

On the origin of anarcho-syndicalism

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This very brief study must be considered as the first draft of a work on the origin of anarcho-syndicalism that deserves to be explored in greater depth: more precisely on the origin of the *term* “anarcho-syndicalism” and its derivatives on the one hand, and on the origin of the *movement* on the other hand, for the word and the fact don’t coincide chronologically. There are several theses on this question. I have therefore made a research, which is very modest, and which does not claim to be exhaustive, but which will perhaps provide some leads for further work.

Anarcho-syndicalism in Russia?

In 1917, the anarchists were, as in the previous revolution, the only defenders of the social revolution, while the social democrats of all tendencies, until the arrival of Lenin, intended to apply the sacrosanct principles of historical materialism according to which it was necessary to go through a phase of bourgeois domination before the proletariat could consider taking power.

They stood constantly and obstinately on the path of true social revolution, despite their weakness and lack of organizational preparedness. But the Russian libertarian movement had imported the divisions and polemics of the European libertarian movement. The revolution of 1905 had not provoked strategic or organizational questionings. The organizational principles remained the kropotkinian principles (not necessarily well assimilated) of free understanding between individuals, the free union of groups according to their affinities. The decisions of congresses, when there were any, were not binding. There could be no question of entrusting to committees the functions of liaison or co-ordination. Unanimity was the only way to reach a decision, and if agreement could not be reached, no decision was taken. The idea of a journal expressing an overall position was not conceivable, since any publication could only represent the views of the group that published it.

It is only by taking into account this context that we can understand the reasons why Makhno, Archinov and their comrades felt the need to reconsider a whole set of organizational principles for the Russian anarchist movement. The anarchists who, in Western Europe, opposed “Archinov’s Platform” were the same ones who opposed this platform in Russia. There is no doubt that Archinov’s Platform is the symptom of a crisis of the anarchist movement in Russia first of all, but also in Western Europe. The Russian libertarian movement thus faced the revolution in 1917 with conceptions that limited the organization to a conglomerate of

autonomous groups. It is conceivable under these conditions that it proved incapable, despite a much larger initial strength, of facing Bolshevism.

The term “anarcho-syndicalism” seems to have been coined by a Russian activist, Daniil Novomirsky, during the revolution of 1905: this anarchist would have wanted to apply to the Russian context the forms of organization and strategy of the French CGT¹. Revolutionary syndicalism, which had only recently appeared in Western Europe, began to take root in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The first soviets that appeared in 1905 seemed to confirm the organisational model advocated by Proudhon and Bakunin. Many activists tried to adapt the model of the then French CGT to Russia (including Maria Korn, Georgi Gogeliia-Orgeiani, Daniil Novomirsky [real name Yakov Kirillovski]). However, these activists were aware that their propaganda was not adapted to specifically Russian conditions.

In 1917, Novomirsky attempted to draw the lessons of 1905, inspired by French revolutionary syndicalism. He proposed a general organization of anarchists on the Russian and international level, freeing itself from the usual generalities. The organization was to be a “political organization in the best sense of the word, for it must tend to become the political force necessary to break the organized violence represented by the state.” Novomirsky proposed to build a workers' anarchist party in much the same way that Pouget in France wanted the CGT to be the “party of labour”.

This party was to have a theoretical platform without which it would be “impossible to achieve unity of action,” as well as tactical conceptions responding to the needs of the workers. The armed struggle against government terror was to be coupled with economic organization through revolutionary trade unions: “It is indispensable for us to work out a clear program and tactics and, on the basis of the general principles of these programs and tactics, to unite all the healthy elements of Russian anarchism into a single federation: the Anarchist Workers' Party².”

According to Novomirsky, the unions were to ensure the continuation of the daily economic struggle while preparing the working class for revolution, after which they would become “the cells of the future workers' society”. We are here in complete agreement with the revolutionary syndicalist orthodoxy... The active minority in the trade unions, whose function was to serve as “pioneers” in the revolutionary struggle, had to prevent the trade unions from becoming instruments

¹ The informations on this question come from two unpublished sources quoted by Alexandre Skirda : two Soviet historians, S.N. Kanev : “questions Questions of History”, 9, 1968, Moscow ; E.N. Kornooukhov : “The activity of the Bolshevik Party against the anarchist petty-bourgeois revolutionaries in the period of the preparation and victory of the October Revolution”, « Lénine, le parti, Octobre », 1967. (Cf. See Alexandre Skirda's remarkable book: *Les anarchistes dans la révolution russe*, éd. La Tête de feuilles.

Novomirsky's text is titled *The program of anarcho-syndicalism*, Odessa, 1907. It is quoted in A. Skirda, *Autonomie individuelle et force collective*, p. 105.

² Novomirsky, *loc. cit.*

of political parties. Anarchist workers believed that cells should be created in the unions to fight socialist “opportunism”. Novomirsky's anarcho-syndicalist group recruited many workers and intellectuals between 1905 and 1907. The group also included seamen, dockers and small business workers.

In the United States, Russian émigré workers active in the Union of Russian Workers of the United States and Canada founded *Golos Trouda*, an anarcho-syndicalist newspaper in New York, which later moved to Russia during the revolution, where there was a significant development of anarcho-syndicalism. The Anarcho-Syndicalist Propaganda Union Golos Trouda in Northern Russia (Petrograd) published a weekly and then a daily paper from the summer of 1917 to the spring of 1918. The Bolsheviks liquidated the organization in 1919.

It should be noted that there was a strong antagonism between the communist anarchist current and the anarcho-syndicalist current in Russia. *Golos Trouda* criticized the communist anarchists for their romanticism and ignorance of the complex social forces at play in the revolution. It is no exaggeration to say that anarcho-syndicalism has largely constituted itself *in opposition to anarchism*, a viewpoint which is not in line with those who see anarcho-syndicalism as a “strategy” of the anarchist movement³. The Anarcho-syndicalist Union gradually acquired real influence, and the newspaper's circulation increased, relying on strong syndicalist collectives, notably in Kronstadt, Oboukhovo and Kolpino (see Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*).

