

## **Comments on *Black Flame*. —**

### ***Was Kropotkin a revolutionary syndicalist?***

In a letter to “comrade Taiyi”, Bajin quotes a sentence from Kropotkin: “a bomb is worth more than a hundred thousand books”.<sup>1</sup> These words are probably apocryphal, but, as we say in French, one lends only to the rich. This other sentence, published in December 1880 in *Le Révolté*, is however perfectly authentic: anarchism is defined as “Permanent revolt by word, writing, dagger, rifle, dynamite [...], everything is good for us, which is not legal”<sup>2</sup>

In *La Révolte*<sup>3</sup> of March 18, 1891, Kropotkin reported the resounding failure of the “insurrectionalist” strategy and wrote: “a building based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed with a few kilograms of explosives”. So it took Kropotkin ten years to realize that a few pounds of explosives couldn’t destroy the capitalist system. He discovered that “the revolution, first and foremost, is a popular movement”. Is it necessary to specify that Bakunin had made this statement well before him? Kropotkin had never taken his distances with terrorism as long as it aroused some interest in the anarchist movement.

Unlike Bakunin, Kropotkin was not an organizer of the labour movement, nor a strategist. He eventually gave up propaganda by the deed as implemented by the “insurrectionalists”, and rallied to the idea of acting within the labour movement, but it is not the result of a particularly brilliant anticipation of the situation: he only followed the general movement.

Une telle attitude était généralement dominante dans le mouvement anarchiste : l'Internationale anti-autoritaire était une référence théorique

---

1 Letter to “comrade Taiyi”, in “Anarchisme et terrorisme”, *À Contretemps*, Bulletin de critique bibliographique n°45, mars 2013.

2 *Le Révolté*, 25 december 1880, quoted by Jean Maitron. It is not absolutely certain Kropotkin wrote these words, but they were in a publication of which he was responsible.

3 *Le Révolté* (The Revolted) changed its name into *La Révolte* (The Revolt) to avoid a fine. This paper took in some way the succession of the Bulletin of the Jurassic Federation of the IWA, but developed directions quite contrary to those of the AIT.

incontournable, même si ceux qui s'y référaient s'en écartaient dans la pratique. Kropotkine omet toutefois de mentionner que lorsque son journal, *Le Revolté*, a pris le relais du Bulletin de la Fédération jurassienne, il a développé des thèmes qui n'avaient rien à voir avec le syndicalisme car il tolérait le terrorisme. Il omet également de mentionner que le Congrès de Londres de 1881, qui était censé être un congrès de l'IWA mais n'était rien d'autre que cela, n'a produit que la légitimation du terrorisme et de l'insurrectionnalisme, deux orientations par définition opposées au syndicalisme. Kropotkine avait une mémoire sélective.

Of course Kropotkin was not indifferent to the workers' movement since he had long been a diligent chronicler of social struggles in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, but his vision of trade unionism was a hundred miles from revolutionary syndicalism. Now that a movement of rejection of terrorism was emerging, especially among syndicalists, Kropotkin writes that "we must be with the people, who no longer call for isolated acts, but for men of action in their ranks"; he advocates "monster unions, including millions of proletarians against the thousands and millions of gold of the exploiters"<sup>4</sup>. Such remarks authorize the editor of the article "Kropotkin" of the *Grande Encyclopédie Larousse* (Great Larousse Encyclopedia) to write that the Russian revolutionary "appears as one of the precursors of revolutionary syndicalism, which, a few years later and for a long time, would strongly mark the labour movement. with, among others, men like Émile Pouget and Fernand Pelloutier". A point of view that coincides with that of Schmidt and van der Walt, who believe that Kropotkin was a supporter of syndicalism: "The key figures in defining anarchism and syndicalism were, however, Bakunin (1814–1876), and Pyotr Kropotkin (1842–1921)", can we read in *Black Flame* (p. 9)<sup>5</sup> – a very questionable assertion as far as Kropotkin is concerned.

It is obviously absurd to imagine that men like Fernand Pelloutier or Émile Pouget had to wait until Kropotkin to discover revolutionary syndicalism. First of all because Kropotkin, like Malatesta, like Sorel and many others, had only a perfectly abstract knowledge of what syndicalism

---

4 *La Révolte*, 27 septembre 1890, cité par J. Maitron, *op. cit.* p. 246 et sq.

5 See also *Black Flame*: "If classical Marxism had Marx and Engels, anarchism and syndicalism were above all shaped by two towering figures, Bakunin and Kropotkin." (p.14) "Moreover, the vast majority of people described in the literature as 'anarchist communists' or 'anarcho-communists' championed syndicalism, including Kropotkin" (p. 19), etc.

was; Secondly because trade unionism as well as syndicalism is a class movement that emerged from the very depths of the working class itself. Of course it was observed *ex post* and then theorized by intellectuals who were for absolutely nothing in the formation of the movement. I am even tempted to say that Sorel had a better knowledge of syndicalism than Kropotkin in that he was regularly in contact with syndicalist leaders during the short period during which he was interested in the movement.

