

About Platformism, synthesisism and the “Fontenis affair”

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The “Cercle d'études libertaires - Gaston-Leval” is a group of reflection constituted in the tradition of the Libertarian Sociological Center founded by Gaston Leval in 1956. Most of its members are militants of the Fédération anarchiste, but the opinions which are expressed represent only the personal views of their authors, as is the case in the following text. There is a website attached to the CEL, monde-nouveau.net

In a few months will take place an international meeting in Saint-Imier, Switzerland, to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the founding of the anti-authoritarian International. This initiative was originally taken by the Federation anarchiste (France), the Fédération libertaire des Montagnes and the Organisation socialiste libertaire (Switzerland), soon followed by many others. The FA and the OSL belong to the two historical “tendencies” of anarchism: synthesisism and platformism. Many organizations in Anglo-Saxon and Latin American countries declare themselves to be Platformists, that is to say they adhere to Arshinov’s platform.

It is true that the Federation anarchiste does not declare itself platformist but advocates the “Anarchist Synthesis”. But it is not as a “synthesist” organization that we call for the gathering, together with other groups: it is as anarchists, as federalists. In 1872, the problem does not arise in terms of “platformism” or “synthesisism”, so there is no need to transpose in the 2012 gathering problems that did not arise in 1872. As to say if “platformist” organizations will answer the call, some have already announced that they would come. I think it would be an insult to our “platformist” comrades to think they do not understand the value of such a meeting, which will enable many people to meet, to exchange ideas and... addresses. Not being platformists doesn't prevent

us from meeting comrades who claim this option. Especially in the context that is defined for the meeting of 2012. The militants of the Anarchist Federation are enthusiastic about this project and many are and will be mobilized. The debate "Synthesism vs Platformism" is far from being at the center of their preoccupations. Their concern is the success of the initiative.

However, among the elder comrades, there is not so much a reluctance as a rejection concerning platformism. Unfortunately, this rejection is largely the consequence of the merging of (or confusion between) two questions: platformism itself and the "Fontenis affair", the latter having in some way "over-determined" the former.

- Concerning platformism: this debate started in France in 1926 and in fact quite quickly ended, the matter was quite quickly settled... and forgotten. There were short-lived attempts to create "platformist" groups. But the question of platformism was a *political* debate on *political* options with which one may or may not agree.

- The "Fontenis affair" appeared 30 years later, in the mid 50s, it is a dramatic event strictly limited to the history of the French post-war anarchist movement, in which "platformism" has in fact *nothing to do*.

The "Fontenis affair" in some way revived the rejection of platformism the French anarchist movement had shown in the 20s and 30s, but this rejection is linked to *extremely precise historical circumstances*, and to facts that took place a long time ago in France and nowhere else. Therefore, in order to understand this rejection, it is necessary to take these circumstances into account, much more than the substance of the program developed by Arshinov and Makhno, known as "Arshinov's platform". Arshinov's platform itself is linked to a very precise context, and for all I know, Libertarian communist organizations in France today no longer refer to it very strictly : they also consider it outdated.

I think the younger militants of the FA don't much care about all that. Local groups of both organizations – FA and AL – work together on practical issues. If however a certain distance is maintained, it is absolutely not due to theoretical disagreements (although they exist) but to behavioral questions. An American anarchist group explains their viewpoint concerning "platformist" behavior with a typically Anglo-Saxon understatement: "While their organizational seriousness and commitment to mass struggle are exemplary, an influence of certain forms and practice (not necessarily politics) reminiscent of Trotskyist groups is apparent." ("Our Anarchism", First of May Anarchist Alliance.)

The important passage in this sentence are the words between brackets ¹.

I think these American comrades have very clearly seen that the problem was not the Platform itself but the “forms and practices” of platformist organizations – of some of them at least. So the problem is much less Arshinov’s platform itself, than the activity of a group of militants led by Georges Fontenis in the 50’s. In the process, Arshinov’s platform was sort of hijacked.

I insist on the fact that the political debate on platformism must be clearly distinguished from considerations about Fontenis.

A methodological statement

Concerning Fontenis I think it is necessary first to make a methodological statement.

Everybody is aware that “water has flowed under the bridges”, as we say in French, and that it is about time to see what we have in common rather than what divides us. So the question is:

- a) Should we simply forget about the dispute, never mention the harm it has provoked and act as if everything was fine; or
- b) Should we first establish the facts, show the extent of the trauma, and then overcome it.

I think things must be said. If you want things to move positively, you must openly express contentious issues. You cannot build the future on frustrations and on things that are constantly untold. I believe it is necessary to establish facts. Only after, can you move forward. And I insist on the fact that all this is strictly linked to the French context: it certainly means absolutely nothing to an anarchist from America – North, Center or South – or elsewhere.

The corollary of all this is the necessity for both sides to make a critical analysis of the events. A militant of the Anarchist Federation recently wrote in *Le Monde libertaire*:

“One might be seduced by the thesis of a mythologized Georges Fontenis, a sort of scapegoat for the failures and the divisions of the anarchist movement, the alibi for some of his followers who rejected on him alone a somewhat cumbersome balance-sheet. For if Fontenis certainly held the lead in this, nothing would have been

¹ Now that the Saint-Imier gathering is over, I can mention one very typical case

possible without the blind obedience on the part of his accomplices or the disturbing passivity and carelessness of the militants of an organization claiming anti-authoritarianism ²."

