of the war, a French CNT was formed claiming the continuity of the CGT-SR but here again divided in at least three branches.

May 68 saw the French libertarian movement relatively impotent and unable to take advantage of the revolutionary momentum. The Anarchist Federation then experienced a series of departures.

Arshinov’s Platform

Immediately after the Russian revolution, the anarchists who had survived Bolshevism and were in exile tried to make an assessment to understand the causes of their failure, to remedy the doctrinal and organizational deficiencies that had paralysed the movement and find a way to remedy the divisions that had marked the anarchist movement.

Several attempts at a solution appeared, personified chronologically by Voline first, a group of activists around Nestor Makhno and Piotr Archinov then, and finally by Sébastien Faure.

Voline, who had collaborated with Makhno in Ukraine, proposed to make a “synthesis” of anarchist doctrine, in a text written in 1924³². It was a question of defining the “master ideas” of anarchism, that is to say the syndicalist principle as the “method of the social revolution”, the communist principle as the “basis of organization of the new society in formation” and the individualistic principle, that is, the idea that “total emancipation and the happiness of the individual” is the “true goal of the social revolution and of the new society”.

32 Volin, “On Synthesisism”,
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/voline-on-synthesis>

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Voline does not therefore seek to bring together three different currents in the same organization but to initiate a discussion within the anarchist movement on these three questions in order to identify programmatic bases and viable principles of organization. It is therefore not a question of “individualistic anarchism” as a specific current of the anarchist movement but of the emancipation of the individual as the objective of the social revolution. It’s not the same thing at all. For Voline, communism is the goal of the libertarian movement, syndicalism the means to achieve this goal, the emancipation of the individual being the goal of the movement.

Another project was developed two years later: a group of Russian and Ukrainian exiles drafted an organizing platform, called “Archinov’s Platform”, according to one of the group members. The authors of this document start from the idea that the anarchist movement during the revolution was divided even when anarchist ideas were well received by the masses.

There was no large-scale anarchist organization to carry out coordinated and continuous actions (outside the Confederation of Nabat and Makhnovchchina in Ukraine). Archinov refutes the idea that only the repression of power has prevented anarchism from developing in Russia. Bolshevik repression was only one of the causes, the other being “the absence of a specific practical program of the day after the revolution”³³. Archinov’s (and Makhno’s) diagnosis of the Russian anarchist movement can hardly be disputed.

In 1926 they published a project of organisational platform for a General Union of Anarchists, known as the “Archinov platform”, but which is the work of a collective of activists.

The platform is divided into three parts:

- A general part establishing the fundamental principles of libertarian communism;
- A constructive part concerning the problems of production, consumption, defence of revolution;
- A section devoted to the general principles of anarchist organization, the need for ideological, tactical coherence, collective responsibility, federalism, etc.

33 Organisational platform of the libertarian communists, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dielo-truda-workers-cause-organisational-platform-of-the-libertarian-communists>

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It is essentially the organizational principles of the platform, yet very vaguely exposed and *expressly said to be debatable*, that shocked the spokesmen of the European anarchist movement. Archinov declared that “there can be no rights without obligation, as there can be no decisions without their execution” – two points that seem difficult to dispute –, but which, obviously shocked a good part of the anarchist movement of the time: the “platformists” were accused of copying Bolshevism.

A third attempt was made by Sébastien Faure, which he will also call “synthesis”, but not in the same spirit as that of Volin³⁴. His idea was that in the same organisation could meet an anarchist-communist current, an anarcho-syndicalist current and an individualistic current and that these three currents can live in harmony, in spite of the fact that the first two currents admit class struggle while the third on most of the time refutes it.

Voline’s approach was something dynamic that did not freeze the elements of which it was constituted: it could indeed be considered a real attempt at synthesis. The same cannot be said for Sébastien Faure’s attempt. The organisation he envisions is only a place where currents of the libertarian movement coexist, more or less peacefully.

The situation today

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of communist regimes in Eastern Europe has not benefited the libertarian movement, while it has allowed an incredible expansion of neo-liberal ideology, dropping a lead cap on minds.

Since the 1990s we are witnessing the emergence of social movements that have developed “libertarian” practices: assembly, rejection of parties and trade union hierarchies, anti-globalization, etc. The significant extension of protest movements organized in a “horizontal” way and opposed to their recovery by political parties, shows that “real things” happen outside all “official” revolutionary organizations, including anarchists: the challenge for the anarchist movement today is not to avoid missing the boat, as in 1968.

