

Decades in the Struggle

I was asked to participate in an oral history project that seeks to document the experiences of self-identified anarchists age 60 and older who have actively participated in anarchist and anarchist-adjacent political movements for at least two decades.

This study is being conducted by Philip Zura (Student Researcher / Principal Investigator) and Nathan Jun (Faculty Research Advisor) at John Carroll University.

The purpose of the project is to collect video-recorded interviews with self-identified anarchists age 60 and older from the United States, Canada, and the UK.

Interviewees were asked questions regarding their personal experiences in anarchist / anarchist-adjacent political movements, their reasons and motivations for joining / participating in anarchist / anarchist-adjacent political movements, their personal understandings of and thoughts about anarchism, etc.

Apparently, I am the only French person to have received the form with the questions that participants had to answer.

Recording will be made available for viewing by John Carroll University faculty, staff, and students, as well as the public at large, via appropriate YouTube or other online media. In the long term, transcripts of the recording may be produced and annotated for purposes of publication.

I am attaching the text I wrote for that occasion, to which I have made a few corrections and additions.

René Berthier
September 2025

Decades in the struggle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht18ImwtQvE&list=PLbt5gpKlNXgts0SWyMqoDDT114l8lX0tz&index=18&t=2078s>

1. Please state your name, age, city of residence, and place of birth.

My name is René Berthier, I'm 78, I spent my early days in Normandy and I now live in a suburb of Paris (France)

2. Please tell us about your upbringing, education, and career.

I was raised by my mother, who was widowed shortly after I was born. I spent my youth in Normandy and I obtained a bachelor's degree in literature at the University of Caen, which used to be the capital city of William the Conqueror.

Then I went to Paris where I obtained a master's degree in English from the Sorbonne in 1971, but teaching did not appeal to me. I then met some anarchist activists who worked in the printing industry, and they introduced me to this milieu, where there were many anarchists.

In France at that time, the vast majority of workers in this sector were members of the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), France's historic trade union organisation. So I joined the CGT in 1972. My first job was in a large printing company with 1,800 workers. I was quickly elected to a trade union position (shop steward).

From then on, my professional life has been mostly spent in the printing and press industry.

3. Please tell us about your political trajectory. How did you first become politically aware? How and in what ways did you first become politically active? What was your entree into radical politics in general and anarchism (or anarchist-adjacent politics) in particular?

Apart from my anarchist comrades in the printing industry, my first contact with anarchism was with an old activist named Gaston Leval, who had set up a 'Centre for Libertarian Sociology'. Leval had been a defector during the First World War and had taken refuge in Spain. He had joined the Spanish CNT and had been a delegate to the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).

He spent several months in Russia as a delegate for the CNT. The report he wrote on his return to Spain, together with that of Angel Pestaña, led the CNT not to join the RILU. His status as a draft dodger made it very difficult for him to return to France. His 'Centre for Libertarian Sociology' was dedicated to a critical reflection on anarchism and to the theoretical and historical training of young activists.

He knew a lot of people, and you could see Spanish veterans of the Civil War, Bulgarian anarchists, Russians, and former Makhnovists passing through his apartment in the Montparnasse district.

Leval was appalled by the shortcomings of the activists of the time (and I believe he would be even more so if he were alive today). The young people who left his Centre were particularly well trained, and I owe him a great deal in this respect. My comrades from the Leval group and I were stunned by the ignorance of most anarchist activists, who were unable to stand up to Marxists in public debates.

Through Gaston Leval, my anarchist education was inevitably strongly influenced by Spain. Of the 450,000 Spanish refugees in France, an overwhelming majority were anarchists.

I am well aware that my discourse on anarchism may be misunderstood by North American readers, for at least two reasons:

1. The anarchism to which I refer could be called specifically ‘Latin’ in the sense that my cultural references in terms of anarchism are essentially French and Spanish. Indeed, I was formed in my young days by militants who, in the twenties and thirties, had been active as revolutionary syndicalists in the French CGT, as anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish CNT. My early years of militancy were immersed in the company of veterans of the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War.

2. For this reason, my vision of anarchism must seem very obsolete, and perhaps very rigid to the North American reader, whose references and tradition of anarchism will probably be very different from mine. However, I would probably feel quite at ease with IWW activists, with whom I would have common cultural references.

Among the shortcomings of the French anarchist movement at the time, it is worth noting an almost total ignorance of Marxism. The 1970s were marked in France by the almost total hegemony of Soviet communism in the labour movement. The Communist Party was very powerful and even won 25% of the vote in the general elections. In the workplaces, the communists were all-powerful, except in the printing sector, where there was a strong socialist current¹ and a residual but not insignificant anarcho-syndicalist current.