An older militant, who had been a witness of the events, wrote much earlier:

"For thirty years, there has been a myth in our community. This myth is about the 'Fontenis affair'. A myth based on one man whose presence among us was relatively short, six or eight years at most, and who exercised authority only for half of that time. For activists who succeeded each other, Fontenis was the 'bad guy', the 'werewolf' of the fable, 'the ugly one' of the tragedy, 'the Antichrist' who not only frightened one generation, but also the following generations who had not known him but who recalls him whenever an ideological dispute shakes our movement. The character does not deserve such an 'honor', nor such consistency in this 'classical' role all human groups invent to get rid of the weight of their 'sins' and blame 'Satan' for their errors. I find ridiculous this use of 'the Fontenis case' by a number of our comrades to explain or justify disagreements. (...) And if to exorcise the devil you just need to talk about him, as the good fathers say, then let us talk about the Fontenis case ³!"

Another author, who for a long time had been a member of the Fédération anarchiste before he started an academic career, writes that « in spite of the expectations of its initiators, the debate platform/synthesis not only did not contribute to the achievement of the unity of the movement, but increased even more the confusionism within the ranks of the libertarians and finally hampered the necessary work of revision of the traditional anarchist positions made indeed necessary by

of "platformist" behavior that particularly irritates the militants of the Federation anarchiste. I discovered on Wikipedia an article on a Swiss group, the Organisation socialiste des montagnes, which claims to be the main organizer of the International gathering of Saint-Imier. It is a pity they haven't mentioned the Federation anarchiste, which is, with the Saint-Imier anarchist group, the initiator of the project, the main financial contributor and the pillar, in terms of militants, of the project. (24-08-2012)

² For the English translation :

http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Parcours_Fontenis_traduc_anglaise.pdf

³ *Ibid.*

the situation ». The author adds that because it was forgotten that what was at stake was only two options among others, the debate froze still, provoking a crack leading to a very serious crisis in the French anarchist movement, a « crisis that never really has been overcome even today, of which the most striking example is the organizational and ideological confusionism of the present-day Anarchist Federation, a sort of hybrid monster, half platformist and half synthesist »⁴.

Obviously, there is no one-sidedness in the approach of the question from the FA.

But the same thing can be said about *Alternative libertaire*:

“In France the debate died down only in the 90s. René Berthier or Gaetano Manfredonia proposed de-passionate approaches of the question. The very synthesist Federation anarchiste (FA) has in fact taken its distances with Sébastien Faure’s catechism. The Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires (UTCL), created in 1976, had on its side quickly evolved towards transcending the platform of which it retained the spirit more than the letter. *Alternative libertaire* remains in this continuity⁵.”

Fontenis’ “coup d’État”

Georges Fontenis was a member of the FA who, with friends of his, organized a fraction, a conspiracy inside the Federation Anarchiste, a “coup d’Etat” in order to take control of it and to take control of its paper, *Le Libertaire*. Once they achieved their project, they excluded at first all those who did not agree with them and then part of the members of their own fraction – an attitude quite consistent with ultra-sectarian and paranoid groups. Characteristic also of such ultra-sectarian groups is the quantity of contemptuous expressions used to qualify their anarchist opponents.

⁴ Gaetano Manfredonia, « Le débat plate-forme ou synthèse », *Itinéraire* n° 13, Voline, 1995. Let us note that Manfredonia, who definitely knows what he is writing about, considers the Fédération anarchiste as “half platformist, half synthesist”.

⁵ Guillaume Davranche : « 1927 : Avec la *Plate-forme*, l’anarchisme tente la rénovation. » <http://www.alternativelibertaire.org/spip.php?article1596>.

This happened in the early 50's⁶. The problem is that Arshinov's platform and the "Fontenis affair" were so to speak merged in the opinion of many of the French anarchists of the time. Wrongly, in my opinion, because Fontenis made some choices which would certainly not have been approved by Arshinov and Makhno.

I have particularly in mind Fontenis' alliance with an authentic Stalinist called Andre Marty, former head of the International Brigades in Spain, appointed by Stalin, known for his crimes during the civil war, and nicknamed the "Butcher of Albacete" because he ordered assassinations of members of the International Brigades which took place in that Spanish city⁷. Marty was also known in Spain for the murder of many anarchists and POUM militants.

Strangely, in 1955, *Le Libertaire*, which Fontenis and his friends controlled, widely opened its columns to Marty. I suppose many anarchists outside France, who don't bother about details, don't know that André Marty had been expelled from the Communist party *not because he was a revolutionary* but because he was an ultra-stalinist. In 1945, he had been Number 3 in the French Communist party. Marty was not a victim of Stalinism. The Libertarian Communist Federation, successor to the Federation Anarchiste, passed unanimously a resolution declaring that the electoral battle was a form of class struggle and that taking part in elections became an option⁸. In the elections of

⁶ The Fédération anarchiste was changed into the Fédération communiste libertaire in 1953. The FCL collapsed in 1956.

⁷ We can observe today attempts made by nostalgic crypto-post-Stalinists to rehabilitate André Marty, presented as a victim of ill-intended right-wing authors. Unfortunately some anarchists fall into this manipulation, including Fontenis groupies. If Marty was not that bad a guy, Fontenis was right to make an alliance with him.

⁸ An analysis « from inside » can be found in a text written by Christian Lagant, militant of the Kronstadt Group of the FCL. The Kronstadt group had published in 1954 a *Memorandum*

[http://www.fondation-besnard.org/IMG/pdf/Memorandum_du_groupe_Kronstadt.pdf] criticizing the activity of Fontenis and his fraction (OPB). Lagant left the FCL at its May 1955 congress and published in 1956 an article analyzing the electoral strategy of the FCL. (« *La FCL et les élections du 2 janvier 1956* » *Noir et Rouge*, n°9)

[see : <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article389>]. It has been said and written that the opposition between Fontenis and Lagant was founded on personal, not political motives. Reading the "Memorandum du groupe Kronstadt" and Lagant's article proves the contrary, for the arguments which are developed are definitely political. Besides, I knew Lagant, we were in the same CGT union,

January 1956, Fontenis appeared with André Marty at his side. The "Alliance" between Fontenis and Marty was a catastrophic failure: in terms of votes, of course, but also because the organization was ruined. I can say without much risk that Makhno and Arshinov would not have approved this kind of drift...