The influence of anarcho-syndicalism in Russia is perceived *ex post*, one could say, through Lenin's insistent allusions against this current and the positions taken by certain Bolshevik leaders who eventually understood that the communist state was totally incompetent to organise society and that the least evil would be to strengthen the means of action of the trade union movement – which is obviously not enough to make them “anarcho-syndicalists”, but it was still too much for Lenin.

The Russian anarcho-syndicalists blamed the Soviets for their heterogeneous social composition and the way in which their delegates were appointed, on party lists, as in parliament, rather than as a direct delegation of constituents. This criticism by the Russian libertarians went virtually unnoticed.

At the IXth party congress, Lenin and Trotsky faced opposition from Bolshevik leaders Preobrazhensky, Ossinsky and Sapronov. On his side, Shliapnikov demanded the separation of powers between the party, the soviets and the trade unions. Ossinsky, in the name of the group “Democratic Centralism”, supported Shliapnikov's position. Lutovinov, a metallurgist leader, stated that “only the corresponding trade union can assume the responsibility of running a production sector. And for the industry as a whole, it can only be the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions – and it cannot be otherwise.” These positions were

³ Allusion to the theses of Schmidt and van der Walt in *Black Flame* (AK Press) who argue that revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism are “strategies” or “variants” of anarchism.

labelled as “smuggled anarcho-syndicalism” by Krestinsky in the *Pravda* of March 12, 1920. Lenin referred to the Workers' opposition as “anarcho-syndicalist deviation”⁴.

In January 1918 an anarcho-syndicalist group intervened at the 1st All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions⁵.

In August 1918 the first All-Russian conference of anarcho-syndicalists was held in Moscow. This conference declared that the Russian revolution was threatened by a triple counter-revolution, from the outside, bourgeois; from the inside; and that of the party in power, “which became counter-revolutionary with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the betrayal of the proletariat and peasantry of Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Finland and elsewhere”.

From March 17 to 25, 1920, the Second All-Russian Congress of Food Workers was held in Moscow, during which an anarcho-syndicalist tendency manifested itself which had to impose itself against the anarcho-communist current.

A statement that, once again, contradicts the far-fetched thesis that anarcho-syndicalism is a “strategy” of anarchism. While it is undeniable that these two currents had affinities and points of convergence, their interrelationships are more complex than what is written in *Black Flame* and it is impossible to reduce them to the assertion that one is a “variant” or a “strategy” of the other.

Armando Borghi reports the conversation he had with Kropotkin in 1920. The old revolutionary criticized the anarchists who supported the Bolsheviks. A passage in Borghi's text is interesting because it shows that the term “anarcho-syndicalist” was recent:

“We conversed in French, talking a little about everything, skipping the question of the war, which was a delicate point for him. He told us that at that time he had handed over his Appeal to the Proletariat of the West⁶ to a commission of English Labour militants. He insisted that the blockade was starving the people and favoring the march of Bolshevism.

“I understood then the meaning of the new ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ binomial which was in fashion. Some anarchists had entered the orbit of Bolshevism, deluding themselves that they were leading it into a second libertarian phase. Kropotkin and others spoke out against this current, opposing the autonomous functionality of the trade unions. With him were Alexander Shapiro, Emma Goldman and Berkman. In reality, the anarcho-Bolsheviks ended up being

⁴ Lenin, Xth congress of the Communist Party of Russia, 8-16 march 1921, “Report on Party unity and Anarcho-Syndicalist Deviance”.

⁵ Cf. *Les anarchistes dans la révolution russe*, La Tête de feuilles, 1973, texts collected and translated by Alexander Skirda. Pages 91-93.

⁶ Seer « Message to the Workers of the West », in Paul Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, Thames and Hudson, p. 149 sq.

Bolsheviks, and the anarcho-syndicalists ended up being exiled or shot, because they were in fact anarchists.⁷

The rest of the story continues in France. For a time, I believed that the first public use of the term “anarcho-syndicalism” in France dated back to the founding congress of the CGT-U⁸, in June 1922, and that it was Lozovsky who used it to pejoratively designate the revolutionary syndicalists who refused to join the Red International of Labour Unions, of which he was president. But the reading of his speech belies this thesis because he speaks only of “syndicalist-anarchists”. But those he refers to there are indeed the syndicalist and anarchist militants who opposed the policies of the Communist International and the Red International of Labour Unions.

The term “anarcho-syndicalist” in the former texts in France

If anarcho-syndicalism, as a doctrine and a movement, appeared well after the formation of revolutionary syndicalism, the expression “anarcho-syndicalist” was used from the very beginning of the 20th century to designate individual activists.

Speaking of himself and Fernand Pelloutier at the London Congress of 1896, Augustin Hamon recounts in the *Révolution prolétarienne*⁹ of January 3, 1928: “After many exchanges, we had the common idea of fighting against Social Democracy at the London Congress. It was the two of us who organized the syndical-anarchist delegation in Paris for this purpose.” (The expression used in French is “syndicalo-anarchiste”)

In *La République sociale* of January 14, 1904, “Organ of the Autonomous Socialist Federation of the Aube”¹⁰, one can read an anti-anarchist article analysing

⁷ Armando Borghi, *Mezzo secolo di Anarchia*, p. 241.

⁸ The Confédération Générale du Travail-Unitaire is a split organized by a strong revolutionary minority of the CGT in 1921. The revolutionary syndicalist current largely dominated this organization, in which there were also supporters of the Russian revolution. The revolutionary syndicalist current eventually split in two, with those who supported the Bolsheviks and advocated membership in the Red International of Labour Unions and those who opposed such membership. From then on, the CGT-U became a communist-dominated organization.

⁹ *La Révolution prolétarienne* is a trade unionist journal (first “revue syndicaliste-communiste”, then from 1930 “Revue syndicaliste révolutionnaire”) founded by Pierre Monatte in Paris, in January 1925. Monatte was a revolutionary syndicalist activist who had an enormous prestige in the French working class for his opposition to the war. He campaigned for membership in the Red International of Labour Unions, joined the Communist Party and was very quickly expelled from it once he had become useless for communist propaganda.