Émile Pouget had not waited for Kropotkin to join the trade union movement for as soon as 1879 he participated in the creation of a union of textile employees. As for Pelloutier, he had been elected deputy secretary of the “Fédération des bourses du travail” in 1894, and secretary the following year, and he strongly condemned anarchist terrorism.

Kropotkin can be credited with having advocated the entry of anarchists into the trade union movement, but those of the anarchist (and not only anarchists) who founded revolutionary syndicalism had not awaited his injunction. Moreover, among the anarchist militants present in the trade union movement, not all of them were syndicalists, there were also some who were simply anarchists *and* trade unionists, like Luigi Bertoni. The initial hostility shown by many anarchists towards trade unions is the legacy of the fracture that occurred within the IWA at the time of its disappearance: that was when anarchism was formed, which was first and foremost a current opposed to organisation and trade union activity.

The model which Kropotkin refers to is obviously the British trade union model, that is, very large unions with millions of workers. Such a perspective has nothing to do with revolutionary syndicalism. If the syndicalist model did not neglect the need to organize as many workers as possible, this was not its essential characteristic. All that can be said is that if Kropotkin “championed” the entry of the anarchists into the unions, there is nothing in the articles he wrote on the labour movement that can justify the idea that he advocated revolutionary syndicalism strictly speaking. The ecumenical vision of Schmidt and van der Walt leads them to call “revolutionary syndicalist” any anarchist advocating the use of trade unions. But syndicalism *can by no means be reduced to that*. One never finds in Kropotkin, except once, in a very circumstantial way (nor in Malatesta, for that matter) the basic idea of syndicalism according to which the workers' class organization, which is today a tool of daily struggle, constitutes the foundation of tomorrow's social organization.

And as if to counter Schmidt and van der Walt saying that anarchism and syndicalism coincide, Kropotkin's even minimalist statements in favour

of trade unionism aroused extremely hostile reactions in the anarchist movement – a fact that Schmidt and van der Walt do not mention. The press of the French anarchist movement reports that meetings were organized “to discuss the conduct to be held vis-à-vis trade unions, seek the simplest and most logical way to demonstrate their danger and the new source of authoritarianism that results”<sup>6</sup>...

Such initiatives were far from isolated. The account of an anarchist meeting tells us that “a companion has dealt with the question of trade unions. He has shown that they can not serve the economic emancipation of the worker”. The speaker admits, however, that they can be useful to “intellectual emancipation, because they are a meeting place where every worker can look for ways to stop the misery he falls prey to”<sup>7</sup>. The union was perceived as “propaganda space”, not as a tool for the struggle.

A report from the French police dated 23 October 1890 confirms this rejection of trade unionism. Here is what we read:

“... Numerous protests were heard; they cried out for betrayal. Individual or collective letters, very lively in tone, were sent to the newspaper. Some also came from abroad...”<sup>8</sup>

Such reactions were clearly not limited to France. A Brazilian historian, Edilene Toledo, tells us that “the anarchists involved in the revolutionary syndicalist movement were very harshly criticized by a large part of the anarchist movement.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the activity of the anarchists in the trade union movement was only marginally accepted by the bulk of the militants, at least for a time – which Schmidt and van der Walt seem to ignore. I say “at least for a time”, for another police report issued 10 years later showed that the situation had completely changed.

These protests against union activity are indicative of the degree of disaffection of part of the anarchist movement of the time towards the labour movement. Of course, such reactions can not incriminate the entire anarchist movement: indeed, many anarchists had already been involved in the labour movement, often for a long time. But we see that the anarchist movement was unable to have any coherent strategy towards the working

---

6 *La Révolte*, juillet 1891, cité par Maitron, p. 266.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Cité par Jean Maitron, tome I, p. 266.

9 «...os anarquistas engajados no movimento sindicalista revolucionário receberam duríssimas críticas de grande parte do mundo anarquista. » Toledo, p. 51.

class: to speak of syndicalism as the “strategy” of the anarchist movement is therefore completely inaccurate. Schmidt and van der Walt mislead their readers and completely obscure the fact that part of the international anarchist movement – including Spain – was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, vigorously hostile to trade unionism. It was not until 1907 that the Spanish anarchist movement decided to invest in the trade union movement, after spending 20 years trying to destroy it. (See further: “Spanish exceptionalism?”)

In 1890 Kropotkin was in favour of the constitution of great unions on the British model. In 1898, as revolutionary syndicalism began to impose itself in France, he distanced himself from terrorism. According to him the union was a tool of propaganda, but could in no way be a prefiguration of the future society: but this idea of “prefiguration” is the very backbone of syndicalism, which leads me to say that Kropotkin might have “championed” trade-unionism, but was in no way a precursor of revolutionary syndicalism. The idea that the union was an organ of struggle against the capitalist system today, and that tomorrow it will be the basis of the reorganization of the emancipated society, is the foundation, the *heart* of the syndicalist doctrine.