It must be said that the “horizontalism” that is often claimed, if it is limited to that, has little to do with the anarchism whose

34 Sébastien Faure, “The Anarchist Synthesis”, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/sebastien-faure-the-anarchist-synthesis>

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organizational model is federalism, consisting of both a horizontal *and* a vertical structure, both operating in cooperation. Horizontalism is a form that can be effective at first in a period of struggle because it allows to react in real time. But permanent assembly, which is the characteristic of horizontalism, presents a danger: it allows people who have the means to be constantly present to take power. There is nothing easier than manipulating a general assembly.

Moreover, if horizontalism allows for one-off action in a restricted space, it is inevitable to resort to federalism if the organization, or action, takes on a large scale and for a long period of time.³⁵ In this case, abuses can be avoided by establishing procedures for the control and revocation of mandates. Can we imagine tomorrow determining the energy policy, the distribution of water, the organization of transport, etc., of millions and millions of people by holding permanent assemblies?

What is the state of the debate today? An author who has long been an activist of the Anarchist Federation writes that “in spite of the expectations of their promoters, not only did the platform/synthesis debate not contribute to the achievement of the unity of the movement, but it further increased confusionism in the ranks of anarchists and therefore ultimately, hindered the necessary work of revision of the traditional anarchist positions that the situation nevertheless imposed”³⁶.

The author adds that because we had forgotten that what was at stake was only two options among others, the debate had frozen, causing a break in the French anarchist movement, a “crisis that has never really been overcome today and whose organizational and ideological confusion of the current Anarchist Federation, a kind of hybrid monster half-platform half-synthesist, is the most striking

35 See:

- Marianne Enckell, “Fédéralisme et autonomie chez les anarchistes”³⁵, <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article46>
- Pierre Besnard, le fédéralisme libertaire, [http://www.monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Besnard - Le_federalisme_libertaire.pdf](http://www.monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Besnard_-_Le_federalisme_libertaire.pdf)
- René Berthier, “Sur le fédéralisme », http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Proudhon_Federalisme.pdf

36 MANFREDONIA, Gaetano. “Le débat plateforme ou synthèse” in *Voline, itinéraire : une vie, une pensée*, n° 13, 1996.

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example”³⁷.

The perspicacity of Manfredonia is caught in fault here because the Anarchist Federation cannot be suspected of being “platformist”, even half: but I also think that it is not “synthesist”, neither half, nor even completely although it continues to claim it: if one observes its practice, it is simply an anarchist organization in which exists the right of tendencies, which is the normal form of an anarchist organization.

Today, the libertarian communist organizations that were originally formed in France on the basis of platformism no longer really refer to it; they consider it outdated, as evidenced by the remarks of a known activist of Alternative libertaire, an organization usually considered a “platformist”.

“In France, the debate only calmed down in the 1990s. René Berthier³⁸ and Gaetano Manfredonia proposed dispassionate approaches to the question. The highly synthetic Fédération Anarchiste (FA) actually moved away from Sébastien Faure’s catechism. The Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires (UTCL), set up in 1976, rapidly moved beyond the Platform, retaining its spirit rather than its letter – Alternative Libertaire is part of this continuity.”³⁹

And we can probably say the same thing of the Libertarian Communist Union that was formed recently from the fusion of Alternative Libertarian of the Coordination of anarchist groups.

What future for the anarchist movement?

There is no doubt that the anarchist movement will not make the revolution alone, that if a great social upheaval takes place, it will have to count on the presence of other organizations, or even other

37 *Ibid.*

38 BERTHIER, René. “À propos du 80^e anniversaire de la révolution russe” in *Le Monde Libertaire*, 18 décembre 1997. BERRY, David. *Une histoire du mouvement anarchiste français, 1917-1945*, Paris, éditions libertaires, 2014.

39 DAVRANCHE, Guillaume. “1927 : Avec la *Plateforme*, l’anarchisme tente de se renouveler” in *Alternative Libertaire*, no.168, décembre 2007. <https://www.unioncommunistelibertaire.org/?1927-Avec-la-Plate-forme-l-anarchisme-tente-la-renovation>

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political projects, to make compromises and contract alliances.