¹⁰ “L’Aube” is one of the 90 administrative districts in France, roughly corresponding to English counties.

the strategy of the libertarian movement. In fact, in spite of the very ironic tone of the article, it is quite well seen:

“Anarchists, once advocates of individual action, because they reject the tyranny of majorities, are now mixing with groupings. It is true to add that some anarchists have found this distinction: we do individual action in groups.

“Anarchists, having become libertarians, have become trade unionists, and individual action has become ‘direct action,’ that is, the direct action of anarchist politics in the unions.

“After having noticed that anarchist politics was not succeeding in public meetings of political circles, libertarians slipped into union circles, with the aim of infusing, little by little, the union members with their so-called libertarian ideas, because there are no worse authoritarians than the so-called libertarians. Judge for yourselves:

“Anarcho-syndicalists (*sic*) are now addressing unionised workers by exclaiming: No politics. Enough of politicians! That means: No more socialist politics since we are replacing it with anarchist politics and politicians, and indeed, since the syndicalist anarchos [*“syndicalistes-anarchos” in the French text*] politicize at the Bourse du Travail [*Labour Exchange*] in Paris and elsewhere, one would have thought that they would deal exclusively with Economic Questions, in relation to purely trade-union action, since they no longer wanted politicians.

“Well, the direct action of anarchist politics in the trade unions consisted purely in advocating the Revolution by means of the general strike, and resulted in the police thugs knocking out harmless citizens or workers who were unnecessarily aroused by the direct action theorists, sheltered in their offices after having engaged these confident workers in demonstrations and outside action”.

This article suggests that libertarians tried several “strategies” before deciding on unionism – which is indeed the case. Thus, we note the use of a word very close to “anarcho-syndicalist” as early as 1904, but it does not seem that the term is used in the sense of a “doctrine” but in the sense of a practice adopted by anarchists.

The same very critical tone is found in *L'Employé d'Hôtel*, the “Official Organ of La Vigilante, Société Syndicale Mutuelle des Employés d'Hôtel” [*The Hotel Clerk, the official organ of La Vigilante, union society mutual of hotel employees*] dated February-March 1905, and entitled “Les Libertaires”. It contains a violent criticism of the CGT's preparations for the general strike of May 1, 1906, but it is the term “anarchist syndicalist” that is used:

“We are invited to do a fine job, and those who were, a few years ago, held in suspicion by the Labour Exchange, who were excluded from the Socialist Congresses, the syndicalist anarchists

["anarchistes syndicalistes" in French], leaders of the current movement, will soon be able to boast of having, by their guilty actions, ruined workers' progress."

The editor of the article warns the readers of the chaos that the anarchist strategy is supposed to cause, but omits to specify that on the following May 1st 1906, a great battle will be fought for the 8-hour day, which might have interested the readers.

On May 23, 1908, *Le Radical*, "organ of the Radical and Radical Socialist Party," published an article entitled "The Great Manoeuvres of Revisionism". Revisionism was then a current initiated by Eduard Bernstein in Germany, who called on Social Democracy to abandon its revolutionary rhetoric and recognize the party as a party of reforms. Bernstein's views had reached certain fringes of the French socialist movement. Should we support the revisionists, or those whom Griffuelhes called the "bawlers", i.e. the revolutionary current? If we had to choose, says the article,

"...we would be very puzzled. For the revisionists by their impatience only compromise bourgeois reformism, while the 'great manoeuvres' of the anarcho-syndicalist strategists seriously compromise socialism and workers' organizations, otherwise serious things.

"And we might have said to ourselves: 'For the moment democratic confusionism is, for the working class, less dangerous than anarcho-syndicalist confusionism'."

L'Action syndicale [The trade union action] of Lens, the organ of the workers' federation in the North of France, wrote on 16 August 1908 about the "Parisian anarcho-syndicalists", referring to "Messrs Griffuelhes, Pouget and Cie". It must be said that the Confederal leadership had made great efforts to support the "Young Union" of miners and to bring down the socialist reformist leadership of the important Miners' Federation.

However, the articles were not always so critical: in the 1908 *La Chronique de la presse*, we read the following:

"...practically, it is indisputable that these trade union anarchists did great service to trade unionism: they brought a great deal of energy to the struggle against the political parties..."

Again, this is rather well seen, because one of the main motivations for the entry of anarchists into the trade unions was to fight against the influence of the socialists.

On April 4, 1908, *Le Temps* reports on a general strike in Rome:

“Some arrests of syndicalist anarchists made during the night were maintained.”

Le Matin of June 30, 1912 wrote:

“It was furthermore established during the Franco-German crisis of 1911 that the trade union anarchists [*anarchistes syndicalistes- in French*] had managed to slip into the regiments in the positions most likely to sabotage the mobilization.”

Thus, in connection with the CGT's insistent anti-militarist propaganda, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of July 1913 speaks of a “syndicalo-anarchist spirit” that penetrates the barracks (“La campagne contre la patrie”, p. 97).

In *Le Populaire de Paris* of 7 March 1921 an article on “The National Committee of the C.G.T.U.” is subtitled: “Les syndicalo-anarchistes l'emportent” [*the syndicalo-anarchists prevail*]. The term “anarcho-syndicalist” is known since in the same article we read: “But the agreement could not be made between pseudo-communists and anarcho-syndicalists...”. In the context of the post-war debates on syndicalism, this formulation shows that the expression “anarcho-syndicalist” is a product of the antagonism between pro- and anti-communist revolutionary syndicalists. In this sentence, anarcho-syndicalism clearly appears as a current.

*L'Humanité*¹¹ of November 29, 1923 published an article entitled “Les 'combinaisons' sur l'unité” [*The “combinations” on unity*]: it mentions the social democrats, grouped in the multiple socialist parties or unionised in the old CGT¹², and the syndicalo-anarchists grouped in the CDS¹³ who all happen to agree to fight the government of the Soviets ...”.