All this is quite natural, for Kropotkin’s political construction was based on the idea that society was to be organized around loosely federated autonomous municipalities. Kropotkin is therefore *not at all* in the perspective of revolutionary syndicalism; on the contrary, he perfectly aligns himself with the traditional anarchist-communist positions (OK for the unions, but just for anarchist propaganda) and is not distinguished on this point from Malatesta. He was not hostile to trade unionism, but his writings are particularly silent about revolutionary syndicalism, strictly speaking, or its militants.

At the London Socialist Congress (1896), which resulted in the definitive expulsion of the anarchists from the Second International, there were a large number of delegates (including Pelloutier) who had been excluded from the previous congress as anarchists, but who had returned with union mandates. In other words, they had been ejected by the door but they had come back through the window. This operation was done with the help of Malatesta, who lived in London. Jacques Julliard informs us that Pelloutier was then “in close correspondence with Kropotkin and Malatesta in London”, but it is not known if it was only a circumstantial fact on the

occasion of the Socialist Congress<sup>10</sup>. In any case, Julliard's book on Pelloutier makes little reference to Kropotkin. In the anarcho-communist circles of the time, in France anyway, some anarchists reproached Pelloutier for having diverted militants from the "specific" activity. In the notes he wrote to Kropotkin's letter of March 5, 1902 (published in 1925) Max Nettlau speaks of these militants who believed themselves "in possession of the syndicalist panacea" and bitterly evokes "the complete change of attitude of so many anarchists as soon as 1895<sup>11</sup>, they saw all these unions inspired by the spirit of Fernand Pelloutier"<sup>12</sup> – an affirmation that suggests that *anarchism* had become the strategy of syndicalism, rather than the contrary...

An examination of Kropotkin's writings shows that he did not neglect the importance of the workers' struggles, which he regularly reported in the anarchist press. However, the workers' struggles, the trade union action, remain somewhat anecdotal, confined to his journalistic activity; they do not provide the elements of strategic thinking, as is the case for Bakunin. One can easily imagine what Bakunin's reaction would have been if he had lived twenty years longer and witnessed the birth of revolutionary syndicalism.

In the above mentioned letter to Max Nettlau, Kropotkin writes:

"... I have always – from the *Bulletin jurassien* to *La Révolte* – preached active participation in the workers' movement, the revolutionary workers' movement. Lately, I was leafing through my collection of *La Révolte*. Well, in each issue I found one and often two articles about the revolutionary workers' movement. So, for *La Révolte*, at least, we cannot say that we have changed. Is it Pouget you are speaking about, who publishes *La Voix du peuple* instead of [*Le Père Peinard*]? Well, he is perfectly right if, after having worked on the development of the idea, he works to spread it, to bring anarchist and revolutionary ideas into the milieu which alone will one day take the gun to make the revolution."

---

10 Jacques Julliard, *Fernand Pelloutier et les Origines du syndicalisme*, Le Seuil, 1971.

11 The date of 1895 probably does not refer to the founding of the CGT but to the accession of Pelloutier to the head of the "Fédération des Bourses du travail".

12 Letter of Kropotkin to Max Nettlau, 5 March 1925.  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-review-of-social-history/article/une-lettre-inedite-de-pierre-kropotkine-a-max-nettlau/5FB48599EA812C6A5D39339298AF605E>

Leafing through a collection of newspapers and seeing articles written about the workers' movement is not enough to make a revolutionary syndicalist. In this passage, Kropotkin places himself from a strictly anarchist-communist point of view: the union is used to make propaganda. There is no hint that the union is the basic unit of the future society – *which is precisely what defines syndicalism*.

After publishing between 1889 and 1900 an anarchist weekly in Paris slang, Émile Pouget had taken responsibility for *La Voix du peuple* (the Voice of the People), the great weekly organ of the CGT, from 1 December 1900 onward. Again, Kropotkin sees nothing else in the publication of the weekly paper of a trade union confederation than the opportunity to make anarchist propaganda.

But let us return to the two paragraphs of Max Nettlau I quoted: he says that Kropotkin "was a true anarchist", and that anarchists must "remain as theoreticians, instead of being absorbed by a practical effort that will only serve a small part of the workers". In short, anarchists must confine themselves to the realm of theory and not compromise themselves with practice. This sentence strangely reminds me of Malatesta, who advocated that anarchists engage in trade union activity – because after all, that is where the workers were – but under the condition that the anarchists should not get bogged in practice: "if it is really necessary to compromise, to give in, to come to impure contacts with authority and bosses so that the organisation lives or because the union members feel the need or because it is their will, so be. *But let others do it, not the anarchists.*"<sup>13</sup>

In other words, anarchists must join trade unions to make anarchist propaganda but not to take on mandates! As if workers would give the slightest credit to speech providers who do not want to get their hands dirty and who refuse to get involved in practical matters! In addition to the fact that Malatesta's attitude strangely resembles religious hypocrisy ("impure contacts"), it literally leads to giving way to other political currents in the unions.