By 1956 Moscow had begun its destalinization policy. Marty was much too strongly marked as a Stalinist. So what do we have ? Fontenis and his followers make friends with an hyper-Stalinist ex-cacique of the Komintern, expelled 4 years earlier from the Communist Party, a murderer of anarchists, POUM militants and International Brigade volunteers. The alliance of Fontenis with Marty has nothing to do with a tactical alliance with a revolutionary militant (or group)⁹, it simply is a totally irrational choice: Fontenis thought he could manipulate Marty and attract communist party militants.

Fontenis had methodically organized a fraction whose objective was to take control of the Federation Anarchiste. Founded in 1950, this fraction was acting within the FA and was called OPB (Organisation Pensée-Bataille, that is "Thought & Battle Organization"). This organization aimed very openly at fighting the "synthesist" orientation of the Anarchist Federation of the time.

I think that activists who claim to be libertarian communists and oppose synthesism have every right to express themselves, to develop their theses, and to try and create an organization that matches their approach of anarchism. What Fontenis can be blamed for is not expressing his views, nor creating an anarchist communist organization according to his own views, but to have destroyed from within an existing organization. Nobody says the Anarchist Federation was perfect, but at least it had been existing. Besides, after a few years of undercover

and that fellow was unanimously considered as having an extreme moral rectitude, I would even say he was pathologically honest. He suicided in 1978.

⁹ It is of course impossible to know for certain what Makhno would have thought of Fontenis' "alliance" with the Stalinist André Marty, but the following information might give a idea: He wrote in 1932 in a Russian anarchist paper in the US: "In my mind, the FAI and the CNT must have (...) groups of initiative in each village and each town, and they must not fear to take control of the revolutionary, strategic, organisational and theoretical direction of the worker's movement. It is obvious that they will have to avoid uniting with political parties in general, and with the bolchevik-communists in particular, for I suppose that their Spanish equivalents will be the good imitators of their masters." (Quoted by Alexandre Skirda, *Les cosaques de la liberté*, p. 330, éd. JC Lattès.)

preparation, Fontenis' taking control of the FA lasted hardly three years, and when it ended he had excluded almost everyone, including most of his own friends, and *Le Libertaire* had lost practically all its readers. After the disastrous affair of the election, Fontenis left a void behind him. A desert.

Fontenis was not a visionary militant who anticipated the perfect model of anarchist organization, who had a prophetic glimpse of the future anarchist program; he was a megalomaniac manipulator who destroyed the only existing anarchist organization, built nothing at its place and left a desert behind him. Such an attitude is not honorable. The destruction of the Federation Anarchiste is not a claim to fame to the credit of Fontenis and his friends.

It took years afterwards to rebuild the Federation Anarchiste.

But I insist on the fact that libertarian communism can in no way be equated to Fontenis, that libertarian communism as a theory and practice, as a legitimate section of the libertarian movement, is in no way impaired by the actions of a man whose misdeeds have in fact lasted only three years.

A mythical construction

Fontenis could very well have said: I do not agree with the FA, I shall build something else, and those who agree with me can follow me. I am sure that some of the militants of the FA would have followed him. The fate of libertarian communism in France would probably have been totally changed. For if the Fontenis episode has greatly undermined the Fédération Anarchiste, the latter recovered anyway, after a time. The Fontenis episode, however, has also severely undermined the future of libertarian communism itself – in France I mean. Whatever may say those who, in France, paint him with glowing colors and show him as a model, he has been a disaster for libertarian communism as a whole.

Today, the main representative organization of libertarian communism in France is the result of a scission in the FA dating from 1970, and then from an exclusion from this split. This organization today has a monthly paper and has only very recently purchased local premises in Paris. In other words, we can say that for *over 40 years*, libertarian communism has barely made any progress in France. Do I have to say that there is nothing to be cheerful about this situation ?

There has been a mythical construction around the three or four catastrophic years during which Fontenis had seized the power, corresponding to a more or less conscious desire to have a hero; but Fontenis certainly is not the Bakunin of the 20th century. No doubt that

thousands of miles away and 60 years later, the myth may seem attractive, but if we make an assessment, what do we have? A small group of men took control of an organization, turned it away from the principles on which it was based, made an alliance with one of its worst enemies, cleaned it out of its members, ruined it financially and drove the readership of its publication to practically nothing, and then walked away, leaving those who remained to sweep the debris. Because that's what happened.

There was on *anarchistblackcat* a revealing, if not interesting, exchange of views (in English) between what seemed to be a young Spanish-speaking militant and a French anarcho-syndicalist "old-timer". It all started because the young man qualified as "shit" an extremely moderate and totally non-polemic article on Fontenis (translated to English) originally published in *Le Monde Libertaire*¹⁰. Three interesting facts can be noted concerning this exchange of views:

1. The obvious cult of personality developed around Fontenis. I quote the young Spanish-speaking fellow:

"Fontenis fought all his life for giving consistence to the revolutionary movement along libertarian lines, fighting not against "ideas" (as the Joyeux group did), but against the Nazism, Francoism, French imperialism. He never hesitate in make alliance with other fighters against the oppresion, or searching a risky way for achieveing the goals of the social revolution, thinking that better make mistaking doing that being in the correct making nothing, but for some "anarchos" that is an aberration. They prefer the edition of cultural papers, many propaganda that only read themselves and talking talking about non-senses. They are very happy: they are never going to "treason". Yes, they will never do any social change. But that is of no importance, of course."

¹⁰ « Parcours d'un aventuriste du mouvement libertaire », *Le Monde libertaire* n° 1604, 16-22 septembre 2010.

