

ABOUT “REVOLUTIONARY AFFINITIES: TOWARD A MARXIST ANARCHIST SOLIDARITY” BY OLIVIER BESANCENOT AND MICHAEL LÖWY

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PM Press is about to publish an English translation of Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy’s book: “Revolutionary Affinities: Toward a Marxist Anarchist Solidarity”.

This book provoked a certain number of reactions within the anarchist movement in France. Indeed, the idea of a dialogue, or of a rapprochement between Marxists and anarchists does arouse some reticence, no doubt on both sides, but especially among anarchists. However, the prospect of a dialogue is not absolutely rejected, provided that it is done on a sound and honest basis. Unfortunately, Besancenot & Löwy’s book does not offer these guarantees.

This is why I thought I should write a response to their book, which I entitled “Affinités non électives, pour un dialogue sans langue de bois entre marxistes et anarchistes” [Non-elective affinities, for a dialogue without political cant between Marxists and anarchists], Éditions du Monde libertaire/Éditions libertaires, 2015.

Here is the introduction (slightly revised) of the book, which is currently being translated.

Introduction

Olivier Besancenot and Michaël Löwy have published a book entitled “Revolutionary Affinities, Our Red and Black Stars” [*this is the French title*], which aims to highlight the

“alliances and solidarity between the two movements”. The two authors want, they say, “to shed light on this ignored side, often deliberately, which reveals the fraternity of their struggles.” This seems to me an excellent idea.

The present book is not, however, strictly speaking a response to *Revolutionary Affinities*: indeed, the mode of exposition of their ideas chosen by Besancenot & Löwy, at least in the historical part, does not allow for a response, because their argumentation is too allusive and vague, based on an extremely approximate presentation of the facts. This is why, rather than answering, I have simply chosen to address the same facts, the same questions, but in our own way: the reader will make up his or her own mind.

The reader can already get an idea of Besancenot & Löwy’s conception of “revolutionary affinities” by the presence of a full-page portrait of Marx, but no portrait of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin.

Each time Marxism is in crisis, Marxists choose between two attitudes, depending on the case:

1. To make people forget the concentrationary experiences of “real Marxism”, they go back and try to present themselves as “humanist” referring to Marx’s early texts, the “1844 Manuscripts”, forgetting that Marx had afterward categorically rejected humanism after Max Stirner’s scathing critique of it in 1845.

2. They try to give themselves a libertarian veneer, cosying up to the anarchists, telling them: “We are not so different as that”. So they rely on two documents that are historical falsifications: Marx’s *Civil War in France* (May 1871) and Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* (November 1917). The first is an opportunistic text written after the crushing of the Paris Commune – a text in which Marx pretends to adopt a federalist

approach, whereas he had always fiercely attacked federalism: Marx hated federalism because he saw it as a political form that was a relic of the Middle Ages. On several occasions he insulted his correspondents by calling them “federalists”.

The second book, written at a time when Lenin needed the support of the Russian anarchists, does not give an inch of what he really thinks but gives the superficial reader the impression of the opposite. Many French anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists, when the book was published, believed that Lenin was an anarchist.

The crisis that revolutionary Marxism is going through today is a collateral effect of the crisis of Marxism in general. The collapse of the USSR deprived many people of a model, which they eventually realized was not perfect, but a model nonetheless; hence the thesis of the “degenerate workers’ state” dear to the Trotskyists, which eventually fizzled out, as did the idea that world revolution was within reach because, we were told, “the productive forces” had “ceased to grow”. In short, the Soviet Union had to make a *political* revolution, not a *social* revolution: replace the bureaucrats with real revolutionaries (Trotskyites, if possible).

It is true that the loss of Marxist hegemony may have been a factor allowing for dialogue. This fact is particularly visible, in practice, by the libertarian militants of the CGT [*the historical union confederation in France*], for example; but the greater tolerance in favour of anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism is also the consequence of the “crisis of militancy” which means that what remains of the communist nuclei in the Confederation are forced to be less picky. But this can also be seen in the theory, as Tomás Ibáñez points out:

“This recent opening of Marxism to anarchism probably responds to the fact that the last five or six

decades have proved more devastating for some of their presuppositions than for those of the anarchists.”

