

Interview:

“Non-elective affinities, for a dialogue without political cant between Marxists and anarchists”

René Berthier

Éditions Libertaires / Éditions du Monde Libertaire

https://monde-libertaire.net/?article=Affinites_non_electives_-_Interview_de_Rene_Berthier

Le Monde Libertaire: The “Éditions du Monde libertaire” and the “Éditions libertaires” have co-published a book by René Berthier, *Affinités non électives* [Non-elective affinities], an answer to Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy’s *Affinités révolutionnaires, Nos étoiles rouges et noires*, published by Mille et une nuits. The book by the two NPA¹ militants aims to highlight the “alliances and solidarity between the two movements”. However, you say in the introduction that your book is “not strictly speaking a response to *Affinités révolutionnaires*. Can you explain?

René Berthier: Besancenot and Löwy’s book did not seem to me to be the kind of work to which one can bring a response. The discourse in this book gives the appearance of a desire for rapprochement and dialogue, but in fact, when I read it carefully, I had the feeling that this was not the case at all. They have blunted the differences between anarchism and Marxism to such an extent that it is no longer clear. When you read that the Bolsheviks helped the masses to “organise the socialisation of production at the base”, you immediately understand that you are not in a “historical” register but in a “soliciting” register. It’s such an absurd assertion, so out of touch with reality, that we can’t respond to it, except by stringing together countless quotes from Lenin categorically contesting the slightest temptation to “give power to the base”.

1 Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist Party) is a party founded on the initiative of the Revolutionary Communist League, Trotskyist, which proposes to all "anti-capitalists" to come together to build the mobilisations that must prepare a radical change in society.

M.L.: So why did you write your book?

R.B.: To tell the truth, many comrades were opposed to writing a “reply”. They thought it wasn’t worth it. This is a very common attitude in the anarchist movement. Faced with lies, with manipulation, one thinks that the truth will come out anyway. It’s a very Platonic attitude: we think that the bad guys are bad because they don’t know the truth: so we just have to reveal it to them. I say somewhere in my book that anarchists suffer from a kind of victim syndrome. It’s something that annoys me a lot. I think, as far as I’m concerned, that you should never leave the field open to falsification. You must always react. Besancenot and Löwy’s book, in spite of its somewhat “naive tone, is a manipulation. This is why, rather than “responding” to this book, I simply wanted to take up more or less the same themes, but presenting them in accordance with what I think is the reality. Readers will judge.

M.L.: Do you hope to convince the authors of *Revolutionary Affinities*?

R.B.: Of course not. I met Michaël Löwy – Besancenot was of course not free – and we had a long discussion. It was a very pleasant moment, but I think that someone who has been involved in a political movement for 20, 30 or, like me, 40 years, is not easily convinced that he has been wrong all his life. People are too personally and emotionally involved; they are caught up in too many things to be able to get out of it. So it’s obviously not for them, nor for the “veterans” of their current, that I wrote this book, but for libertarian activists who may have been attracted by the discourse held by Besancenot and Löwy, but also for readers who are not necessarily activists but who are interested in political questions. Maybe some NPA militants might be interested, you never know...

The libertarian friends who expressed their doubts about the need to write “Affinités non électives” did not seem to see that Besancenot and Löwy’s book could attract people – young people for the most part, I think – who are in the more or less concentric circles of supporters of the libertarian movement. I think it was necessary for them to have access to a different sound. I think that you should never abandon the field.

M.L.: There is a big difference in tone between *Revolutionary Affinities* and *Non-Elective Affinities*, your book. The former is obviously more accessible to someone who doesn’t have much knowledge of theory and history. One could say that their book is rather “basic” while yours is more “intellectual”. Don’t you think this could be a handicap?

R.B.: It’s funny what you say because I received a “Reply to René Berthier” signed by Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy, in which they allude to

this problem. This response will soon appear in *Le Monde Libertaire* in paper format.

To my remark that their book was too “basic”, “elementary”, “accessible to a public without much political training”, they reply: “Indeed, we chose to write in a language accessible to any worker, to any young person interested in revolutionary ideas and not only to militants already trained and informed.”

Are we to understand that my book is not “accessible to every worker, to every young person interested in revolutionary ideas?” I categorically deny this.