(<http://www.monde-libertaire.fr/portraits/13723-georges-fontenis-parcours-dun-aventuriste-du-mouvement-libertaire-1/2>)

English version : « Journey of an adventurer of the Libertarian movement », <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article371>

In a rudimentary way, this opinion reflects quite well the platformist opinion concerning the Anarchist Federation.

2. The image of the Anarchist Federation conveyed by some Fontenis groupies. I quote the French "Old-timer":

"Another thing that amazes me is the image certain anarchists have of the French Anarchist Federation. If we listen to them (or read them), the FA is a bunch of hazy sycophants languidly discussing about the sex of angels, airing ideas with no connection with reality, publishing 'cultural papers' intended to no one else but ourselves, and 'talking, talking, talking about non-senses', passively watching through the window the real world going by: nazism, francoism, French imperialism, the exploited, the oppressed, the unemployed and the homeless reduced to simple 'ideas'. And, of course, taking 'inorganicity as a virtue', which is probably how C. names the FA's alledged refusal of organization.

The "old-timer" concludes recalling that "these vaporous anarchists who are opposed to organization have achieved quite some things", such as a weekly paper, a radio, a big bookshop in Paris, and others in different towns, a publishing house, etc.: "So I would like C. to tell me how on earth such inconsistent people can do all this – not mentioning organizing an international gathering in 2012."

3. The third fact which is revealed is that the personality cult is largely based on ignorance. "C.", the young fellow, says:

« Georges Fontenis has the qualities of a genuine social revolutionary. He was devoted since he was young to build revolutionary movement, thinking about its REAL problems in its time and moment (Libertarian Communist Manifesto, for example, was written for the FA of the 50s). "Non conforme" to the communist libertarian movement and the revolutionary left at the beginning of the XXI Century) and strengthening links between who fight. Its legacy will perdure. »

"C." obviously doesn't know that by the time he had written *Non conforme* (2002), George Fontenis had become a serious burden for Alternative libertaire, the organization of which he was a "historical"

militant. Two prominent leaders of *Alternative libertaire* wrote about this book:

"Alas, if Georges Fontenis always has a concern for 'breaking taboos' he does not do it in *Non conforme* with much relevance. The exercise turns out into a search for an iconoclastic posture which most often misses its target, when it does not altogether go astray. The purpose is confused and ambiguous on certain social issues. Ultimately, Georges Fontenis wants to ask non conform questions but the ambivalent writing of his answers might lead readers to conclusions too conform to... the dominant ideology." (*Alternative libertaire*, décembre 2002.)

This statement, written in AL's magazine, drove Fontenis furious.

At least, as far as *they* are concerned, the militants of *Alternative Libertaire* don't lull in the cult of personality...

If you push aside all the caricatured (and sometimes childish) aspects of the "Fontenis affair" – secret organization, Leninist-type faction, incredible over-estimation of his own capacities, threats to assassinate "traitors", etc. – we can, 60 years later, take into account that one of the motivations behind Fontenis' attempt in the 50s was the observation of the divisions and of the inefficiency of the *Fédération anarchiste*.

The "Fontenis affair" no longer determines the attitudes of both parties with regard one another, and it is a very good thing. The "Fontenis affair" is history. But history is something that must be taken into consideration under the condition it does not paralyze positive action. The anarchists from other countries are not concerned with this debate and they certainly don't understand it.

"Organizational and strategic obsession"

For the intermediate generation of activists of the FA, such as mine – those who started their activity in the late 60s and in the early 70's – it was not so much Fontenis himself the problem as the libertarian communist groups who claimed more or less his legacy. They were characterized by a high degree of sectarianism and dogmatism. In addition, Daniel Guérin had developed his theses about "libertarian Marxism", and libertarian communist activists, who wanted at all costs to bring "rigor" and "cohesion" to the anarchist doctrine, believed that they would find a remedy for the deficiencies they perceived in the anarchist doctrine by aping Marxist language, especially Trotskyite. This attitude, I

think, merely revealed the specific deficiency of these activists concerning their own libertarian authors¹¹.

But efficiency and cohesion are relative notions. All depends what your aims are. Constantly insisting on "rigor", "efficiency", etc. doesn't necessarily make you more rigorous or efficient. For we have seen too many groups claiming "coherence", "rigor" and "cohesion" but never growing beyond a membership of 50 or 60 and splitting or excluding in the name of "coherence", "rigor" and "cohesion", but with the words "working class" never off their lips.

A good illustration of what many French anarchists consider as "organizational and strategic obsession" can be found on the website of a US anarchist group, Miami Autonomy & Solidarity. When I speak of "organizational and strategic obsession", I don't mean I am against organization and strategy, I mean that the level of reflection and theorization on these questions must correspond to the level of membership: what can we do with the forces we have? Once given the objectives, and *they* can be very ambitious – for example creating an anarchist mass organization – I don't see the point, if we are 50, to discuss endlessly about world revolution strategy. The question should rather be: "How can we reach a membership of 100?"

Miami Autonomy & Solidarity published a text written by Scott Nappalos which seems to me characteristic of this tendency, "Towards Theory of Political Organization for Our Time" (Part I). It deals with the necessity of "regroupment": the author is convinced that "in this time, we are witnessing a broad convergence on practices and concepts in organizations which began at different starting points and with different traditions": but he observes "strong unevenness within organizations, and internally most organizations have people moving in different directions". The solution lies in a "substantial transformation of existing orientations and forces":

¹¹ This imitation of Trotskyism by the French libertarian communists used to make it virtually impossible to distinguish them from Trotskyites. They constantly tried to commit themselves with the Trotskyites through alliances, joint communiqués, joint events, etc. In short, a lot of visible signs that showed their proximity to the Trotskyites... and their distance from the anarchist movement.