It is possible that the class struggle in the forms it adopts today gives rise to forms of struggle and organization that no longer correspond to the patterns to which we were accustomed (this process has also largely begun) and that the struggles of the future will take place outside the “traditional” libertarian organizations and without the militants who cling to outdated schemes.

Anarchists think that daily militant action should be the prefiguration of the emancipated model of society they intend to build. Their opposition to electoral activity is not a metaphysical opposition. They understand perfectly the arguments put forward by the “radical left” to justify the unlikely efforts devoted to this activity, with no hope of success: “making us known”, “making our voice heard”, “counting us”, etc.

We think these efforts are futile, a waste of time and energy, and a huge demoralization factor for activists. We think this strategy is about legitimizing the dominant system and how it works with people who need to be shown that it is a dead end. All the socialist parties, at the beginning of their history, used to say that they only ran candidates for “propaganda”.

A libertarian society is a society functioning in a libertarian way, not a society populated exclusively by “pure juice” libertarians. We do not know how the revolution of tomorrow will be, the one that will finally free the forces of society and allow it to move towards its emancipation. No doubt it will take totally unexpected forms. It will probably not be a revolution in the way it is usually understood. Perhaps it will be the consequence of an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions. Perhaps it will be the result of a succession of developments marked by violent upheavals.

Perhaps we will have a revolution that will not be driven by the “producers”, who are locked in paralysing trade union and political shackles, who do not have much internal coherence and who no longer even have the first of the conditions defined by Proudhon to manifest a political capacity: self-awareness⁴⁰.

40 Cf. Proudhon, *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (1864).

Proudhon defined the three stages through which the working class had to pass in order to achieve political capacity: 1. Awareness of itself, from the point of view of its relations with society and the State, and as a collective being distinct from the bourgeois class. 2. To possess an

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Perhaps we will be dealing with a consumer revolution whose instrument of struggle will not be the general strike of producers, but the general boycott of products.

Errico Malatesta said that “the anarchist revolution we want goes far beyond the interests of a class: it proposes the complete liberation of humanity currently enslaved, from the triple economic, political and social point of view”. I think that today’s revolutionary movement must understand that it must show the middle classes that they have every interest in a radical transformation of the foundations of society: It must integrate a coherent discourse towards the middle classes because they represent a very large fraction of the population.

Pierre Besnard had seen things perfectly: in *The Trade Unions and the Social Revolution*, he gives a definition of the working class which in fact integrates 75 or 80% of the population:

“The industrial worker or the worker of the land, the craftsman of the town or of the fields, whether or not he works with his family, the employee, the official, the foreman, the technician, the teacher, the scholar, the writer, the artist, who live exclusively on the product of their labour belong to the same class: the proletariat.”

Besnard adds that this observation also applies to those who do not want to be considered proletarians:

“The unequal remuneration of their effort, the different character of their occupations; the consideration accorded to them by their employers in some cases, the consideration sometimes derived from their very functions; the authority that is sometimes delegated to them and that they exercise without control, the abuse they can make of it; the total misunderstanding of their exact role, their claim to be outside the confines of their

“idea”, a notion “of its own constitution”. 3. The ability to “deduce, for the organisation of society, practical conclusions of its own”. To the last question, he replied in the negative: the working class was not yet in a position to create the organisation that would enable its emancipation. (Proudhon died just as the First International was being formed.) At the time, Proudhon thought that the working class fulfilled the first and second conditions, but not the third. Today, a very large part of the working class has not even reached the first stage.

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class and to join the opposing class cannot change their social situation. Whether they are salaried or not, they live on the product of their work. They receive from a boss, from a third party, from the state the remuneration of their effort. They are, remain and remain proletarians. “All the subtleties, all these artifices of language will be powerless to change anything in this state of things; and, whether they like it or not, all these workers are called to unite, because they have identical interests.

“All these subtleties, all these artifices of language will be powerless to change anything in this state of things; and, whether they like it or not, all these workers are called to unite, because they have identical interests.”

In a letter he wrote to Elisée Reclus shortly before his death, Bakunin sets out the prospects for the working class in the aftermath of the crushing of the Paris Commune. “The revolution for the moment is back in its bed,” he says, “we are falling back into the period of evolution, that is to say the period of underground revolutions, invisible and often even insensitive.” The old revolutionary thus clearly suggests that one cycle is completed, another begins. This is not a sudden adherence to reformism, it is simply an observation.