First of all, one should have a little respect for the readers. The fact that you’re talking to someone who doesn’t have a great political, theoretical or historical culture doesn’t justify presenting the facts in a distorted way. And that’s what Besancenot and Löwy do, all page long. That’s what made me react in the first place. It’s a kind of “abuse of weakness” on their part, if you know what I mean. I can’t stand it when people’s weakness is taken advantage of to manipulate them – in this case it’s weakness in knowledge. The fact that some people have knowledge gaps is not a shame. The shame is in not trying to fill those gaps. But, as I say, I don’t think my book is inaccessible.

M.L.: I did a rather silly count, I admit, and I was surprised to find that you don’t talk much about the authors of *Revolutionary Affinities*: on average, once every seven pages. Do you have an explanation?

R.B.: I see that you had access to the digital text, otherwise it’s a pain in the ass to make such an account. I don’t have an explanation, but it’s true that my bias was not, as I said, to respond to their book. If I had wanted to respond to their arguments one by one, Besancenot and Löwy would have been quoted much more, obviously. On the whole I simply took the themes they deal with and treated them in my own way. So there was no need to quote them all the time. I should add that some of the things I say do not necessarily reflect the views of the libertarian movement in general or the Anarchist Federation in particular.

In fact, I have designed my book as a kind of “elementary manual of anarchist training”. It could very well serve as a basic book for learning about anarchist history and theory. The presence of a limited amount of references to the authors of *Revolutionary Affinities* is not awkward, in this perspective. A few sections would be missing, of course.

Besides, there are themes that I have not dealt with. In their “Reply to René Berthier”, Besancenot and Löwy reproach me, quite rightly, for not having dealt with ecology. This is absolutely true, but it was deliberate on my part.

Ecology has become the icing on the cake, the unavoidable step in any “political programme”. To tell the truth, and at the risk of surprising people, ecology bores me deeply, at least as it is understood today by many people. For the politicians of ecology, it has become a hunt for a good bowl, and I consider that these people have completely discredited themselves. Then too many people confuse ecology with environmentalism. A dog dropping on the pavement is an environmental problem (it’s true that it’s unpleasant). But dog poo is biodegradable. Well, let’s say I’m being a bit provocative. But I know that many comrades think like me, without perhaps daring to say so.

The Trotskyists did with ecology as they had done with “self-management”: they integrated it into their system of thought when it became a commonplace. As for the libertarians, they should have no complex, despite the fact that our movement is divided on this question, notably on that of “degrowth” and “productivism”. Authors like Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, but also part of the individualist movement, have largely cleared the way.

M.L.: By the way, Besancenot and Löwy reproach you for not having spoken about ecology, but do they reproach you for not having spoken about feminism?

R.B.: No, they don’t reproach me for that. Once again, it’s deliberate on my part. But I made up for it by attaching the biographies (very brief, I admit) of three women:

- Nathalie Lemel, because she was a militant of the IWA, who joined almost as soon as it was founded, who was one of those anonymous people who were the real creators of the International, who took part in the Commune insurrection, who founded the first women’s organisation, who was deported to New Caledonia, who continued the struggle for the status of women on her return, and who died in poverty. I could have mentioned Louise Michel, or Philomène Rozan², who are well known. I preferred Nathalie Lemel, an anonymous woman.

- Maria “Maryusa” Nikiforova because I was tired of the armed struggle in Ukraine during the revolution being monopolised by Makhno, despite the sympathy I feel for him: Maryusa, at the time of the events, was more famous than Makhno, she was a remarkable war leader acting especially in urban areas. Captured by the Whites, she was executed, together with her husband, on 16 September 1919. She was then forgotten for two reasons: because she was one of the losers, and because she was a woman. She was

2 On 6 July 1869, Philomène Rozan, President of the Commission for the strike of the ovalists (silk workers) of Lyon, declared, in her own name and in the name of the eight thousand members who made up the corporation, that she was joining the International Workingmen's Association

totally obscured by the libertarian movement, but we must pay tribute to Makhno, who was one of the very few to mention her in his writings. I would point out, without being able to affirm it for sure, that she was perhaps one of the first trans-gender activists. The question deserves to be explored.

- Finally, Lucy Parsons, a very complex character whom I would have liked to talk about more: I confess to having censored myself a little when it came to her. Her relations with the US anarchist movement were turbulent, but I'll summarise: her opposition to Emma Goldman must have been the class reaction of an authentic proletarian against what she must have considered (rightly or wrongly) a petty bourgeois intellectual anarchist. Her rapprochement with the Communist Party, without it being possible to say with certainty that she joined it, is undoubtedly the consequence of the deficiencies of the anarchist movement. I'm probably going to make enemies, but this is my conviction, and it's a question to be explored. Perhaps the subject of a future book?