A comrade in my union was, in the late 70s, was a member of the political bureau of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, the major trotskyite organisation. At that time Alternative Libertaire did not yet exist, it had another name, UTCL (Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires). I asked my friend his opinion about our anarcho-communist comrades. He aswered that they were nothing but a tendency within the Ligue communiste.

"Inevitably this would require conflict, splits, and rupture of existing organizations into distinct tendencies that at present battle only internally. This is actually to be welcomed, as it would clarify our directions, and alleviate some of the periodic internal paralysis." (*underlined by me.*)

"This is a risk, but it is a necessary risk", says Nappalos; and naturally all this is done in the name of the proletariat: "In such a time, organizational and ideological loyalties should be re-assessed in favor of the interests of the proletariat and the movement as a whole."

I am perfectly aware that the opinions found in blogs and on websites do not necessarily express the level of thought of a political movement as a whole, but "Towards Theory of Political Organization for Our Time" is a long elaborate text in three parts, not just the spontaneous expression of a blogger.

In the name of rigor, cohesion, unity of thought, the author welcomes conflicts, splits and rupture: this is what we, in France, have experienced with Georges Fontenis in the 50s; but it is most of all the illustration of the permanent temptation existing among those militants who want to be better royalists than the king, as we say in France, and who over-interpret platformism and transform it into a caricature – precisely what Fontenis has done.

The paradox is that when you stick to the letter of the strategic considerations of some anarchist militants, you have the impression that they are talking about an organization of thousands and thousands of members. It is the impression I had reading Nappalos. His text reminds me of these two German revolutionary organizations (AAUD and AAUD-E) who decided to merge in 1931 (a bit late...) to form the KAU¹². When you read the discourse, the accounts that were made of this apparently considerable event by the council communists themselves, you have the impression that the fate of the world proletariat was at stake, that the colossal forces of the planetary revolution were uniting to beat those of the world reaction. In fact the first organization had 343 members and the second 57. It seems that some anarchists have inherited from council communism an overestimation of the importance of discourses. There is something comic (or pathetic) about advocating splits in

¹² Respectively : Allgemeine Arbeiter Union Deutschlands, Allgemeine Arbeiter Union Deutschlands-Einheitsorganisation, Kommunistische Arbeiter-Union.

microscopic organizations because of disagreements on the strategy of world revolution.

Obviously, Nappalos' viewpoint does not produce unanimity, for a blogger – significantly calling himself "Syndicalist" – replies:

"Most respectfully comrade, having gone through enough 'conflict, splits, and rupture' over the past near 37 years, I sadly do not really find this to be healthy: 'conflict, splits, and rupture of existing organizations into distinct tendencies that at present battle only internally. This is actually to be welcomed, as it would clarify our directions, and alleviate some of the periodic internal paralysis.' (...)

"The willingness to want to engage in those sorts of struggles, to split organizations and create bad taste in folks mouths is not, in my opinion, 'worth it'. It stands a greater chance of not creating the 'possibly creating a higher form of organization than we have seen in decades in North America.' Whatever that higher form of organization may be.

"Folks should come together or go apart based on commonalities. And folks should come together or separate in a comradely way when those commonalities are no longer there. 'Conflict, splits, and rupture' are not a way to build and have long lasting results well beyond the moment of political separation."

I must say I feel much sympathy for this comrade. And I would like to remind that there never has been an important anarchist movement when there wasn't *first* an anarchist mass organization. This raises the (apparently unsolved) problem of the relationship between anarchist organization and class organization, which seems at the center of the preoccupations of American – North and South – anarchists.

Nappalos vs synthesisism

In the 2nd part of his text, Nappalos deals with « synthesisism ». There is much truth in what he says : it is not a theory. But what Volin meant by synthesisism was not at all the same thing as what Sébastien Faure made of it. As much as Makhno and Arshinov, Volin was aware of the flaws of the anarchist movement of the time and wanted to change it. Volin, Makhno and Arshinov shared the same initial idea: the necessity to unify the anarchist movement which was divided and inefficient. The difference was in the method to reach unity. The "platformists" considered that anarcho-communism was the only anarchist movement,

individualism being a bourgeois ideology¹³ and anarcho-syndicalism not being a doctrine but a simple method of action.

Volin considered that unity could be reached through an effort of theoretical clarification implying a collective reflection between all the currents of the movement. Volin's approach does not correspond to what is meant today by "synthesism". He didn't want the different branches of anarchism to live side by side indefinitely, he thought that after a debate they would merge into something *different* and *superior* – which is precisely the meaning of a "synthesis". In Volin's synthesis, there was something dynamic, things were to evolve. On the contrary, when Sébastien Faure published "La Synthèse anarchiste" in 1928, he developed a very static point of view, advocating the simple cohabitation of the different currents of anarchism without any debate nor clarification. It is this version of "synthesism" which has prevailed, but strictly speaking it is not a synthesis. Sébastien Faure's version of synthesism is a patch stuck on the inner tube of a tyre.

Nappalos is also right when he says that "no one calls himself or herself a synthesist". I never heard anybody calling himself a synthesist. But whatever truth there may be in what Nappalos says, the major mistake he makes is to give too much credit to discourses without observing the facts. In the FA there are differences of opinions but they practically never are the consequences of certain comrades being anarcho-communists and others being anarcho-syndicalists or individualists. Our congresses are not places where you see permanent clashes between anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists or individualists, leading to paralysis, they are places where militants are most of the times in fairly polite opposition concerning practical matters, sometimes in extremely vigorous opposition. These differences of opinions exist because people simply don't always agree with each other.

Obviously Nappalos sees the French Anarchist Federation as an organization allowing "for varying contradictory tendencies to all exist in the same organization without any fundamental unity". But besides the fact that in the FA there are no individualists (I never met any, at least)¹⁴ but anarchist-communists and anarcho-syndicalists, or militants who are

¹³ A point of view Bakunin shared.