And if Bakunin writes this to Reclus, it is not for nothing: indeed, the latter affirms that there is no difference of nature between the concepts of evolution and revolution, only a difference of rhythm:

“Science sees no opposition between these two words of Evolution and Revolution, which are so closely related. (...) Evolution, synonymous with gradual, continuous development in ideas and morals, is presented as if it were the opposite of this frightening thing, the Revolution, which implies more or less abrupt changes in the facts.”

“Thus it can be said that evolution and revolution are the two successive acts of the same phenomenon, the evolution preceding the revolution, and this one preceding a new evolution, mother of future revolutions. Can a change be made without sudden shifts in balance

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in life? Does not the revolution necessarily have to follow evolution, as the act follows the will to act?⁴¹

It is in this sense that Bakunin writes in his letter to Reclus that “the hour of the revolution has passed”. What he has in mind is the “terrible disasters we have witnessed, and the terrible defeats of which we have been more or less the guilty victims”; but also “revolutionary thought, hope and passion [which] are absolutely not found in the masses, and when they are absent, no matter how hard we try, we will do nothing”.

But the Russian revolutionary says something else in his letter, something that is very topical: States have accumulated a capacity to repress the working class that far exceeds the capacity of the working class to resist it:

“Never was Europe’s international reaction so formidable against any popular movement. It has turned repression into a new science that is systematically taught in military schools to lieutenants in all countries. And to attack this impregnable fortress what do we have? The disorganized masses.”

The reading of Reclus and Bakunin should perhaps lead us to reconsider the concept of “revolution”, not to dismiss it, on the contrary, but to enrich it.

Conclusion

The refusal of certain anarchists at the beginning of the 20th century to take part in the struggles of the working class to win demands stemmed from a serious error of analysis: they thought that the revolution would be tomorrow, or at least the day after tomorrow. So demands for shorter working hours or higher wages were futile, especially as these gains would soon be wiped out by the bosses. The only initiatives that led directly to revolution were the only ones that counted. revolution.

“The major crisis of capitalism, the social collapse did not occur. The social revolutions of the last hundred and twenty years have occurred following wars (Russian

41 *Élisée Reclus, Évolution et Révolution dans l'idéal anarchiste..*

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revolution of February 1917), military coups (Spain 1936), weakening of the state power (Fall of the USSR), organization of peasant guerrillas (Cuba and Nicaragua), various foreign interventions including military (China), anti-colonialist struggles (Vietnam). The 'Great Evening', 'the day when all the poor will move' has been an apocalyptic dream until today.

“This reality implies that libertarians – and all revolutionaries of the future – must conceive of social transformations as a process, a movement in the making, a succession of events, with compromises, pauses and leaps forward that it is important, as far as possible, to control.”⁴²

Today there are few improvements in living conditions, we know that for the first time since the beginning of the industrial revolution the younger generations will live less well, less long, will be less well fed, will have poorer medical care, will be less well housed than the previous generation. Preventing this terrible regression is a true revolutionary goal, it is a permanent revolution: “The real revolutionary practice is not the temporary insurrection, but rather a constant revolution that societies and individuals are undergoing to seize their sovereignty.”⁴³

The Russian revolution, and probably even more the Spanish revolution, took place in a hostile international context that largely determined their fate. It would be naive to imagine that we could significantly change production relations and power relations on a small scale without being confronted with all the power that states have in this globalized world.

The reflection that can be drawn from Bakunin's letter to Élisée Reclus is that today's revolutionary movement has a tendency to completely ignore the unimaginable means of surveillance, control, mass repression, manipulation of the population, elimination of obstacles. This observation must lead us to understand what the physiognomy of tomorrow's revolution will take: It will be a revolution in which a very large mass of the population will be

42 Jaques Toublet, “L'anarchosindicalisme, l'autre socialisme”, Jacky Toublet, Préface à La Confédération générale du travail d'Émile Pouget, Éditions CNT Région parisienne, 1997. p. 117.

43 *Ibid.*

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organized, educated, prepared and will know what to do to take control of society. It will be a revolution that cannot be beheaded by the elimination of a few leaders because the initiative will be everywhere.

The preparation for such a revolution will take decades and the revolutionary movement must put to work quickly by investing now all the spaces where workers and citizens are in a position to decide for themselves the direction their lives will take, by systematically expanding these areas.

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