---

13 Malatesta, *Pensiero e Volontà*, 16 avril 1925, in : *Malatesta, Écrits choisis*, III, Anancy, Groupe 1er Mai, 1982, p. 14. It is true that Malatesta sometimes says the opposite: "In recent years, we have approached the various avant-garde parties for practical action and have always come off badly. Do we have to isolate ourselves from impure contacts, and not move or try to move except when we can do so with our own strength and in the name of our integral program? I do not think so." (*Rivoluzione et lotta quotidiana*, 6. L'alluvione fascista. [www.liberliber.it](http://www.liberliber.it). But this quote does not refer to the trade union struggle but to activity as "specific" anarchists.

Max Nettlau, who was in regular correspondence with Kropotkin, gives in his *History of Anarchy* some indications on his relationship with trade unionism (Nettlau speaks of *trade unionism*, not syndicalism):

“Kropotkin's trade union sympathies are greatly exaggerated. He was a true anarchist, which implied sympathies for all progress in freedom (voluntary association) and in solidarity (communist cooperation) and for the creation of revolutionary forces (the proletariat organizing and rebelling). But knowing the authoritarian habits of the masses, their penetration and impulsion by libertarian militants - in the sense of the Alliance in the international - seemed necessary to him. The militants like Pelloutier, Pouget and their friends did nothing else. The political socialists and moderates had inspired the trade unions after the crushing of the revolutionaries of the International, from 1871 to 1892. Seeing the libertarians acquire supremacy in them, Kropotkin had great satisfaction, and in January 1898, on his return from the United States, for example, he greeted three movements that already existed in germ: the federation of the unions taking the factories and production into their hands; the cooperatives that would make the distribution and the municipality that would take the land, the houses, etc. for the needs of its members. But he also recognized that the socialists, the anarchists, were right to remain as theoreticians, instead of being absorbed by a practical effort that will only serve a small part of the workers.” (Nettlau, my translation from *La Anarquía a través de los tiempos, Barcelona 1933* [Short History of Anarquism])

The Spanish text which was used as a basis for the English translation refers to "sindicalismo", i. e. "trade unionism". The English translation incorrectly refers to "syndicalism", in other words, "revolutionary syndicalism". In fact this quote from Nettlau does not refer to Kropotkin's supposed "revolutionary syndicalist sympathies" but to his "trade unionist sympathies".<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Nettlau's quoted passage essentially says that Kropotkin's sympathies towards trade unionism are exaggerated because, beyond trade unionism, there is something else. Nettlau is absolutely right because he refers to *trade unionism*. Yet precisely this “other thing” (voluntary association, communist cooperation and

---

14 I refer to the Spanish text (1933) which served as the basis for the French translation.

revolutionary forces) is the foundation of revolutionary syndicalism (and anarcho-syndicalism).

In a sample of 17 texts (see list below<sup>15</sup>), the term “CGT” does not appear once, the word “union” appears several times in the sense of employers’ union (“The conquest of bread” and “The War” ), of governmental union (“Fatality of the revolution”) or agricultural union (“The State – its historical role”); in one text it appears in the usual sense of trade union (*Autour d’une vie*: 3 occurrences) but in very general considerations. The name of Emile Pouget appears twice in *Autour d’une vie*, when Kropotkin describes their common problems with justice; that of Pelloutier and Monatte<sup>16</sup> not once. Yet one would have thought that Pelloutier, one of the most important organizers of the Labor exchange federation (Fédération des Bourses du travail), would have caught the attention of Kropotkin. Kropotkin, however, refers to “our comrade Pouget” in the 1919 introduction to the Russian edition of *Paroles d’un revolté*. The old revolutionary makes an allusion to Pouget in *the Conquest of Bread*, a book in which he stressed that the social revolution will primarily be “the question of bread for all”. In this writing of 1919, he comments:

“It was only many years later, when the trade union movement began to take root in France, that another writing appeared on the same subject. Our comrade Pouget described in his book *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (How We Will Make the Revolution), how a social revolution could be accomplished in France under the direction of the labour unions; how not expecting anything from those who would not fail to seize power, the workers’ unions and congresses would be able to expropriate the capitalists and organize production on new bases without, for that, allowing production stoppages. It is clear that only the workers and their organizations can achieve this goal; and although I disagree with Pouget on certain details, I confidently recommend this book to all those who understand that humanity is unquestionably on the

---

15 *Autour d’une vie*; *Aux jeunes gens*; *Communisme et Anarchie*; *Fatalité de la Révolution*; *L’Action anarchiste dans la révolution*; *L’Anarchie - Sa philosophie - Son idéal*; *L’Esprit de révolte*; *L’État - son rôle historique*; *L’Organisation de la Vindicté - appelée Justice*; *La Commune*; *La Commune de Paris*; *La Conquête du pain*; *La Grande Révolution*; *La Guerre*; *La Loi et l’Autorité*; *La Morale anarchiste*; *La révolution sera-t-elle collectiviste*; *Le Principe Anarchiste*; *Le Salarial*.