¹⁴ I must modify this opinion for I very recently realized there is at least one individualist, a comrade I've known for years, who does a very good militant job in the Federation anarchiste. We never had the opportunity to discuss the matter. Maybe I'll have to reconsider my point of view on the question. (24-08-2012)

neither, or both – that is, simply anarchists with no hyphen –, when I observe facts I see that these tendencies are not contradictory: on the contrary they practice an extremely efficient COLLABORATION. At the risk of seeming insistent, we are the ones who have a weekly paper, a radio, etc.

There is something definitely paternalistic in Nappalos' attitude who considers synthesism as limited to "lower case 'a' anarchists" (whatever that means), developing "organizational patriotism" (it is well known that platformist organizations *never* develop "organizational patriotism"). Even more, "synthesist" organizations limit their activity to unessential questions such as "sub-culture", "activist networks", "protest politics", "anti-globalization and anti-war movements", where they have a "productive role to play" – thank you.

Nappalos sticks to concepts 90 years old and is convinced that the alleged "synthetic" organizations today have not evolved; that reality has had no effect on them; that the practices of these organizations strictly stick to his 90 year-old representation of synthesism ¹⁵.

The debate on platformism

The debate on platformism is a debate on theory, on organization, on tactics and strategy. But it is also a debate on the context (political, economic, sociological) in which it might be most valid. That also means that before forming an authorized opinion we, Western European militants, and more precisely French militants, have a great lot to learn concerning the situation in Central or South America, for instance, or even Northern America.

It must be noted that whatever we militants of the Federation anarchiste think about the Platform, it is mostly the same thing as what Alternative libertaire thinks! The conclusion is that the viewpoint our both organizations have on this issue is probably determined by the identical contexts. And we must not exclude the possibility that in other contexts, platformism might be the solution. I can hardly imagine, for instance, anarcho-syndicalism developing in places where there is no, or practically no, working class, practically no industry, etc.

It is significant that when a Nefac interviewer asked Alternative Libertaire, a French "platformist" organization, why there were so few references to Platformism in their literature, the answer was that the Platform is part of their ideological references but they don't make a fuss

¹⁵ For a critical analysis of platformism *and* synthesism, see René Berthier, "Leçons d'octobre": <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article304>

about it because the text, written in 1926, is obsolete and not adapted to the present-day situation in France. The only thing the interviewed member of AL retains from the Platform seems to be the necessity to organize:

"Arshinov's Platform and 'platformism' are indeed a part of our 'ideological baggage'. But we're not attached to them in a dogmatic way. We think that part of the text, written in the 1920's, is now obsolete and is not adapted to the political realities we live with in France today. That is why we rarely make references to 'The Platform' or to platformism. We identify with the spirit of platformism, and say so, but we don't identify with every word written in the original platform! We are still convinced of the importance of anarchists being organised, and to also have a clear political and strategic line. To that effect, yes, we are platformists ¹⁶."

Obsolescence of the Platform – at least in France – and necessity to organize are two things with which we have been agreeing for a long time. I don't even understand why anarchists have to constantly repeat that it is necessary to organize. To me an unorganized anarchist is a contradiction.

The debate on Platformism took place in France *in the mid 20s*. Unless I am mistaken, I think the "platform" was "discovered" in England in the early 70s and in the Americas in the 90s. So there is a clear anteriority in France. Most French and Italian anarchists, including libertarian communists, – I'm thinking of Malatesta – strongly opposed the platform which was misunderstood and raised somewhat hysterical reactions. Arshinov clearly said that the "platform" was a *project*, and could be discussed. It is most unfortunate that the anarchist movement of the time did not take advantage of this opening.

Once again, we must consider the context of the late 20's. I think the condemnation by Makhno and Arshinov of the flaws of the anarchist movement of the time was largely correct. About the time the Kronstadt uprising was suppressed and when the Makhnovist movement was crushed, a French anarchist individualist, Andre Lorulot, made a conference on "Our enemy, the woman", in which he claimed that

¹⁶ <http://fdca.it/fdcaen/international/al.htm>

women were frivolous and prevented their men from being activists¹⁷. The minutes of the time say that attendance at this conference was so important that there were people outside the room. An old comrade told me that during this conference, May Piquera, a well known anarchist and feminist activist, bestowed the lecturer a vigorous slap. There was also in the anarchist movement people who opposed the reduction of working hours because that would have diverted the workers from the revolution...

These aspects of the French anarchist movement of the 20s might have shocked Makhno and Arshinov, but the movement could *absolutely not be reduced to that*.

Conceptions that are 90 years old...

Arshinov's platform was written in 1926, and Sébastien Faure's theory of synthesist anarchism was written in 1928 in response to the platform. We can't, the international anarchist movement can't stick today to the debate in these terms, because we are talking about conceptions that are *90 years old* : perhaps should we consider the possibility of reconsidering the terms of the debate... I think that neither side can refer to ideas and forms of organization 90 years old without considering adaptations. I think that in fact, in the meantime, the two schools of thought have come closer.

In retrospect – and after 90 years you can serenely look backwards – what first motivated Makhno and Arshinov was that they realized the inability of the French anarchist movement to take decisions. I must add that this was absolutely not the case in Spain, for instance. So it's not a congenital matter to anarchism. The Spanish CNT had a million members in 1930 and to reach this point instances had necessarily existed in the organization in which the guidelines were discussed and voted and decisions taken. These instances did not exist in the French anarchist movement (and Italian, I think: Malatesta said that a general assembly was simply a meeting where the different points of view were expressed). Remember that the 1907 anarchist international conference which took place in Amsterdam reached to absolutely no decision.