Le Radical of January 9, 1914 published a rather long article entitled “Anarchy in the CGT” in which its author wondered “How was the conquest by the anarchist elements of the trade union organization carried out?” Here again, the article is

¹¹ Socialist newspaper until 1920, then communist.

¹² The “Old CGT” refers to the “reformist” confederal majority which had not split, in opposition to the secessionist CGT-U (1921) in which revolutionary syndicalists and communists were grouped. It should be noted, however, that many CGT anarchists did not approve of the split and remained in the “historical” CGT. Pierre Monatte, who actively campaigned for membership of the Red International of Labour Unions, found himself in a paradoxical situation because his own union had not split up and would, therefore, never have joined this trade union international.

¹³ Comité de défense syndicaliste. (Trade Union Defence Committee). During the war, an “International Action Committee” was set up to develop anti-militarist propaganda. Disagreements arose between syndicalists and socialists. The former created their “Comité de défense syndicaliste”, the latter continued under the aegis of the “International Action Committee” which later became the “Committee for the Resumption of International Relations”.

quite well seen, despite the inevitable distortions it contains. It evokes the different causes of the “anarchist conquest” of the unions and underlines an essential point:

“At the time the C.G.T. was formed, most of the workers who joined the unions were tired of the miserable quarrels between the various socialist schools, and whose violence increased with each election campaign. ‘No politics in the trade unions!’ this slogan was to be well received.”

The article touches on a crucial point: anarchists in the trade union movement, trade union activists of all political persuasions, have largely taken advantage of the incredible divisions in the socialist movement to move towards what will become revolutionary syndicalism. The CGT was then the only identification centre for the working class. Five or six socialist parties divided into about forty opposing tendencies were claiming leadership of the working class. Things would evolve from 1905 onwards when the socialists unified into a single party, proposing an alternative to the CGT, another centre of identification, which would contribute in part to the decline of revolutionary syndicalism.

Referring to the anarchist investment in the unions, the article rightly recalls that “some pure anarchists, remaining faithful to the libertarian ideal, kept away from what they considered to be a deviation and a compromise”: it quotes Jean Grave and André Lorulot. An interesting remark that suggests three things:

- a) Many anarchists were invested in the trade union movement;
- b) A small number of them have “kept away”;
- c) It is implicitly suggested that those who invested in the trade union movement were not really “faithful to the libertarian ideal”.

The article concludes as follows:

“It should be recognized however that, by showing themselves skilful enough, sometimes flexible enough, to seize the leadership of the confederal movement, the trade-union anarchists succeeded in conquering a force and means of action which had always been lacking to the theorists of the sect.”

The reference to the “sect” is perhaps an allusion to the Amiens Charter, which states that the trade union organisation does not have to “concern itself with parties and sects which, outside and alongside, can freely pursue social transformation”. Here again, this passage of the article is interesting in that it suggests that there is a clear distinction, within the libertarian movement, between those who have been able to adapt, who have been “skilful” and “flexible”, who have gone to work in the field, on the one hand, and “sect theorists”, on the other.

From this very quick overview of the press of the time, three remarks can be made:

– The articles dealing with the anarchist movement in the CGT are obviously not praiseworthy, often they are hostile, they are political analyses that are rarely favourable but often relatively objective.

– They don't echo the obsession of the “bombers”, of the terrorists of the “propaganda by the deed” whose memory is still fresh. Which shows that the mainstream press was perfectly capable, when it wanted to, of differentiating between bombers and militant anarchists in the labour movement.

– The terms « anarchiste syndicaliste », « syndicalo-anarchiste », « anarcho-syndicaliste », etc. seemed commonplace, they were interchangeable; they referred to a practice, a tactic, but not a doctrine or a movement except in the latest articles dealing with the syndicalists and the communist party.

Subject to a closer examination of the press of the time, which could modify my conclusions, it appears that the revolutionary current in the CGT was clearly identified with anarchism, which was a constitutive part – essential, obviously – of revolutionary syndicalism.

The (very provisional) conclusion of this research is the following:

1. There existed in the French labour movement, before the Russian Revolution, activists whom the press of the time referred to as “syndicalist anarchists” or “syndicalo-anarchists” “anarchist syndicalists”. The term “anarcho-syndicalist” was known but not widely used. Without any ambiguity, these were anarchist militants who were dedicated to trade unionism in the CGT. There is nothing to suggest that it was a particular doctrine. The militants of this anarchist current in the CGT constituted one of the currents – perhaps the main current – of revolutionary syndicalism.

2. A careful reading of the debates of the congress of Amiens, which led to the vote on the famous “charter” supposed to be the condensed version of the revolutionary syndicalist doctrine, clearly shows that the enemy of the reformists, who mobilized their big battalions, were the anarchists. Shortly after the congress of Amiens, two socialist congresses were held in succession, during which one can read testimonies of extreme satisfaction from the leaders of the party. The congress of Amiens was the alliance of revolutionary syndicalist leaders and reformists not only against the most sectarian tendency of the socialist movement (the “Guests”¹⁴), but also against the anarchists: all specifically anarchist themes disappeared from the “Amiens charter”: anti-parliamentarianism, anti-militarism, criticism of state and religion.

3. In the period from the Russian revolution to the foundation of the CGTU (1921), a current was formed which was designated under the term “anarcho-syndicalist”. Anarcho-syndicalism as a doctrine appears to be a current originating

¹⁴ Jules Guesde (1845-1922) was a socialist leader who could be described as a "pre-Leninist" who advocated, among other things, the subordination of the union to the party. One of the most vigorous opponents of the anarchists in the CGT was Victor Renard, president of the powerful Textile Federation.

from revolutionary syndicalism. In fact, the syndicalist movement was divided in two, one tendency advocating the CGTU's adhesion to the Red International of Labour unions, the other opposing it. The current opposed to this membership had been described as "anarcho-syndicalist" by the socialists, communists and those syndicalists who were in favour of Moscow. It was therefore a pejorative term that was rejected for years by those it referred to, before they ended up taking the term for themselves.