16 Pierre Monatte was born in 1881. Kropotkine died in 1921.

threshold of social reconstruction.”<sup>17</sup>

Kropotkin’s only allusion to revolutionary syndicalism (still without naming it explicitly ...) is therefore in a review of a book by Pouget.

One has the impression that Schmidt and van der Walt play on the confusion between the French word “syndicalisme” – which is the English “trade unionism”, and “syndicalisme révolutionnaire” which equates to the English “syndicalism”. But saying that Kropotkin (or Malatesta) “championed” syndicalism is utterly wrong: they “championed” trade unionism, not syndicalism: they “championed” trade unionism as a space in which the anarchists could make propaganda.

So when Schmidt and van der Walt say that “the vast majority of people described in the literature as ‘anarchist communists’ or ‘anarcho-communists’ championed syndicalism” (p. 124), we are entitled to wonder if they have the slightest idea of what revolutionary syndicalism is.

\* \* \* \* \*

In Russia an extremely radical communist anarchist trend had developed which opposed Kropotkin’s analysis of the 1905 revolution. Relying on Paul<sup>18</sup>, Schmidt and van der Walt write that “Kropotkin published a newspaper called *Kleb i Volya* (Bread and Freedom) to be distributed in Russia to fight the ‘anarcho-communist’ trend by promoting syndicalism. He thought that revolutionary unions were ‘absolutely necessary.’”<sup>19</sup> The authors of *Black Flame* conclude that Kropotkin (and others) “embraced syndicalism.” And in a note, they specify: “It is not an illusion to speak of a revolutionary syndicalist Kropotkin”. Here again there is a confusion between trade unionism and revolutionary trade syndicalism, and this confusion misleads the reader.

---

17 Kropotkin, *Paroles d'un révolté*, postface à l'édition russe.

18 Paul Avrich, *Les Anarchistes russes*, éd. François Maspéro for the French edition.

19 *Black Flame*, p. 126, footnote.

In an article for young Russian anarchists ("The Russian Union", August-September 1905), Kropotkin advised anarchists and socialists to create independent unions, even if they were small, which contrasted with his former references to the British model of big, mass trade unions<sup>20</sup>. Yet in October, he opted for a kind of political determinism and wrote that the formation of trade unions would be achieved anyway and that anarchists would waste their energy by being involved in them. Kropotkin then made a double observation:

a) Individualists, currents opposed to organization and in favour of expropriations dominated,

b) Anarchists (those who were not individualists, opposed to organization and in favour of expropriations, one might think) "considered trade unions as embryonic cells (*yacheika*) of future social reconstruction" (Nettlau, p. 255).

As a result, in the Russian newspaper in London (October 1906-July 1907) and in other publications, he spoke out in favour of trade union activity.

So in the context of the 1905 revolution in Russia, Kropotkin advocated the use of unions as a "default option", so to speak, in order to counter the positions of an anarchist group that opposed his positions. Unionism was therefore *a strategy against anarchism!* Moreover, Schmidt and van der Walt omit part of the quotation from Avrich, who adds that "Kropotkin did not feel for them [*the unions*] the fascination of his young followers, but declared himself ready to give them support"<sup>21</sup>.

So we have a "revolutionary syndicalist Kropotkin" who felt "no fascination" for the unions and who "declared himself ready to give them support". In my opinion there is not enough substance to promote Kropotkin to the rank of theorist of revolutionary syndicalism...

---

20 "In practice, a question arises: must anarchists join existing unions or create new ones, on anarchist bases? Before giving an answer to this question, we would like to check the impressions on the results of the local activity centres in Russia. We believe, however, that wherever possible anarchists should create new anarchist unions, who could establish federal relations with other professional unions. Where there are trade unions without political party influence, anarchists should enter them." (Reports read at the Congress of Anarcho-communists, October 1906)], London,[No publisher], 1907, pp.11-13). (See: [http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine\\_les\\_anarchistes\\_et\\_les\\_syndicats-2.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine_les_anarchistes_et_les_syndicats-2.pdf))

21 *Op. cit.*

Editor of one of the most read anarchist newspapers, a newspaper claiming the legacy of the IWA, Kropotkin actually endorsed all the excesses of the anarchist movement, went downwind; and if, in his books, he endeavoured to “collect the symptoms which on all sides presage the advent of a new era, the germination of new forms of social life,”<sup>22</sup> unlike Bakunin he never constituted a pole of regroupement of the movement around whom could have been elaborated, in terms of organization and strategy, an alternative to the centrifugal drifts of the anarchist movement of the time. anarchist

The anarchist writers of this period were far behind men like Proudhon for theory or Bakunin for strategy.

