

Some comments about *Black Flame*

René Berthier

I shall make five remarks, which I summarize here, but which I shall develop more completely elsewhere.

1st Comment

Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, the authors of *Black Flame*, write that syndicalism was born in the 1860s at the time of the First International. I understand what drives them to such a statement: There is indeed a real proximity between syndicalism and the practise of the Jura Federation as described by Bakunin. But it is historically inaccurate to say that syndicalism was born in 1860, or 1870. The analogies between two facts do not make an identity. The expression “syndicalism” (syndicalisme révolutionnaire in French) applies to a specific historical phenomenon, and tracing its birth back to an earlier period under the pretext of similarities creates unnecessary confusions, which do not contribute strictly to the debate.

The analogies that may exist between the practices of the Jura Federation and revolutionary syndicalism are indisputable, but the differences as well. First, there is a difference in scale. The Jura Federation in the best period had hardly more than 1200 members, and towards the end when it had become an affinity group it had only 400, while the CGT had several hundreds of thousands of members. Then the Jura Federation was mainly established in the watch industry while the CGT included workers in many sectors of activity. We must therefore avoid mythifying the Jura Federation, even if its struggles and the values it defended were universal.

Schmidt and van der Walt are very anxious to show that syndicalism has not “emerged” in France in the 1890s but that “it was Bakunin, not Sorel forty years later, who was the key theorist of syndicalism, and that a whole first wave of syndicalism took place in the 1870s and 1880s” (p. 16). This

statement seems confusing to me because it mixes two levels of reflection: the emergence of a class movement and the theorization that is made afterwards.

A class movement such as revolutionary syndicalism appears when the conditions that make it possible and necessary come together. The theorization that is made after the fact is another thing. We are not going to waste our time debating whether Bakunin or Sorel are the “theoreticians” of revolutionary syndicalism. Nobody believes Sorel had anything to do with the birth of syndicalism: he was a shooting star who got interested in syndicalism for a very short time and who quickly became interested in something else; besides, he was an observer who was totally outside the movement he was describing. Which was not the case of Bakunin. Bakunin has described very clearly not only the functioning but also the objectives of a movement that foreshadows what revolutionary syndicalism will be a generation later.

Creating an artificial and somehow “organic” link between syndicalism as it appeared in France in the 90s, calling it a “second wave” whose “first wave” would have appeared within the IWA in the 60s or 70s is an ideological posture, it is not a historical approach because too many documents from the 1890-1910 period emanating from the anarchist movement itself contradict the idea that “syndicalism, in essence, is an anarchist strategy”. The “convergence” between anarchism and trade unionism has been a gradual one, it has been the work of only a part of the anarchist movement; the other part was vigorously criticizing the involvement of anarchists in union activity.

2nd Comment

Schmidt and van der Walt think that syndicalism is not different from anarchism and that it is only a “strategy” of anarchism – whether conscious or unconscious. Syndicalists may accept this proximity to anarchism or refuse it, but Schmidt-van der Walt consider that syndicalism is, whatever one may say, a “strategy” of anarchism.

Although I do not deny that there are many “bridges” between the two currents, I am totally opposed to this assumption – at least as far as France is concerned. Perhaps things are different for the Brazilian case, which I do not know well enough¹. It is possible that, as João Carlos Marques puts it, revolutionary syndicalism was a strategy instrumentalized by the anarchists

1 Originally this text was written at the request of Brazilian comrades.

rather than an independent ideology².

One can indeed imagine that the process of formation of an autonomous and spontaneous practice and theory of the working class in Brazil did not unfold in the same way as in Europe and that the anarchist movement – and the immigrants who introduced anarchism in Brazil – proceeded to the introduction of revolutionary syndicalism in the working class in a voluntarist way. In this case, one might say that syndicalism is a “strategy” of anarchism, but it is only a hypothesis. I do not think, however, that things have happened that way. As far as I know, Brazilian revolutionary syndicalism was constituted in two ways that do not exclude each other:

a) Endogenously by the influence of causes identical to those which contributed to the formation of this current in France (the same causes produce the same effects);

b) Under the influence of the example of the French CGT – as shown by many texts of Brazilian labour congresses.

The Brazilian libertarian movement has had its share of anti-union and anti-organizational activists.