4. The difficulty in "spotting" this anarcho-syndicalist current may be due to the fact that it existed in practice for about ten years since it continued to call itself "revolutionary syndicalist", considering itself to be the only authentically revolutionary syndicalist current. Only progressively was the term accepted, first by the rank and file militants, then by the leaders.

There is no doubt that the common use of the term "anarcho-syndicalism" appeared rather late in Western Europe after the Great War, and in a polemical form, the term being intended to mark a change from "classical" revolutionary syndicalism. It was a symptom of the split between those who adhered to communist theories and supported the Bolshevik dictatorship, and those who opposed it; in other words, anarcho-syndicalism was linked to the emergence of the communist current, which is contemporary to it. It was the communists who designated as "anarcho-syndicalists" the revolutionary syndicalists opposed to the line of the Red International of Labour Unions.

At the beginning, the theoretical content of this new current, which appeared as a spectrum created by those who were opposed to it, was not very precise. In fact, notorious libertarians, but also communists – not quite in line, Daniel Colson tells us – were designated, or designated themselves as such:

"During this period when anarcho-syndicalism is supposed to disappear, one vainly seeks the trace of anarcho-syndicalists, proclaiming themselves as such (...). In the militant discourse of 1922, anarcho-syndicalism is not a claimed reference, but a negative classification produced by those who claim to be opposed to it¹⁵."

What does Colson mean by "anarcho-syndicalism is supposed to disappear"? He points out a curious thing. In the usual discourse on the history of the workers' movement, he says, it is schematically considered that "anarcho-syndicalism" refers to the pre-war (archaic) proletariat, while "communism" represents the post-war (modern) proletariat. The war and the Russian revolution somehow brought about the end of anarcho-syndicalism, replaced by communism, a more modern form and more in tune with the times. But before the war, nobody spoke of anarcho-syndicalism *as a movement*: the term only appeared in the early 1920s...

¹⁵ Daniel Colson, *Anarcho-syndicalisme et communisme, Saint-Etienne 1920-1925*, Centre d'études foréziennes, Atelier de création libertaire.

Daniel Colson shows that the reference to anarcho-syndicalism had a “positive but subterranean career,” in the sense that although it did not appear in the texts of congresses, the term was found in the reports of oral interventions that could be found in the militant press. Huard, a CGT-SR militant had gone to Spain in 1931 and upon his return made a propaganda tour throughout France, of which the *Combat syndicaliste* made reports written by local correspondents. These reports, says Colson, “provide a good picture of how the Huard's interventions were perceived locally”. Of the nine reports, six do not use the term “anarcho-syndicalist,” but “three reports give Huard an explicit reference to anarcho-syndicalism”. One of the reports denounces the way the press slanders “Spanish anarcho-syndicalists”. Another report explains that the CGT-SR delegation carried the “fraternal greeting of the anarcho-syndicalist comrades of France”. Finally, the third report explicitly mentions “the anarcho-syndicalists of the CGTSR”.

Colson considers the possibility that Huard did not use the terms “anarcho-syndicalism” or “anarcho-syndicalist,” but that these accounts reveal that grassroots activists spontaneously used terms that their organization took much longer to accept in its official texts.

“If we had to date precisely the moment when anarcho-syndicalism became the official reference for an organized fraction of the French working class, we would have to skip about fifteen years. It was in 1937 that Pierre Besnard, secretary of the IWA, delivered a short speech on ‘Anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism’ at the International Anarchist Congress. By his words the IWA officially claimed anarcho-syndicalism, defined as an ‘organic and organised movement’ which ‘holds its doctrine of anarchism and its form of organisation of revolutionary syndicalism’. Quite a late conversion that the history of the French member organisation of the IWA – the CGT-SR – did not allow us to foresee. From its foundation at the congress of Lyon, in November 1926, to 1937, the CGT-SR never referred to anarcho-syndicalism, but always to revolutionary syndicalism, invariably described as ‘federalist and anti-state’¹⁶”.

Of course, anarcho-syndicalism already existed as a movement, but now it found its formulation as a doctrine, although in 1937, as to the very substance of the doctrine, Besnard did not say anything very different from what could be read in the charter of Lyon, which founded the CGT-SR in 1926 – the same year as Archinov's platform.

In this 1937 Report, entitled “Anarcho-syndicalism and Anarchism. Tactics and Union Intervention”, Besnard explained that anarcho-syndicalism is “the current economic and social expression of the anarchist doctrine. It is also, in the revolutionary field, as the Spanish experience itself proves, its essential agent of

¹⁶ D. Colson, *op. cit.* p. 21.

implementation. It is represented in the world by the IWA and its National Organizations. Its doctrine was defined by the Constituent Congress of the 2nd AIT (25 to 31 December 1922).” This 1937 report is extremely interesting because it defines quite precisely the type of relationship between anarchists and mass organization. One finds in it accents that platformism wouldn't disavow...

Let us note that the founding texts of the CGT-SR make no reference to anarcho-syndicalism no more than the founding texts of the 2nd IWA at the end of 1922. However, this organisation is undeniably anarcho-syndicalist, in that it reintroduces in its principles what had been rejected in the Amiens Charter of 1906. The Lyon charter of the CGT-SR affirms in 1926 that trade unionism is “the only workers' class movement”: “The fundamental opposition of the aims pursued by the parties and groupings which do not recognise the essential role of trade unionism also forces the CGT-SR to cease to observe the hitherto traditional trade union neutrality in their regard”. The text refers to the French word “syndicalisme”, which is translated into English by “trade unionism”.