The communists of the CGT treated Trotskyists and Maoists very differently from anarcho-syndicalists. Trotskyists and Maoists were considered as ‘reactionary petty bourgeois’ and often suffered violence at the hands of the communists. Anarcho-syndicalism, on the other hand, remained in the collective memory of communists as a current that was certainly opposed to communism, but still belonged to the labour movement. The grassroots communist militant knew vaguely that anarcho-syndicalists ‘had been behind the founding of the CGT’, which is technically incorrect, as they in fact were revolutionary syndicalists. The

¹ The socialist movement within the CGT Printing Federation had nothing to do with the Socialist Party of the time, but had its roots in the historical socialism of the French labour movement. These socialists had nothing to do with the socialists in government and did not model their actions on the electoral imperatives of the Socialist Party.

confrontation between communists and anarcho-syndicalists only emerged after the Russian Revolution – but that is another story.

Parallel to ‘orthodox’ communism, there were countless revolutionary Marxist, Trotskyist and Maoist groups. I naturally became interested in Marxism, which Leval had encouraged us to learn about. He said that you can't make good activists out of ignorant people. I thus acquired a solid Marxist education, through reading Marx himself and Trotsky, and others.

To be honest, my interest in Trotsky may stem from the fact that I dated a Trotskyist activist around 1971, which greatly surprised our respective comrades. This was before I joined the CGT's graphic arts federation; Christiane and I were competing for the position of president of the union we were active in at the time and ended up with the same number of votes. So there was no president, but two deputy presidents, which forced us to collaborate... and we've been collaborating for 54 years now... It sounds very much like a novel in the ‘Soviet realism’ style.

In my early period I was greatly influenced by the texts of the group ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’, one of whose ‘leaders’, Claude Lefort, taught at the University of Caen, where I had begun my studies before joining the Sorbonne. Another author interested me also greatly at the time: Nicos Poulantzas, Gramsci, Luxembourg and others.

My first organisational experience was within an organisation we called the ‘Alliance syndicaliste révolutionnaire et anarcho-syndicaliste’ (Revolutionary syndicalist and Anarcho-Syndicalist Alliance), or simply ‘the Alliance’ – quite explicitly in reference to Bakunin's ‘Alliance’.²

The ‘Alliance’ was formed in the aftermath of the strikes of May 68 when many anarchists active in the mainstream unions noted the failure of the anarchist movement to organise anything meaningful. The initiative came from the anarchist movement itself, and more particularly from the syndicalist part of the movement. Not all of them defined themselves as anarcho-syndicalists, some were simply anarchists who had union activity.

The initial objective of the project was very modest: to coordinate the activity of libertarian activists who were located in the existing trade union Confederations³. Among these activists, there were of course ‘grassroots’ activists, but there were also many activists who had elected union responsibilities at the workplace or at the local and regional level. Our recruitment was very different from that of the anarchist groups of the time,

2 See: R. Berthier, *About the ‘Alliance syndicaliste’*,
<https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article900>

3 In the heroic days of the CGT there was only one trade union confederation, but the hazards of history led philosophical or political currents of thought to create an organisation corresponding to their desires. To simplify, after WWII the labour movement was divided into 4 confederations:

- a) The CGT, the majority, dominated by the communists.
- b) The CGT-Force ouvrière, anti-communist, but with an active minority of Trotskyites (Fourth International), French and Spanish anarcho-syndicalists.
- c) The CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers) dominated by Christians.
- d) The CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail), which grew out of the CFTC but retained a strong Christian influence. After May 1968, this organisation was tempted by extreme left-wing ideas (self-management, etc.) but the liberal temptations of its leaders ended up dominating.

which attracted many young people drawn solely by the word ‘anarchist’ and rebelling against paternal authority.

The initial project of the ‘Alliance’ was not strictly speaking a question of creating an ‘organisation’ but simply a coordination. But in the end, it didn’t work out that way.

We published a monthly newspaper, *Solidarité ouvrière*⁴ (Workers’ Solidarity), obviously in reference to the daily newspaper of the same name published by the Spanish CNT. Over the years, one of the main points to emphasise is that the Alliance has been engaged in a real dusting off of the theory, whereas this was not at all the initial objective.

We quickly realised that the Alliance’s initial, very modest project was not feasible: to coordinate the activity of libertarian syndicalist militants, independently of their organisational affiliation: At the time, there were several anarchist organisations that were not developing and were competing half-heartedly with each other. Within these organisations were activists who were active in the labour movement. Our intention was simply to coordinate their activities. The success of this project was only very marginal: a few anarchist militants here and there joined us.