\* \* \* \* \*

In April 1907 a controversy had opposed, in several issues of *Les Temps nouveaux*, Marc Pierrot, a “specific” anarchist, and Hubert Lagardelle – a controversy of which Kropotkin found himself in the position of arbitrator<sup>23</sup>. The interest of this debate is that it shows how anarchists and left-wing socialists viewed their relationship with anarchism. Marc Pierrot was not initially hostile to trade unionism, but later developed a serious opposition to it. Lagardelle, on his side, was one of those revolutionary syndicalists of Marxist formation who considered that Marx was the

---

22 Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*.

23 Hubert Lagardelle began a career as a journalist, created the Marxist magazine *La Jeunesse socialiste* (1895). In 1896, he joined Jules Guesde's (Marxist) French Workers Party. Then he founded *Le Mouvement socialiste* (1899-1914), a theoretical review of socialism, then of revolutionary syndicalism, which remains a reference in the history of French socialism. Lagardelle was influenced by the theories of Proudhon, Marx and Georges Sorel. A socialist activist, he frequented the leaders of the CGT and contributed to the formation of revolutionary trade unionist ideology in the years 1904-1908. In the 1910s, disappointed by the evolution of the CGT, he retired to Toulouse. Like other former revolutionary trade unionists or members of the left wing of the workers movement (Gustave Hervé and Georges Valois in France, Mussolini in Italy), Hubert Lagardelle was tempted by fascism. In 1926, he joined the Toulouse section of the Faisceau of Georges Valois, the first French fascist party.

founder of this current<sup>24</sup> !

At a public meeting involving Griffuelhes, Michels, Arturo Labriola, and Kritchevsky<sup>25</sup>, and later in *Les Temps Nouveaux*<sup>26</sup>, Lagardelle denied that the trade union movement dated back to before 1900-1901, reducing Pelloutier to a precursor. He argued that revolutionary syndicalism was essentially Marxist and had no connection with anarchism. He literally took the opposite view of Pierrot's and of certain anarchists of the time, who thought that "all conceptions which are the very expression of revolutionary syndicalism" had been "propagated mainly by anarchist comrades"<sup>27</sup>. It clearly did not occur to anyone that revolutionary syndicalism was nobody's invention but the natural product of the working class placed in a given context.

Lagardelle had tried to call upon Kropotkin as a witness and to oppose him to the trade union movement by referring to the Russian revolutionary's refusal to write the preface of "Les Anarchistes et les syndicats" (The Anarchists and the Unions), a pamphlet of the "Étudiants socialistes révolutionnaires internationalistes" (Socialist Revolutionary Internationalist Students) published in 1898. This pamphlet invited the anarchists to join the unions. Lagardelle wanted to show that the anarchists were opposed to the contents of this pamphlet. He wrote:

“This pseudo-syndicalist pamphlet was blamed by the anarchists.

---

24 « Syndicalistes et anarchistes », debate between Hubert Lagardelle and Marc Pierrot  
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article505>

25 The public meeting took place on April 3, 1907. The texts were published in 1908 (*Syndicalisme et socialisme*, M. Rivière, Paris).

26 H. Lagardelle, « Syndicalistes et Anarchistes », in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 27 avril 1907. (Réponse à M. Pierrot, Anarchistes et syndicalistes, in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 13 avril 1907.)

27 « Syndicalistes et anarchistes », *Les Temps Nouveaux* 27 avril 1907.

A few years later, Marc Pierrot made a completely different speech: "Trade union organization, he would say in 1910, is not for them [the anarchists] the necessary goal. They will not go to meetings to proclaim, like union speakers: "workers, get organized! "Certainly with such ideas, anarchists had no chance of being listened to by workers. We therefore understand that for Pierrot, the activity of anarchists in trade unions was not essential and that it did not consist in helping workers to organize and fight, but in making anarchist propaganda, which basically consisted in saying that there is was no point in going on strike. We learn that "it is propaganda that is above all the goal of anarchists in trade union circles, regardless of the Workers' Unity, so dear to trade unionists." Incidentally, Marc Pierrot was a doctor, he considered that anarchy was above all a moral and was never a man of action." For the anecdote, Marc Pierrot was a doctor, he considered that anarchy was above all an ethics and was never a man of action.

Kropotkin, after having read it, refused to write the preface. He gave his reasons in a letter that Pierrot can not refuse to publish. This will be the best way for him to confuse me<sup>28</sup>.”