The new organisation challenges the idea of trade union neutrality as affirmed in the Amiens Charter, in particular the paragraph where “the Congress affirms the complete freedom of the trade union member to participate, outside the corporate grouping, in such forms of struggle as correspond to his philosophical or political conception, limiting itself to asking him in reciprocity not to introduce into the union the opinions he professes outside.” The CGT-SR now affirms the need for trade unionism not only to develop outside political parties, but *against* them. This attitude is to some extent a response to the 21 conditions for admission to the Communist International, which advocated the formation of communist fractions in the trade unions in order to take control of them.

The reason for the resistance of the CGT-SR leadership to the use of the term “anarcho-syndicalism” probably stems from the fact that the new organization considered itself to be representative of true revolutionary syndicalism, as opposed to those who had joined Bolshevism.

The term “anarcho-syndicalism” was, however, used in Spain before Huard and the CGT-SR delegation travelled there. According to Frank Mintz¹⁷, “it begins to supplant that of 'revolutionary syndicalism' from July 1928 in the texts of the Cenetist leader Juan Peiró when he writes in Catalan”. It was in 1928 that Peiró would have given his definition of anarcho-syndicalism. Frank Mintz adds: “In 1932, a leader of national stature, Horacio Preito, published *Anarco-Sindicalismo. Cómo afianzaremos la revolución* [*Anarchosyndicalism: How We Will Strengthen the Revolution*]. In 1933, Valeriano Orobón Fernández publishes a call for a workers' alliance in which he uses the terms “anarchosyndicalism” and “anarchosyndicalist” three times (Cf. Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, volume I).”

¹⁷ Private correspondence.

Anarcho-syndicalists and the CGT

No one in France seems to dispute the fact that “anarcho-syndicalists” played a decisive role in the founding of the CGT. When, in the early 1970s, I myself was a young anarcho-syndicalist activist in the CGT – which at the time was heavily influenced by Brezhnev's communism – even the communists recognized the fact. At that time any deviation from the trade union line decided by the communists was met with vigorous reactions, sometimes physical. The Stalinists' favourite targets were the Trotskyists, accused of being “petty-bourgeois”. Anarcho-syndicalists were not necessarily treated better, but they had the privilege of not being considered petty-bourgeois: they had a kind of “proletarian legitimacy” due to the fact that they had participated in the founding of the CGT. In fact, all this was completely false.

There were no anarcho-syndicalists at the founding of the CGT, but there actually were *anarchists*, many of whom participated in the foundation of revolutionary syndicalism. The anarcho-syndicalism that was present in communist mythology in the 1970s had in reality nothing to do with the founding of the CGT, it was a reminiscence of the heated debates that opposed in the 1920s the communist militants and the militants who would later be called “anarcho-syndicalists”.

The famous Amiens Charter, which affirms "trade union neutrality", is presented as a compromise between revolutionary trade unionists and part of the reformist current to block the Guesdist current. In reality, the socialist documents of the time show that the Guesdists were very satisfied with the results of the Amiens congress, which endorsed the division of labour between parties and trade unions, thus ensuring the hegemony of the parties.

Referring to the Amiens Charter, Édouard Vaillant (socialist MP, former anarchist) declared that it was a victory over the anarchists, and Victor Renard, guesdist and leader of the powerful CGT Textile Federation, triumphed by saying that “the anarchists who predominate in the CGT agreed to put a **muzzle** on themselves”. So there is no mention of anarcho-syndicalists, but *anarchists*. These two remarks reveal, alongside a very powerful reformist current in the CGT (Victor Renard, and many others), the presence of a clearly strong anarchist current, but which suffered defeat at the Amiens congress. At that congress, there was a revolutionary syndicalist current which presumably allied with the reformists, not so much against the “Guesdists” as against the anarchists.

“Anarcho-syndicalist”: an insult

Perhaps further research than mine can find the use of the term “anarcho-syndicalist” prior to 1900. If in France the term “anarcho-syndicalist” had been known in competition with other synonymous terms, it became common usage in the 1920s as a way of designating anarchists or revolutionary trade unionists, *as a*

movement. These syndicalists, who eventually formed the 2nd IWA, refused to join the Red International of Labour unions, i.e. the international institution founded by and on the fringes of the Communist International. It was therefore a pejorative term, even an insult, used by socialists and communists.

It was undoubtedly at the 2nd congress of the CGTU (Bourges, 12-17 November 1923) that the turning point in the debate on anarcho-syndicalism came. The acts of the congress show that the expression “anarcho-syndicalist” appears there often – 15 times –, but there is no question of “anarcho-syndicalism”: in other words, it is a tendency but not a doctrine – not yet. However, at this congress we find the ingredient that will lead to the foundation of anarcho-syndicalism as a doctrine in its own right: it is the debate on the Red International of Labour unions, to which the CGTU had adhered. Colomer explains the question perfectly:

“As a unionist member, I will join the C.G.T.U. if my Union joins it. This is the practical position, the only possible, the only valid one. But if I am forced by the necessities of life to join a Union which adheres to a Communist International, my duty as a producer, as an individual defending his well-being and his freedom is to fight against those who have unduly seized the Trade Union Organization and who receive orders from a political party, from a government which murders our comrades in Russia.

“This is why we are determined to fight with all our strength against the Confederal Majority.

“The insurrection is the most sacred right of the individual placed in a similar situation. Now, if you wish, and this will be my conclusion, we, the Trade Unionist and Anarcho-Syndicalist Minority, will rise up against the C.G.T.U. Government.”

So we do not yet speak of anarcho-syndicalism as a doctrine, but it is very present as a tendency, qualified as “Trade Unionist and Anarcho-Syndicalist Minority”.

L'Humanité, the newspaper of the Communist Party issued an article (July 23, 1924) on Lozovsky's report to the 3rd Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions. This report violently attacked anarcho-syndicalism and recognized it as a doctrine:

“The anarcho-syndicalist ideology today is reduced to hatred of Bolshevism, of the RILU [*Red international of labour unions*] and Soviet Russia. Moreover, anarcho-syndicalism is progressively disintegrating, its groups separating from the French core and joining the RILU: we have examples of this in North America (among the Industrial Workers of the World) and also among South American anarchists. The tenacious activity of the RILU has hastened this decomposition since 1923.”