As far as Schmidt and van der Walt are concerned, it is clear that their theory is presented as a general theory, valid everywhere.

It is undeniable that the anarchists played a considerable and even preponderant role in the French CGT until 1914, but they were not the only ones. Moreover, by claiming that syndicalism is a “strategy” of anarchism, Schmidt-van der Walt postulate that anarchism was a homogeneous movement, which was far from being the case. It would be necessary to ask of *which* anarchism revolutionary syndicalism is supposed to be the “strategy”: the French anarchist publications of the late 19th century reveal that an important, if not the majority, part of the anarchist movement was totally hostile to trade unionism³.

The Brazilian libertarian movement had its share of anti-union and anti-organisation activists. However, this image of French anarchism is not rigid because the situation evolved. The police reports reveal that after a while, the specific anarchist movement ended up being considerably reduced, “aspired”, “swallowed up” by the CGT. Naturally, this point needs to be developed. It would be more accurate to say that it is the anarchist move-

2 « *A Voz do Trabalhador: cultura operária e resistência anarquista no Rio de Janeiro (1908-1915)* », p. 75.

3 See Mauricio Antonioli, *Bakounine entre syndicalisme révolutionnaire et anarchisme*, éditions Noir&Rouge.

ment that had become a “strategy” of syndicalism.

3rd Comment

Another point of disagreement concerns the relationship between syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism. According to Schmidt and van der Walt, syndicalism refuses, or is reluctant to admit, its relationship with anarchism, while anarcho-syndicalism invokes it. In addition, anarcho-syndicalism seems to be a sort of radical form of syndicalism. I do not share this approach at all.

This thesis of Schmidt and van der Walt is totally subjective and does not rest on anything factual. It corresponds to an ideological, utopian construction of the relations between syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, a vision of things such as the authors of *Black Flame* would like them to be, but on *nothing historically based*.

Revolutionary syndicalism regained some strength after the war, and especially after the Russian revolution. The anarchist and syndicalist movements enthusiastically supported the Russian revolution. But when informations on the repression of the workers' movement organized by the Russian communists began to filter, the anarchists generally condemned the regime⁴. The syndicalists were much slower to analyse what was happening and reacted in an ambivalent way because many militants decided to support the Bolsheviks at all costs. The syndicalist movement literally split in two. One part, with Pierre Monatte, supported the Russian communists, advocated the CGTU's membership — a split of the CGT — to the Red International of Labour Unions, the trade union counterpart of the Communist International. Another part of the syndicalist movement, with Pierre Besnard, refused to support the Russian communists, withdrew from all initiatives related to the Red International of Trade Unions.

The activists who founded the Berlin IWA in 1922 had no choice: the syndicalists *had* to be organized on an international level; but they *could not* join an international organization that condoned the ruthless repression of the Russian labour movement.

What qualifies the IWA as an anarcho-syndicalist organization is that contrary to syndicalism that advocated *neutrality* towards political parties, now the IWA proclaims its *opposition* to them. From a doctrinal point of view, this is where the main difference between the two movements lies.

4 See David Berry, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917 to 1945*, Paperback

The trade union press of the time reveals the controversies that fiercely opposed the activists who supported the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) and those who opposed it.

If the Berlin IWA did not refer to anarcho-syndicalism, it is mainly because for about ten years following the Russian revolution, the word "anarcho-syndicalist" was used *insultingly* to refer to syndicalists and anarchists who did not support joining the RILU. This is why the founding documents of the Berlin IWA did not refer to anarcho-syndicalism but *systematically to syndicalism*, although it definitely was an anarcho-syndicalist organisation. Actually, the militants who founded the Berlin IWA considered themselves as the *real* syndicalists. Similarly, when the CGT-Syndicaliste révolutionnaire was founded in 1926, its founding documents did not mention anarcho-syndicalism. They too considered themselves as the *real* syndicalists.