M.L.: The last part of your book ("8. Questions") is perhaps the most original insofar as it deals with questions that could be described as "programmatic": power, federalism, self-management, planning, etc. Is it for this part that you are the most original? Is it for this part that you thought it was important to specify that the ideas you developed in your book were your own?

R.B.: Yes, to a large extent. There are questions that I tackle that are not necessarily unanimously accepted in the libertarian movement, but which are the subject of debate.

For example, I try to distance myself from the notion of self-management because it has become a sort of panacea that is supposed to solve all problems. But generally speaking, the great anarchist thinkers don't give a damn about self-management: what interests them is how to regulate the global organisation of society, and for them it's federalism. It's not that the management of companies isn't important, but it's not the main thing. The fixation on the notion of self-management has, I think, prevented a real reflection on the organisation of society as a whole.

Similarly, I often quote Proudhon and Bakunin who were in favour of political decentralisation but advocated economic centralisation, in the sense that decisions on the organisation of society should be debated in a decentralised way, but once the general orientations have been adopted, their implementation should be relatively centralised – within the limits of the measures necessary to control decisions, ensure the rotation of mandates and their revocation. In a figurative way, I say that the railway policy of

France (or Europe) cannot be decided by the general assembly of the workers of a small far-away station but by society as a whole.

When I'm invited to give "talks" on these questions, I notice that this discourse goes down very well in the anarchist movement, which would not have been the case twenty or thirty years ago. So there has been an evolution which I think is very positive.

M.L.: Is your chapter on the "Transitional Programme" a joke or what?

R.B.: Not at all. The anecdote about Trotsky asking for the protection of the CGT-SR is authentic, it was told to us by a direct witness. Trotsky was perfectly aware of what was happening in the revolutionary movement in France and he could not ignore the literature published by the CGT-SR. I think I am relatively convincing in showing the analogies (beyond the obvious differences in approach) between the "transitional programme" set out in Pierre Besnard's *The Workers' Unions and the Social Revolution*, published in 1930 by the CGT-SR, and Trotsky's 1938 Transitional Programme. I think this is the first time these analogies have been laid out (but I could be wrong). Yet we were already talking about this in the 1970s in the days of the Alliance syndicaliste³, since the witness I'm talking about, Julien Toublet, former treasurer of the CGT-SR, was part of the Alliance, and we used to discuss these things.

But beyond that, I wrote this chapter to suggest that the anarchist movement should perhaps think about a programme of action and achievements that could serve as a basis for developing our ideas in the workers' movement, among the workers. We need, I think, to stop holding up "Self-Management" placards in demonstrations, which nobody cares about, which mean nothing to people, and come up with more concrete proposals. After the last Anarchist Federation congress, some comrades met quite informally to discuss what we called a "Basic Minimum Programme". Extremely interesting exchanges took place, and I think it would be good to reactivate this "informal commission".

M.L.: Last point: what do you think of the dialogue between anarchists and Marxists?

R.B.: Personally, I'm in favour of dialogue and reflection, but I don't think that Besancenot and Löwy's book is an invitation to dialogue. And then everything depends on what the dialogue is about. If it's about questions of daily action, we'll see as we go along.

3 See: About the "Alliance syndicaliste",
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article900>

- If it's about theoretical questions, dialogue seems possible to me if we manage to talk about the same thing, but that's where the problem lies: the frankly comical story of Lenin wanting to give power to the base gives the measure of the problem: the worst thing is that I think Besancenot and Löwy *really believe* in what they say.
- If it's about strategic questions, we have to admit that "Revolutionary Affinities" acts like a funnel: the reader is insensitively pushed towards the bottom of the funnel, towards the narrow part, and finds himself confronted with the only possible way out: participation in the electoral strategy. On this, we cannot agree.

I insist on the fact that anarchists are not opposed to universal suffrage as such. But Bakunin said that we will never emancipate the proletariat by sending deputies to parliament. No doubt the NPA knows this, but precisely: by insisting on presenting candidates at every election (and by constantly mobilising militants in this sterile task), they are only endorsing this system. I think that the revolutionary movement should seriously address three questions:

- What is the viability today of a "revolution" in the sense in which it has been understood until now?
- Wouldn't the tactical alternative be the investment of militants in all the structures of civil society?
- What could be a real revolutionary strategy for the 21st century?

I am convinced that on these three questions a dialogue is quite possible.