It is true that many libertarians may have thought after the collapse of the USSR that the anarchist movement would finally be able to express itself, to develop. Communism, which had provided the popular masses with an illusory bright future, had often been designated by anarchists, conveniently enough, as the main obstacle to the development of their movement. Now that the Soviet Union had been definitively brought down, the way was open, it was thought, for the development of a real anarchist alternative to capitalism.

However, it must be noted that the confidential nature of anarchism persists, even though it has maintained historical continuity in many countries, even in Latin America, where it suffered terrible repression during the period of the dictatorships. It was not until the current period that anarchist groups appeared in regions of the world such as Northern Africa or the Near East. This means that anarchists have yet to analyse why the collapse of Soviet communism has benefited their movement so little, if at all.

On the whole, we can assume that the left-wing social democrats – the Trotskyists – have understood today that they will never again take over the Winter Palace; and that the libertarians have understood that they will never again reactivate the collectivisations of 1936-39 in Spain. While many militants of both currents have long lived in a delirium of identification with their respective models, I think it's fair to say that this period is definitely over.

The different varieties of revolutionary Marxism, especially Trotskyism, have tried to adapt. In some ways, the Trotskyists have adapted better to the new times than the anarchists. They

went back to their original model: they became social-democratic, but one or two notches further left than “ordinary” social democracy. They have become somewhat mired in parliamentary politics: like Marx, they think that there is no politics except in participation in the electoral game, they think that the revolutionary movement is only “visible” through its participation in electoral campaigns, even if it is not visible in Parliament itself. We often hear activists complaining that their activity is only defined by the electoral deadlines. Once an election is over, it is necessary to prepare for the next one.

When Marx reproached the federalists of the IWA for their “apolitism”, he was in fact reproaching them for their refusal of parliamentary action, which in his eyes was the only conceivable form of political action. Of course, today’s revolutionary Marxists say that they only stand for election to make their voices heard, to make propaganda. It is worth noting that at first, the social democrats of the 19th century all said that participation in parliamentary elections was only a means of propaganda.

The anarchists, on the other hand, were unable or unwilling to redevelop the anarcho-syndicalist model on a large scale, which only partially resurfaced on the occasion of major social movements such as May 68. The supremacy of the social-democratic model, or even the collaborationist model involving “social partners”, seriously hinders any prospect of emancipation and finding an exit from capitalism. One exception, however: Spain (again!). An anarcho-syndicalist organisation has been reconstituted there – after the death of Franco and after undergoing serious internal crises – bringing together today about 60,000 workers, which is still impressive in today’s context, but has nothing to do with the scale of the movement before the civil war.

Responding to Besancenot & Löwy presents a real methodological difficulty because their book is a long series of

decontextualised approximations, hollow assertions and watered-down facts in order to be able to present the illusion of affinities between Marxism and anarchism at all costs.

“Revolutionary Affinities” seeks to soften criticism of anarchism, blunt differences – which is disconcerting for us, as we are not used to it! But their book also seeks (above all, I would say) to attenuate the responsibility of the communists in all the episodes in which they used repression against the working class – and there, they are exasperating.

Kronstadt? Oh, yes, it was a “mistake and a fault”, but there was no choice, it was that or open the door to reaction – a perfectly debatable claim. The satisfaction of the demands of the Kronstadt sailors (which included equality of food rations between Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks...) would not have provoked an influx of reaction, but on the contrary an extension of the revolutionary dynamic in the whole of Russia, and the slightest attempt by reaction, internal or otherwise, would have been met with a mass uprising comparable to that of February 1792 in France. But it is certain that the Bolshevik party would then have lost its monopoly of power. This was to be avoided at all costs.

There were periods when the two currents – anarchists and communists – collaborated. And it was more often the anarchists who collaborated with the communists than the other way round. There are also many interrelations on the theoretical level, often ignored by both sides. In fact, it is impossible to answer Besancenot & Löwy because reading their book is like entering a thick fog. It is extremely frustrating to be forced to devote ten pages of contextualisation to ten lines of vague approximations or absurdities. The only conceivable attitude, in response to “Revolutionary Affinities”, is not to take up their approximations point by point but to oppose them with another vision of history, our own.