At first Kropotkin had agreed to write this preface, but he refused after reading the text. He later explained that his refusal was not motivated by a disagreement on the role of the anarchists within the trade union movement, since he had specifically recommended, in 1890, in *Le Révolté*, the entry anarchists in the unions. Kropotkin addressed to the *Temps nouveaux*<sup>29</sup> an explanation which, according to him, would put an end to Lagardelle’s accusations. He claimed that his refusal was not motivated by a substantive disagreement with the brochure, but because he disapproved of its form.

Kropotkin added a copy of the letter in which he expressed his refusal to write the preface. His answer provides us with some explanations about his positions on trade unionism. He reproaches the editors of the pamphlet published by the Internationalist Revolutionary Socialist Students for not contenting themselves with “highlighting the arguments that can be made in favor of a more active part to take in the struggles of the unions”, but to advance “general ideas about anarchy” that he could not share – which, whatever one may say, comes back to a disagreement of substance ...

“I had not intended to intervene in the debate between Pierrot and Lagardelle, especially since Pierrot is doing it very well, and I have so many other things to do. But since Lagardelle has thought it necessary to confuse the debate by bringing in my name and insinuating that I have written a mysterious letter against unionism, which Pierrot will not venture to publish (I leave it to the reader to appreciate this process), I am forced to speak of this letter.”<sup>30</sup>

In his letter published by *Les Temps nouveaux*, Kropotkin actually refers to unionism, not syndicalism. But most of all he attacks Lagardelle and reaffirms that “workers' organizations are the true force capable of carrying

---

28 Hubert Lagardelle, « Anarchisme et Syndicalisme », in *Syndicalisme et socialisme*, Bibliothèque du Mouvement Socialiste, Librairie des Sciences politiques & sociales Marcel Rivière 1908, Appendice.

29 Kropotkine, « Les Anarchistes et les syndicats », *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 25 mai 1907. [http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine\\_les\\_anarchistes\\_et\\_les\\_syndicats-2.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine_les_anarchistes_et_les_syndicats-2.pdf)

30 Kropotkine : « Les Anarchistes et les Syndicats », *Les Temps nouveaux*, 25 mai 1907. See: [http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine\\_les\\_anarchistes\\_et\\_les\\_syndicats-2.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/kropotkine_les_anarchistes_et_les_syndicats-2.pdf)

out the social revolution, after the awakening of the proletariat has been done first by individual acts, then by collective acts of strikes, wider and wider revolts”. For Kropotkin, a social movement does not seem to be conceivable other than by an initial individual act.

“Those anarchists who have always thought that the professionally organized labour movement for *direct struggle* against Capital – today it is called in France unionism<sup>31</sup> and 'direct action' – is the real strength, capable of bringing to the social revolution and to realize it through the egalitarian transformation of consumption and production – those of us who have thought so for the last thirty-five years have simply remained faithful to the mother idea of the International, such as had conceived, as early as 1864, the French (against Marx and Engels) and as it was always applied in Catalonia, in the Bernese Jura, in the Valley of the Vesdre, and partly in Italy. The International was a great unionist movement which would do all that these gentlemen claim to have discovered in unionism.”<sup>32</sup>

Such an attitude was, generally, dominant in the anarchist movement: the anti-authoritarian International was an unavoidable theoretical reference, even if those who referred to it turned away from it in practice. Kropotkin, however, fails to mention that when his journal, *Le Revolté*, took over from the *Bulletin of the Jura Federation*, he developed themes that had nothing to do with trade unionism for he condoned terrorism. He also fails to mention that the London Congress of 1881, which was supposed to be an IWA congress but wasn't in any way, produced nothing but the legitimization of terrorism and insurrectionalism, two orientations by definition opposed to trade unionism. Kropotkin had a selective memory.

Opinions differed greatly on the nature of the IWA: for Charles Albert, it consisted mainly of “groups of thought, discussion and propaganda”, which was an astonishing denial of reality<sup>33</sup>. “These were, however isolated

---

31 Kropotkin does not refer to revolutionary syndicalism, he uses the French word for “unionism”.

32 P. Kropotkine, “Les Anarchistes et les Syndicats”, in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 25 mai 1907. Here again Kropotkin does not use the expression “revolutionary syndicalism” but the French equivalent to “unionism”.

33 C. Albert, « Après le Congrès », *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 7 décembre 1907. Some sections of the International were affinity groups, such as the Russian section made up of refugees, but with a few exceptions the IWA was a trade union-type structure. During my stay in Saint-Imier for the 2012 international meetings, I was told that the local brass band had

positions, especially elements that were decidedly foreign to the vicissitudes of the organized labour movement”, says Maurizio Antonioli <sup>34</sup>.