The fact preceded the word, but we can say that the foundation of the second International Workers' Association in Berlin in 1922 can be considered as the actual foundation of *anarcho-syndicalism*. Indeed, contrary to the CGT resolution of Amiens (1906), which is widely considered as a syndicalist manifesto but which is in fact a watering down of revolutionary syndicalism⁵, the founding documents of the Berlin IWA do not speak of

5 The original revolutionary syndicalism as it was formulated in the years 1890-1900 was somehow "genetically" based on anti-statism, antiparlamentarianism, anti-militarism and anti-religion because it was direct heir of the workers' movement who was savagely repressed during the commune and long after. Syndicalism was based on this legacy, in opposition to the state, the army, the police and the Church (which is often forgotten), it was also based on extreme mistrust towards the democratic and socialist parties that wanted to subjugate the workers, and on opposition to religion that wanted to "educate" the workers. It was a very radical tendency within the working class, but it gradually declined. The irresistible rise of the reformist movement in the CGT gradually eroded the positions of the revolutionaries. Workers were electing more and more men and women emanating from the reformist stream. Gradually the syndicalists were forced to make concessions to the reformists. Until 1905 there had been 5 or 6 socialist parties divided by incessant quarrels. In 1905, the socialist movement united in one party and offered the workers a new pole of identification. This unification obviously reinforced the socialist current in the CGT.

It is absolutely necessary to have read the minutes of the CGT congress of 1906 to understand the extent of the reformist offensive against the

being *neutral* in relation to political parties but in *opposition* to them. Unlike the resolution of Amiens which writes off the struggle against the state, against parliamentary strategy and against the army, the founding documents of the IWA declares its opposition to parliamentary activity, to nationalism, to militarism, to the state.

The expression “anarcho-syndicalism” will only be progressively integrated into the documents of the syndicalist movement and become widely used by the end of the 1920s.

If Schmidt and van der Walt are not absolutely wrong when they suggest that syndicalism is a « milder » form of anarcho-syndicalism, this observation absolutely can not explain in what way the two currents are distinguished.

Similarly, explaining the difference between these two currents by the fact that syndicalism did not openly refer to anarchism, or did so reluctantly, while anarcho-syndicalism recognized its link with anarchism, is false because historically speaking, part of the revolutionary syndicalist current clearly rejected anarchism by adhering to Moscow's positions, while the other part, in which there were many anarchists, had no problem with anarchism; they simply progressively adopted the qualification of "anarcho-syndicalist" which imposed itself with time;

The use of the term “anarcho-syndicalism”

The history of the use of the term “anarcho-syndicalism” is complex and varies from country to country. The term was used in Russia during the 1905 revolution by Daniil Novomirski and others, such as Maria Korn, Georgi Gogeliia-Orgeiani, Daniil Novomirski, as an attempt to apply the or-

revolutionary syndicalists, and especially the anarchists. At the risk of appearing emphatic, the reading of this document is extremely moving and seems to me absolutely necessary to understand the regression of the movement and the scale of the attacks, to which syndicalists and anarchists were bravely fighting back. Already at this time, the syndicalist current is divided between a "modernist" faction with Pierre Monatte, and the militants who try to maintain the traditions of direct action. The same division will be found again in 1919-1920, with the same men, when it comes to supporting or condemning membership of the International Red Union. Link to the 1906 congress of the CGT: http://ihs.cgt.fr/IMG/pdf_12_-_1906_-_Congres_Amiens.pdf

ganizational forms and strategy of the French CGT to the Russian context ⁶.

During the Russian revolution there were *very harsh* oppositions between anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, which naturally does not fit with the dogmatic construction of Schmidt and van der Walt who consider the latter as a “strategy” of the former.

In France one finds the term “anarcho-syndicalist” (but not “anarcho-syndicalism”) in the mainstream newspapers as well as was in the labour movement at the beginning of the 20th century but it did not designate a doctrine nor a movement but only anarchists who were individually engaged in union activity. Two other terms were used interchangeably with “anarcho-syndicalist”: “syndicalist anarchist” and “syndicalo-anarchist”. They were perfectly synonymous but never designatde a doctrine or a movement⁷.

Then, after WWI the term was used in a pejorative way by the communists and by the pro-communist syndicalists to point out these syndicalists who refused to endorse the repression of the Russian communists against the workers’ movement and who refused to join the Red International of Trade Unions created by the Bolsheviks. The choice to support or condemn the communist regime in Russia caused a very deep fracture within the syndicalist movement. Those syndicalists who supported communism eventually disappeared as a current. The syndicalist organizations which refused to join the International Trade Union Red created the new IWA in Berlin which marked the birth of anarcho-syndicalism.