In a review he wrote in 1935 on a very biased pro-communist book¹⁸, Monatte comments: “Our author takes up the communist vocabulary and catechism. Already before the war the Social Democrats did not call revolutionary syndicalism otherwise than by the name anarcho-syndicalism: the Bolsheviks continued¹⁹.” Monatte was writing this eleven years after his exclusion from the Communist Party, that is at a period when he once again revindicated syndicalism. He omits to say that he too had had recourse to communist vocabulary and catechism, and that he too, when he was a member of the party, considered the term “anarcho-syndicalist” as an insult .

Still in 1956, Monatte recalled that the term “anarcho-syndicalist” was “used for polemical purposes by social democracy, both right and left, by the German social democrats as well as by the Bolsheviks”²⁰. But he forgets to specify that this term was used polemically by the pro-communist revolutionary syndicalists, of whom he was a member, as we can see in a letter from Godonnèche to Monatte, where anarchists were blamed for their opposition to the Red International of Labour Unions²¹.

Pierre Monatte, who had debated with Malatesta in Amsterdam in 1907, contributed greatly, by his prestige due to his opposition to the war, to bringing the workers closer to the positions of the Russian Communists. Naively convinced that the Communist Party would respect trade union independence, he joined the Communist Party in May 1923 and became a member of its executive committee in January 1924. In December 1924 he was excluded “as an enemy of the proletariat, the Party and the International” and his ex-comrades of the Party will act disgustingly with him, accusing him of being a “saboteur of the working class”²².

Many revolutionary syndicalists joined the Communist Party, but gradually, a number of them were excluded or resigned. Among them was Pierre Monatte. He and his comrades founded in January 1925 a periodical, *La Révolution prolétarienne*, first described as a “syndicalist-communist review” and then from 1930 “syndicaliste review”. The review declared itself faithful to the Amiens Charter. Those excluded and resigning from the party joined the group of the Revolution prolétarienne, which had premises at 21 rue Jean-Robert in Paris. For a few years, this office hosted the Alliance syndicaliste, formed in the aftermath of the strikes of May 68. The veterans and young militants were able to rub shoulders and occasionally attend meetings.

¹⁸ René Garmy, *Histoire du mouvement syndical en France (de 1914 à nos jours)*.

¹⁹ *La Révolution prolétarienne*, January 25, 1935.

²⁰ Pierre Monatte, « Souvenirs », *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Institut français d'Histoire sociale*, octobre 1956, n° 16. See also:
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5621224d/texteBrut>

²¹ *Syndicalisme révolutionnaire et communisme*, Archives Monatte, Maspéro, p. 303 sq.

²² <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article593>: « L'Humanité » du 11 septembre 1925 : Pierre Monatte, saboteur du mouvement ouvrier ?

There reigned among these old comrades a sort of unspoken hierarchy based on the date of departure from the party. For decades, the newspaper provided irreplaceable critical analyses of Stalinism, investigations of the Eastern bloc and French imperialism, on the class struggles in France, etc. After WWII, Monatte, Rosmer and Chambelland were very critical of the Atlanticist orientation taken by some editors, and the magazine declined, but it still exists today, although I can't say who its editors are²³.

Break in the revolutionary syndicalist current

Anarcho-syndicalism thus refers to that part of the revolutionary syndicalist movement that ended up, in the early 1920s, by rebutting the Amiens Charter and the notion of trade union “neutrality” towards parties in order to assert its *opposition* to parties. For about ten years, anarcho-syndicalism was there in practice, but it was not yet designated as such.

After the Russian revolution, the revolutionary syndicalist movement was divided into two currents: one that supported the Soviet regime, the other that refused to endorse a regime that already had a history of repression of the working class. The break within the revolutionary syndicalist current was materialized by the foundation of the IWA in Berlin in December 1922 with all the revolutionary syndicalist organizations that refused to support the Soviet regime and join the Red International of Labour Unions. *This foundation literally marks the birth of anarcho-syndicalism*: a movement that has the characteristic of being both the offspring of revolutionary syndicalism and the product of the anarchists of the CGTU.

On this point, Schmidt and van der Walt are right that “Anarcho-syndicalism is a term best reserved for the revolutionary unionism that is openly and consciously anarchist in origins, orientation, and aims.” (Black Flame, p. 142) But they remain locked in their ideological vision of things and do not see the problem from a historical point of view, for they add: “The classical example would be Spain's CNT, which traced its roots back to the anarchist Spanish section of the First International – the Spanish Regional Workers' Federation (FORE) – and the ideas of Bakunin”.

The CNT at its foundation claimed revolutionary syndicalism, and it was only later that it ended up claiming anarcho-syndicalism. Moreover, Schmidt and van der Walt completely obliterate the fact that between the foundation of the Spanish Federation of the IWA and the foundation of the CNT, there was a thirty-year rupture in the historical continuity: the anarcho-communist groups of Kropotkinian and Malatestian inspiration managed to destroy the collectivist and unionist current, which actually was of Bakuninian inspiration. It was only in 1907, after

²³ <https://revolutionproletarienne.wordpress.com/>

See: Edward Sarboni, *Le syndicalisme de La Révolution prolétarienne entre 1925 et 1939 – Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*, La Bussière, Éditions Acratie, 2016, 213 pages, 17 €.

having made a catastrophic assessment of this strategy, that the Spanish anarchist groups decided to invest massively in the trade union movement. It is true that once they had taken this decision, the result was spectacular. What is affirmed here undoubtedly goes against all the preconceived ideas within the anarchist movement, but a simple examination of the documents of the period would show that in all the countries where a libertarian movement existed, there were violent conflicts between the current stemming from the Kropotkinian and Malatestian tradition and the current stemming from the Bakuninian tradition. These conflictualities were all the more violent as anarchism penetrated more deeply into the workers' movement, as in Spain and Argentina.