If Lagardelle's viewpoint was representative of these observers of revolutionary syndicalism militants of socialist formation who wanted at all costs and against all evidence to bring it back to a “Marxist” creation, Marc Pierrot was himself the prototype of the anarchist described by Maurizio Antonioli who at first had assimilated revolutionary syndicalism to anarchism (revolutionary syndicalist ideas had been propagated “especially by anarchist comrades”<sup>35</sup>), but ended up flatly rejecting this rapprochement. Pierrot later stated:

“The development of this Confederation brought new difficulties and problems that did not arise at the time of Pelloutier. Above all, it gave birth to a new conception, the syndicalist conception, which opposes the anarchist conception, on the role and the future of the unions”.<sup>36</sup>

This is to say how Schmidt and van der Walt's ideological theses on revolutionary syndicalism as “strategy” of anarchism are hardly compatible with reality.

\* \* \* \* \*

My intention is not to question on principle what Schmidt and van der Walt say about Kropotkin but to highlight the distortions they impart to his thinking. I wish to show that their vision of Kropotkin does not respond to a desire for historical and critical examination of facts but to insert Kropotkin into the pattern they have built, a pattern largely based on ideological preconceptions that have no historical validity (revolutionary syndicalism as the "strategy" of anarchism) or inoperative and recuperating concepts (the Broad Anarchist Tradition).

In the case of Kropotkin, the idea that he was a thinker of revolutionary syndicalism has only a very meagre basis in view of the many elements that show us that he was not. Such an attitude on the part of the authors of *Black*

---

been admitted as a section of the International: the information deserves to be checked...

34 Maurizio Antonioli, “Bakunin tra sindacalismo rivoluzionario e anarchismo », in *Bakunin cent'anni dopo*, Edizioni Antistato, 1976, p. 75. En français, aux éditions Noir&Rouge.

35 Marx Pierrot, “All current conceptions which are the very expression of revolutionary syndicalism” had been “propagated mainly by anarchist comrades”, “Syndicalistes et anarchistes”, *Les Temps Nouveaux* 27 avril 1907.

36 M. Pierrot, « Les syndicats et l'anarchie », *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 19 mars 1910.

*Flame* suggests two explanations: either they do not have a very clear idea of what revolutionary syndicalism is, or they deliberately manipulate readers by trying to force Kropotkin's thought into the frameworks they have established.

René Berthier  
February-April 2018

\*\*\*\*\*

Regarding relations between Kropotkin and trade unionism/syndicalism, here are some details provided by Philippe Pelletier.

◆ Miller Martin A. (1976): Kropotkin. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 346 p.

◆ Woodcock G., Avakumovich I. (1953): *Pierre Kropokine, le prince anarchiste*. Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 368 p.

• On April 5, 1895, in a letter to Max Nettlau, Kropotkin emphasizes the limits of syndicalism but underlines its possibilities in action that propaganda alone can not provide (MAM, 177).

• 1896, London General Council of the 2nd International. At the anarchist meeting of July 28, the French present are: Louise Michel, Elisée Reclus, Tortelier.

• In March 1898, Kropotkin writes “The Development of Trade Unionism” in *Freedom*.

• In 1901 he was ill and could not go to a meeting in London organized by two French and British delegations of workers. He sent a message calling for the creation of “an international federation of all unions around the world” (MMA, 177).

• In 1903, he renews his relationship with James Guillaume (whom he had met in Switzerland). James Guillaume, for his part, began to support the CGT. According to Max Nettlau, the two men had a “titanic debate” on syndicalism (*ib.*). (*NB*: the recent seminar on James Guillaume does not mention this episode.)

• On May 25, 1907, Kropotkin wrote “Les Anarchistes et les Syndicats” (“The Anarchists and the Unions”) in *Les Temps nouveaux*.

• In 1909, Kropotkin prefaced a book on syndicalism by Goghelia (in

Russian) where he shows the contradiction between Marxism as foundation of Social Democracy and syndicalism. (*NB*: G. Goghelia – of Georgian origin – was the animator of a Russian anarchist group created in Geneva in 1903 (periodical: *Hleb i Yolya*, August 1903-November 1905).

- In a letter to his friend Rubakin (March 17, 1913), Kropotkin believes that, contrary to what Sorel thinks, syndicalism which is reemerging in France is in the continuity of the anti-authoritarian current of the First International (MMA, p. 176).

- In 1914, Kropotkin wrote to Luigi Bertoni that “trade unionism is absolutely necessary, it is the only force by which workers continue the direct struggle against capital without turning to parliamentarism” (*Ibid.*, 177). Nettlau).

- He writes to Jean Grave that anarchism must be devoted to trade unionism, but not exclusively (*ib.*)

- G. P. Maximoff dedicates a passage, in his book on Kropotkin (in Russian, Chicago, 1931), on the relations between Kropotkin and syndicalism.

At the moment the CGT was formed, Kropotkin lived in London, he was often ill, he made a tour in the United States (1902) and was busy writing his books and much concerned with the Russian revolution (as soon as 1904).

*A priori*, he therefore met neither Pelloutier nor Pouget. He was especially in contact with Grave, Nettlau and Guillaume.