But the situation was paradoxical. This new IWA actually marked the birth of anarcho-syndicalism, but the founding documents still refered to revolutionary syndicalism, for these militants, unlike pro-Communist syndicalists, considered themselves to be the *true* revolutionary syndicalists. It took years for the terms “anarcho-syndicalism” and “anarcho-syndicalist” to be widely used. So we see that the difference between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism has absolutely nothing to do with *Black Flame*'s explanations, which are not based on historical facts but on interpretations that are all the more subjective and whimsical that the au-

6 See two unpublished Soviet historians cited by Alexandre Skirda: S.N. Kanev: “history questions”, 9, 1968, Moscow; E.N. Kornoukhov: “The activity of the Bolshevik party against the petty-bourgeois anarchist revolutionaries in the period of the preparation and victory of the October revolution”, “Lenin, the party, October”, 1967. (Cf. The remarkable work by Alexander Skirda: *Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*)

7 See: “De l’origine de l’anarcho-syndicalisme”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article603>

thors of the book obviously did not have access to French, Spanish and Italian sources that could have enlightened them.

4th Comment

I do not approve of the concept that Schmidt and van der Walt develop about the “Broad Anarchist Tradition”, which consists in labelling as “anarchist” currents or movements that certainly present analogies or affinities with anarchism, but which it is not correct to define as such. This is very much like the manipulative practices we observe among revolutionary Marxists (and also some anarchists, I would say), who claim to take credit for initiatives taken by others.

We can issue some assumptions about the function of the Broad Anarchist Tradition concept:

a) It makes it possible to challenge the idea that anarchism was never anything but a minority phenomenon, “the poor cousin of other Left traditions” (p. 9). By resorting to a broader “tradition”, the “perimeter” of the movement is widened;

b) It challenges the idea that anarchism (to which revolutionary syndicalism is supposed to be organically attached) is an originally European or even French phenomenon: “We demonstrate that mass anarchism and syndicalist movements emerged in a number of regions, notably parts of Europe, the Americas, and East Asia” (p. 9).

Nobody denies that anarchism and syndicalism “emerged in a number of regions, notably parts of Europe, the Americas, and East Asia” since the same causes produce the same effects: but these causes and effects do not necessarily occur simultaneously everywhere. Schmidt and van der Walt are stuck in a contradiction: on the one hand they try to contest the idea that revolutionary syndicalism is a European “invention”, but at the same time they designate Bakunin as its “founder”.

Let us take the case of Chinese anarchism. No one disputes that there was a major anarchist movement in China, but it appeared between 1905 and 1910 drawing from both Taoist and Buddhist texts and from Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus. Li Shizeng (1881-1973) discovers anarchism in Kropotkin's writings. The “Manifesto of the Anarcho-Communist Society” of Shifu dates from 1914. Nothing authorizes us to say that Chinese anarchism is the import of Western political thought. It is the result of conditions peculiar to Chinese society and of various cross-cultural influences linked to the international circulation of ideas. But we cannot deny that there is a chronological gap between the emergence of anarchism in

France and Europe, and its emergence in China. Anarchism did not pop out in elaborate form like a devil from its box, simultaneously all over the planet. There is some demagogy to say the opposite. Whether it pleases or not, its first appearance as a *doctrine* dates from 1840 when Proudhon declared that “property is theft”, and as a *movement* in the late 1860s⁸.

The so-called “Broad Anarchist Tradition” has the advantage of greatly – and artificially – expanding the “perimeter” of anarchism. It would have been more accurate, and less manipulative, to simply speak of “anti-authoritarian tradition” or “anti-authoritarian current” which some non-orthodox Marxist currents could have easily joined without creating a great fuss in the anarchist movement.

5th Comment

Finally, a last point that I would like to emphasize, on which I partially agree with Schmidt & van der Walt. They rightly dispute the choice made by P. Eltzbacher who incorporates into the anarchist “pantheon” a number of authors on the sole ground that they were against the state. These are the “Seven Sages”: Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Tucker, Tolstoy, Bakunin and Kropotkin. If Bakunin and Kropotkin are recognized by Schmidt and van der Walt as “anarchists”, the others are rejected. I am ready to give them reason for Stirner, Tucker and Tolstoy, but the cases of Godwin and Proudhon deserve to be examined.