But these instances did exist in the Unione Syndacale Italiana, an active anarcho-sindicalist organization crushed by Mussolini.

So if the Arshinov platform brings something new to the French anarchist movement (and Italian), it brings absolutely nothing new to the

¹⁷ See <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article140> for an analysis of this conference.

Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement – and the anarcho-syndicalist movement in general, including French. In fact, if you read the statutes of the CGT-SR, a French anarcho-syndicalist organization created in 1926, *the same year as Arshinov's platform*, you find a set of federal structures in which members discuss and vote on policy decisions. The statutes of the CGT-SR are at least as "authoritarian", if not more, as what you read in Arshinov's platform... It is significant that in 1926, Arshinov's platform created in the French anarchist movement an outburst of protestations while the Statutes of the CGT-SR – more "authoritarian" in my view – left everybody silent.

So we can say that the diagnosis made by Makhno and Arshinov was right. But Arshinov's platform brought nothing really new as compared with what already existed at the time. If no-one objected to the "authoritarianism" of the statutes of the CGT-SR, but did so for Arshinov's platform (written the same year) it is, in my opinion, simply because Arshinov's platform was addressed (very naively, I would say) to the anarchists, while the statutes of the CGT-SR concerned the anarcho-syndicalists – which suggests that there was then a deep gap between the anarchist movement and the French working class. And here we touch another point stressed by Makhno and Arshinov: the relative lack of involvement of the French anarchist movement of the time in the working class. Right or wrong, this is in any case how Makhno and Arshinov seem to have perceived things. This probably explains that what was denied by the anarchist movement was accepted by the anarcho-syndicalist movement: because *it was not the same people who were involved*.

Unfortunately, Makhno didn't understand anything about revolutionary syndicalism, about anarcho-syndicalism. He should have turned to them. In the 20s, the working class anarchist movement was in the syndicalist movement. Makhno and Arshinov unfortunately didn't realize it. They were looking for an alternative to bolshevism and didn't understand that anarcho-syndicalism *was that alternative*¹⁸.

¹⁸ I recently read a lot of platformist documents published by North and South American groups. In many of these texts anarcho-syndicalism seems to be seen as a sort of radical version of unionism, but the *essence* of anarcho-syndicalism is missing, that is, the convergence of vertical (industrial) and horizontal (geographical) structures and activity. During its anarcho-syndicalist period, the French CGT (created in 1895), was precisely the fusion of the federation of unions and of the federation of "Bourses du Travail" (local structures grouping the unions on a geographical level – [Workers centers?]).

Two main things must be noted concerning the “Anarchist Synthesis”.

1. As it was conceived in 1928 by Sebastien Faure – distorting the idea of “synthesis” originally developed by Volin – a “synthesist” organization must include what Faure pointed out as the three schools of anarchism: the individualist, anarchist-communist, and syndicalist schools – all of them supposed to work together in harmony. In fact, the individualist school has so to speak disappeared today. I’ve personally never met any since the late 70s¹⁹. So what practically remains is an organization in which anarchist-communists and anarcho-syndicalists work together. In fact, this distinction strictly doesn’t matter any more. I never heard a comrade ask another comrade: “are you a libertarian communist or an anarcho-syndicalist?” The distinctions are gradually receding in the FA itself.

2. The tradition was that decisions were to be taken unanimously. I don’t know where this tradition comes from, but it’s like that. This system was not established because it was supposed to be “anarchist”, for I know for sure it did not exist before the “Fontenis affair”. I think it was established after, as a guarantee against a new Fontenis. This system still is valid today, theoretically if not in practice. Practically, it means that a decision might be taken if it is sufficiently vague, and of such a nature as to create a general agreement. But when you come to something practical, decision-making can be difficult or impossible because it inevitably creates all sorts of disagreements. Theoretically, one person opposing a decision can paralyze all decision-making.

Anarcho-syndicalism is precisely defined by the fact that it dedicates a great part of its activity to non-work-place problems: housing, schools, transports, culture, etc. Same thing with the Spanish CNT (created 1911): when the Spanish comrades created unions in a new place, they also created a “unión local”, a library, sometimes a school, etc. All this activity was strictly linked with the general activity of the CNT. Ignoring (deliberately or not) this “horizontal” activity of anarcho-syndicalism makes it naturally easy to criticize the absence of... horizontal activity. Practically, a really functioning anarcho-syndicalist organization – that is having a real “horizontal” activity –, would not only enter into competition with political parties, but also with “specific” anarchist organizations...

¹⁹ The only individualist anarchist I met, in the 70s, was a member of my CGT union, he paid his membership fees, came to the general assemblies, etc. and was *not* a member of the Fédération anarchiste!

Decision-making

Is the principle of unanimous decision-making a utopian vision? Can everyone really be united in a symbiotic, almost-mystical union? The question is certainly interesting from a psychoanalytical point of view. However, the arguments in favor of this system are not *totally* without consistency. This practice implies that the different viewpoints in presence be seriously debated and that their supporters take the time to argue for their opinions, thus avoiding a brutal vote where 51% win over 49%. To us, this type of decision appertains to the parliamentary system. Secondly, it requires that the different points of view make concessions so that an agreement can be reached on the broadest consensus.

Today, unanimous decision-making has been subjected to a serious relativisation in the Federation Anarchiste. After a thorough discussion, the oppositions content themselves with what we call a "friendly abstention", that is, they do not oppose the decision, but the groups opposed to the decision are not required to apply it. But even in that case, the non-application of decisions concern *very few people* because, as I said, a thorough debate has previously reached to a large consensus. So in this system, you never have 51% against 49% – which to me is a form of violence – but a *very small* number of persons disagreeing with everybody else.