Schmidt and van der Walt are partially right again when they say that revolutionary syndicalism “is a term best reserved for the syndicalist variant that for a range of reasons, did not explicitly link to the anarchist tradition, and was unaware of, ignored, or downplayed its anarchist ancestry. It is typical of revolutionary syndicalist currents to deny any alignment to particular political groupings or philosophies – to claim to be ‘apolitical,’ notwithstanding the radical politics that they embody.” (BF, p. 142)

The problem again is that they start from ideological preconceptions that do not take into account the complexity of historical facts. It is quite presumptuous to say that revolutionary syndicalism has an “anarchist ancestry”. It is undeniable that the formation of revolutionary syndicalism owes much to *anarchists*, but it is an abusive generalization to say that it is a production of *anarchism*, generically speaking, because it then obliterates the fact that many anarchists were (and still are) opposed to unions. Historical revolutionary syndicalism (not Schmidt and van der Walt’s idealistic constructions) also owes its origin to socialist militants, blanquists and others. Victor Griffuelhes, secretary of the CGT while Pouget was assistant secretary, was of blanquist origin.

After the Dresden congress of German social democracy in 1903, which gave a short-lived hope for a radical turn in the socialist movement, many socialist militants saw revolutionary trade unionism as a current that would give new life to socialism. Again, while anarchists played a decisive role in the formation of revolutionary syndicalism, they were not alone and to call it a “variant” of anarchism is perfectly misleading.

The IWA’s declaration of principle continues to refer to revolutionary syndicalism: the term is used ten times in the text, which is normal, since these militants considered themselves to be *the real revolutionary syndicalists*, in opposition to those who, like Pierre Monatte, had joined the ranks of the communists. The term will still take years to become established, but the idea is there: the Berlin IWA, founded in 1922, no longer declares itself neutral with respect to political parties but in *opposition* to them; it declares itself opposed to parliamentary activity, nationalism, militarism, the State; all things that had been discarded by the Amiens Charter by compromise with the reformists. *This* is what defines anarcho-syndicalism in contrast to revolutionary syndicalism.

In my opinion, revolutionary syndicalism is a revolutionary form of syndicalism to which the anarchists made a decisive but not exclusive contribution, and which, in France, abandoned in 1906, at the congress of Amiens, certain essential themes of anarchism (struggle against the state, parliament, the army, religion...) by compromise with the reformists, in order to preserve the unity of the working class of the time. Revolutionary syndicalism according to the congress of Amiens is an explicit rejection of the anarchist foundation of the original doctrine. To say then that it participates in the “strategy” of anarchism, or that it is a “variant” of anarchism, is simply meaningless.

Schmidt-van der Walt's theses on the difference between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism seem to me extremely caricatural and totally cut off from historical reality. It is not the level of explicit and conscious relation of syndicalism to anarchism that defines the difference between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism: these are two movements which have a common origin but which have evolved in a contrary way due to historical circumstances. So Schmidt and van der Walt must decide: they can't say *at the same time* that syndicalism is a “variant” of anarchism and that it does not “explicitly link to the anarchist tradition, and was unaware of, ignored, or downplayed its anarchist ancestry” (BF, p. 142). If syndicalists “downplayed” anarchism, it was not “due to ignorance or a tactical denial of the link to anarchism” (BF, p. 16). I am inclined to think that experienced and politically trained working class militants know what they do²⁴.

It goes without saying that revolutionary syndicalism outside France has evolved differently. Argentina and Spain, for example, have had very different histories. In Spain, the appearance of the term “anarcho-syndicalism” is probably not the result of the same historical causes, but Cesar M. Lorenzo tells us that this term “will not be commonly used until 1920, when the CNT will have made its breakthrough among the masses”²⁵, which corresponds to the same periodisation as in France – but Lorenzo does not seem to consider the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism as the consequence of a fracture within the revolutionary syndicalist movement at the time of the Russian revolution. The fact that a congress of the CNT recognized in 1919 libertarian communism as an objective, and that two observers (Angel Pestaña and Gaston Leval) who had returned from Russia made reports unfavourable to joining the Red International of Labour Unions completes the explanation.

If until about 1920 revolutionary syndicalism was indeed the reference point of many organizations, there was a real fracture from the creation of the Communist

²⁴ The veterans of revolutionary syndicalism that I met when I was a young militant in the late sixties and early seventies, who had been active in the 1930s, knew very well why they were not anarchists or anarcho-syndicalists – to which they were not hostile, should-I say.

²⁵ C.M. Lorenzo, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en Espagne*, Les Éditions libertaires, p. 56.

International and the Red International of Labour Unions, and it is from this fracture that anarcho-syndicalism was born.

Conclusion

In the 1920s a real split within the revolutionary syndicalist current occurred, and two very different strategic visions were confronted, personified by two well-known militants: Pierre Monatte, a former anarchist, one of the protagonists of the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam, and Pierre Besnard, an anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist. This fracture which opposed two strategies had catastrophic consequences, since it weakened a current that was in the majority in the CGTU and opened the doors to the Communist Party. This division was mainly caused by the question of membership to the Red International of Labour Unions, but also, in general, by the attitude to be adopted towards the Soviet power, which had initially aroused enthusiasm in the libertarian movement, before detailed information reaching Western Europe cooled the enthusiasm of many activists.

Now if we look at the history of the international labour movement after the Russian revolution, we see that without exception, except perhaps in Spain, the strategy of the Communist International led to splits in all the trade union organizations which had a dominant revolutionary syndicalist character.

It seems useful to specify that the dramatic informations coming from Russia after the end of the civil war was relatively better assimilated by the revolutionary syndicalists of anarchist origin, who founded the Berlin IWA, than by the others, although there were obviously many anarchist defectors who not only ended up constituting the cadres of the CGT, but also founded the Communist Party.

As a result, revolutionary syndicalism practically disappeared as a current with any weight in the working class and merged into communist dominated organizations. The branch of revolutionary syndicalism that had become anarcho-syndicalism continued to live an independent life and remained as mass organizations alive until the following war.

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