Just one example: in the chapter on the Russian Revolution, we read: “In October 1917, the soviets, having become aware of their own strength, supplanted the institutional power and seized power.” Such a statement is totally false. Moreover, two pages later we learn that “the insurrection, organised by the Bolsheviks, handed over (*sic*) power to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets”... It is somewhat contradictory: either the Soviets seized power, or were handed over the power.

In fact, what happened was that the soviets had decided to take power on the occasion of their Second Congress, on 25 October. But even though the Bolsheviks were in a good position in many of the soviets, Lenin was obsessed with the fact that the Bolsheviks absolutely had to take power *before* the Congress of Soviets did. Lenin’s correspondence at this time is full of letters in which he reviled party members who challenged this strategy. All of this is perfectly verifiable.

Some of the issues discussed in “Revolutionary Affinities” are, in my view, of little interest. I will only focus on the questions I consider essential. The “Letter to Louise Michel”, although moving, is not very important in the debate, except to show that Besancenot is in one way or another personally linked, through his grandmother, to the mythical figure of the Commune. This does not create any “affinity” with anarchism. Besancenot seems to be used to referring to his grandmother, since he mentioned her during a trip to Mexico. The same goes for the other characters mentioned in the chapter “Portraits”, whose only purpose, in my opinion, is to find connections between Marxism and anarchism where there are none: Rosa Luxembourgh hated anarchists, Pierre Monatte had long since disavowed anarchism when he joined the Communist Party in 1923, after having betrayed revolutionary syndicalism.

Moreover, to draw the blanket of Emma Goldman and Durruti towards Marxism requires a great deal of imagination: the only interest that these two characters can have from the

Marxist point of view is that the former was for a time fooled by the illusion of Bolshevism (although she very vigorously rectified this when she understood the nature of the regime), and that the latter provides (through the “Friends of Durutti”) an opportunity to criticise the Spanish CNT.

As for “Subcomandante Marcos”, I think that Besancenot is not vindictive, because when he went to Mexico in December 2008 for the “World Festival of Rage”, the Zapatistas made it clear that he was not welcome in Chiapas because he had participated in a meeting with the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), a left-wing party, member of the Socialist International, which the Zapatistas consider to be one of their enemies because, along with other “major” parties, it has always supported state repression against indigenous and popular revolts.

Who is the audience for *Revolutionary Affinities*? The level of argument is very basic: the book does not seek to demonstrate, but to assert a certain number of things that are supposed to indicate that there is a possible understanding between anarchists and Trotskyists (but are the militants of the NPA Trotskyists?).

It seems obvious to me that Besancenot & Löwy are addressing an audience that emerged from the vast social movements of the 1990s that developed practices described as “libertarian”: assemblies, refusal of parties and union hierarchies, anti-globalisation, etc. The important extension of protest movements organising themselves in a “horizontal” way and opposed to their recuperation by political parties are perhaps also a “target” of “*Revolutionary Affinities*”. Perhaps also a fringe of militants of the organised anarchist movement, in particular those of *Alternative Libertaire*, are targeted. But perhaps their book has an internal function in the complex workings of the tendencies that run through the NPA.

Tomas Ibanez rightly speaks of “extramural anarchism” to refer to the “huge anti-globalisation protests in the early 2000s or in the May 15, 2011 movement when it began, or in Occupy Wall Street, or in Istanbul’s Taksim Square. In all of these movements, which it would be highly improper to label as anarchist, one could distinguish anti-hierarchical principles, non-authoritarian practices, horizontal forms of organisation, and also the use of direct action, hostility towards the exercise of power, and distrust of any kind of avant-gardism.”

In short, “real things” happen outside all “official” revolutionary organisations, including anarchist ones, and it is there that you have to recruit the troops of tomorrow’s revolutionary organisation, in the same way that the communists of the 1920s went to look in the trade union movement for recruits for the party.

The argument of “Revolutionary Affinities” remains constantly at the level of elementary political discourse, accessible to a public whose political training does not allow it to have a critical view of their discourse. Having a low level of political culture is clearly not condemnable in itself: what is condemnable is to manipulate people in this situation.

The book helps to spread a deliberately distorted view of the relationship between anarchism and Marxism to a defenceless public, when there is so much that could be said that is interesting and stimulating. A lot could be said about the genesis and theoretical interrelations between these two currents: the problem is that on this terrain, Marxism is very indebted to anarchism, and I’m not sure that Besancenot & Löwy are so keen to expand on this.