I would add one essential thing. I have been a union militant in the labor movement for several decades, and proceeding to the "classical" majority vote in order to make a decision does not shock me more than that. However, my experience in the trade union movement *and* in the anarchist movement leads me to one conclusion: the majority vote is a system that is ideally suited to deal with current, ordinary, "everyday" issues. The unanimous vote, with the restriction of "friendly abstention", is ideal when it comes to discussing matters of principle.

For instance if a majority of members of the Federation Anarchiste decided to put up candidates for parliamentary elections, I suppose there would be at least *one* vote against it on behalf of anarchist principles. If this principle had prevailed in Fontenis' time, anarchists would not have stood for election next to a Stalinist assassin.

Moreover, those who are skeptical and surprised by the unanimous vote system don't need to make all a fuss about it, because it has a *natural limit*. This system can operate in an assembly of 50 or 100 individuals representing an organization of 400 members, for instance. But when the Fédération anarchiste reaches 100 000 members, I think it will be time to imagine another system...

The question in that case is to avoid clinging obstinately to a decision-making system that prevents the organization from growing.

The refusal to implement a decision with which one disagrees does not lead to inefficiency, and it is entirely consistent with libertarian federalism. I perfectly remember an interview of a member of Alternative libertaire where the autonomy of their local groups was acknowledged²⁰, so I assume they function the same way as we do. This is far away from the strict application of platformism...

It is in the State system of logic, of which Leninism is the most extreme form, that we see that. If you read Proudhon or Bakunin, you'll see that any structure adhering to a federal organization has the right to secede. Here, in this case, it is not secession but a simple disagreement, which is, by definition, not necessarily definitive.

We must keep in mind that the members of the organization have a minimum of sense of responsibility. It is a matter of confidence. Individuals or groups who disagree are not enemies. In an anarchist organization, we are still supposed to have a comprehensive and convergent general outlook. Otherwise, it is no use staying in the organization. This type of practice is quite at odds with what people are used to... but it does not mean that we are necessarily wrong. I think this system prevents the constitution of fractions within the FA, and reduces the risk of splitting. Fractions in an organization are as many mini-"political parties" who seek for a majority: it is the introduction of parliamentary system in the organization. With our system, I am convinced that in the long run, everyone wins.

It is in the Leninist system that the minority is obliged to implement decisions with which they disagree. It's pretty perverse, I think. Our system, in my opinion, has more efficiency. You rarely correctly apply a decision with which you disagree, especially when it is forced upon you. It's not a question of "authority" or "anti-authority", it is a simple, plain question of common sense. But it is certain that if people are constantly disagreeing on *everything, all the time*, they had better go somewhere else...

Such a thing did happen in the FA. About ten years ago, some groups have left, on matters of substantive disagreement – which is legitimate. But it never appeared as a split, with the devastating

²⁰ "We respect the autonomy of all local AL groups", says the Alternative Libertaire militant interviewed by the Nefac (above mentioned).

psychological effects that it implies. They simply de-federated themselves and formed groups that remained relatively marginal and local. Recently the possibility to negotiate their return was considered by the FA, and in this perspective was also contemplated the possibility to *reconsider synthesisism*. The question was raised within the FA but it finally was dropped because in fact these groups are either collapsing or shifting to Council Marxism.

I think the reducing distance between "classical" anarchism and platformism in France comes from the fact that decision-making in the FA has become clearer and more responsive.

The inability of the anarchist movement to take decisions was undoubtedly one of the reasons that motivated Makhno's and Arshinov's approach. Obviously, the other reason that motivated them, *90 years ago*, was that the libertarian movement of the time had appeared to them, with some exceptions, as a conglomeration of wacky anarcho-individualists, anarcho-vegetarians, anarcho-nudists, anarcho-this and anarcho-that. Right or wrong, they also regarded a great part of the anarchist movement as a bunch petty bourgeois, and they openly said they did not want to have anything to do with them. If instead of coming to France they had landed in Spain, there would never have been an "Arshinov platform". In Spain, it was not necessary... The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement would simply have absorbed them.

St. Imier: a great opportunity for debate

The meeting in St. Imier will provide a great opportunity for debate. There is nothing like a direct conversation to exchange views. Personal relationships that might develop are extremely important. There is no doubt that convergences could be considered, but we are skeptical about pompous and sententious initiatives, with great initial statements, press conferences and great closing statements. Practical and pragmatic initiatives, modest steps of which we can see the effects seem more realistic. We are suspicious of this form of artificial cohesion that seems to make things look square and monolithic while inside it cracks everywhere. It is essential that each group or organization keep its autonomy, which does not exclude a maximum of coordination. The circumstances to which the various libertarian organizations are confronted are extremely varied, much more, perhaps, than we can imagine. An international organization should first help explain this diversity.

I think it is about time the libertarian movement organized on an international level. I remain convinced that the “platformism” referred to by many groups outside of France is something which has been reviewed by local contexts, that it is not something dogmatic. The reference to the platform corresponds to the legitimate need to take distances from the most extravagant forms of anarchism, and probably in the first place from individualism and the refusal to organize.

It is of course no coincidence that the international gathering of St. Imier will take place at the same time as the congress of the International of anarchist federations. The coincidence of dates is intended to highlight the need for an international organization. The St. Imier gathering will give a great opportunity to discuss these questions. The French FA does not intend to interfere in the way the Canadian or Brazilian libertarians are organized, for example. We don’t care whether they are “platformists” or “synthesists”. The diversity of contexts justifies the diversity of approaches. But we ask the same understanding from others. However, if the anarchist movement in one particular country does not develop or recedes because of a permanent internal crisis, for instance, we can collectively wonder why and consider solutions.

Still, we all agree, however, on the fact that the working class, the working population as a whole, must organize autonomously in order to build a society without exploitation and oppression. It is time to imagine an organization that is not based on outdated dogmatic conceptions but on an uninhibited and open federalism.

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