Godwin is certainly not anarchist, but it would be absurd to dismiss him as a precursor. I fully agree with Schmidt & van der Walt's refusal to seek at any price anarchist authors even in Greek antiquity, and to consider as “anarchist” the slightest questioning of the State; but their rigid attitude prevents them from considering the possibility that anarchist thought might have had precursors. This leads them to have a non-historical vision. One has the impression that anarchism was born around 1850-1860, out of nothing, which is of course not true.

In my opinion, anarchism fits right into this uninterrupted flow of thought that, since the Middle Ages, stubbornly challenges the notion of immanence and aims to free critical thinking⁹. This does not mean that anarchism identifies itself with each of the stages of this long evolution,

8 For a scientific approach of the international history of anarchism, see: Gaetano Manfredonia, *Histoire mondiale de l'anarchie*, Éditions Textuel & Arte éditions, 2014.

9 This gradual evolution of philosophy towards the negation of God and of the “first cause” has been perfectly seen by Bakunin.

strewn with heroic thinkers who have been imprisoned, terrorized, bruised, tortured, burned alive, but that anarchism has its place at the end of this evolution.

However, I share Schmidt and van der Walt's view that anarchism is a political doctrine (they rarely qualify it as an "ideology"), that it was born of the industrial revolution, within the working class, as a product of its struggles against economic exploitation and political and religious oppression.

Proudhon is very curiously treated by Schmidt & van der Walt. He is denied the status of anarchist by right, although a certain role is not denied him: *Black Flame* intends to examine "the relationship between anarchism and other ideas, particularly the views of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, classical Marxists, and economic liberalism...". [*Emphasis added.*] There is anarchism on the one hand, and "other ideas" on the other, and Proudhon is one of the "other ideas." The review of the bibliographical sources mentioned by the authors of *Black Flame* explains everything: There is no work of Proudhon in their bibliography, simply a collection of selected texts, not particularly recent¹⁰. As for possible studies on Proudhon, one 96-page book, published in 1934! And two absentees: the sociologists Georges Gurvitch¹¹ and Pierre Ansart¹², to speak only of these two authors, who seem to me totally unavoidable if we speak of Proudhon today.

The anarchist movement should stand out from what I call an "ideological vision of history". By this I mean a vision which starts from a certain number of pre-established assertions and which tries to bring reality within the framework of these presuppositions. It seems to me that *Black Flame* very often falls into this fault. This disadvantage does not prevent

10 Edwards, S., ed. *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1969.

11 George Gurvitch :

- *Proudhon, sa vie, son œuvre*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1965.
- *Les fondateurs français de la sociologie contemporaine : Saint-Simon et Proudhon*, Paris, Centre de documentation universitaire, 1955.
- *Dialectique et sociologie*, Flammarion, 1962.

In Portuguese:

- *Proudhon*, Georges Gurvitch, 1983, Editora Edicoes 70, Rio de Janeiro.
- *Proudhon e Marx*, 1980, Editora Martins Fontes, Rio de Janeiro.

12 *Sociologie de Proudhon*, PUF, 1967

Socialisme et anarchisme : Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Marx, PUF, 1969.

Naissance de l'anarchisme, PUF, 1970.

Proudhon, Le Livre de poche, 1984.

the book from being otherwise interesting, but it greatly reduces, in my opinion, its scope and normative value.

Last point

Anarchism as a political and social movement actually appeared at the period of the industrial revolution, as Schmidt and van der Walt rightly say. But from its appearance as a self-affirming doctrine, that is, with Proudhon, it advocated economic emancipation from the capitalist system, political emancipation from the state, *and* ideological emancipation from God: “God in religion, the State in politics, property in economics, such is the triple form in which mankind, become alien to itself, has never ceased to tear itself apart with its own hands”¹³, says Proudhon.

Black Flame practically never mentions God and religion. If occasionally the book evokes Bakunin’s atheism, atheism nowhere appears as one of the pillars of anarchism. Schmidt and van der Walt are ready to talk about economic emancipation from Capital, of political emancipation from the state, but they have ignored ideological emancipation from God. Yet Bakunin, their only referent in terms of anarchism, very often speaks of it: the very first sentence of the program of Bakunin’s Alliance, of which they speak so much, declares: "The Alliance declares itself atheist" ... This small sentence, though *essential* for Bakunin, seems to have escaped the insight of Schmidt and van der Walt.

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13 Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques*.