By force of circumstance, we were led to develop ourselves, not so much by trying to win the already organised anarchist militants as by developing ourselves in the workplaces, a task that was only made possible because we had a significant presence. In other words, *we practically ‘extracted’ ourselves from the organised anarchist movement.*

Should we have stopped referring to ‘anarchism’? I don’t think so, because it was on the libertarian ground of anarcho-syndicalism that the Alliance had been created and developed. But gradually, the militants who came to us had absolutely nothing to do with the anarchist movement, they were militants from the trade union movement. Many, after having lived May 68, had become involved in inter-professional structures – the equivalent of the historical Labour exchanges: they had rediscovered syndicalism in a spontaneous and pragmatic way, and the Alliance militants simply explained them that what they had discovered was something that was deeply rooted in the working class. Syndicalist positions were spontaneously multiplying in local and regional structures.

In a way, we were driven to introduce innovations into our practice. After the Russian revolution, our elders were confronted with a practice they did not know: communist fractions within the unions. The Communists organised themselves outside the trade union structures to determine the positions they would develop within it; a few organised militants coordinating their interventions, facing a mass of unorganised members, managed to take control of the unions, one by one. The syndicalists were unable to cope with this new practice or to find countermeasures. However, they had the excuse that these practices were totally new and contrary to the traditions of the French working class.

An old comrade who had been active in the 1930s told us how eager the communists were to take up mandates in the CGT. The elders of the revolutionary syndicalist movement saw the communists occupying the functions with sympathy, because they saw them as the next generation.

4 <https://archivesautonomies.org/spip.php?article754>

They had no awareness of what was happening. It was in reference to this failure of our elders that we had the idea of creating 'counter-fractions' to face the Trotskyists. In several trade union bodies we were confronted with Trotskyite cells that manoeuvred to try to take control.

In a trade union organisation where political factions try to monopolise leading positions, it is necessary to form a more or less clandestine opposition structure with the objective of preserving, or restoring trade union democracy and pluralism. There was no strictly 'anarchist agenda', but a platform for the restoration of democracy, elections for positions of responsibility, general assemblies to manage struggles, etc. We have used this tactic on several occasions and it has proved to be very effective. Maybe also because the Trotskyists didn't imagine that anarchists were capable of this.

The Alliance had effectively transformed itself into a political organisation whose objective was to develop in the working class and disseminate anarcho-syndicalism. This situation lasted for a while. We were living in an exciting period where everything seemed to be going well, until the day when brutal repression came down on us in the form of an alliance between union bureaucracies and militants from a Trotskyist organisation whose tactic was to occupy positions within the union apparatus, unlike us, who campaigned at grassroots level.

From the mid seventies to 2003 when I retired, my activity focused almost exclusively on trade unionism: I served almost continuously as a shop steward, trade union president and, finally, as a member of the federal executive committee – all of these positions being elected. I would add that my anarcho-syndicalist convictions were known to everyone.

The choice I made may seem strange, even contradictory to my anarchist beliefs. However, it must be understood that in France at the time, the trade union movement was generally oriented towards class struggle, and it was not contradictory for a libertarian activist to choose to fight alongside his fellow workers and to take on mandated positions as long as they were elected.

There could have been an alternative to militating within the mainstream unions: creating a trade union organisation with an anarcho-syndicalist orientation. This option was discussed but rejected. At the time, there was a French CNT, made up of a few individuals who were, incidentally, very sectarian. Furthermore, if the activists, many of whom had a proven track record in trade unionism, had left their unions to found a CNT, the union members would not have followed them. This would have been a double loss: we would have created only a very small structure with no influence, and we would have abandoned the workers we were fighting with. It would not have been understood.

I have never regretted the choice I made.

Regarding my decision to take on union responsibilities in the printing and press sector, it would be extremely complicated to go into detail, as this would require me to go into lengthy historical considerations, but the issue lay in the conflict that existed within the Graphic Arts Federation between a centralist faction that wanted to control all the activities of the member unions and a faction that could be described as 'federalist'. A fierce struggle

took place over more than ten years, at the end of which it is difficult to say whether there was a winner, but it can be said that the 'federalist' faction managed to maintain its positions which, given the context, was already quite a victory. It was at that time that my term as union president ended and I retired in 2003.

After retiring, I took the time to do what my activism had prevented me from doing: writing, partly to take stock of my trade union activity,⁵ but also to pass on the political and theoretical experience I had acquired. I devoted myself actively to history and theory.

4. Please explain your involvement in anarchist and/or anarchist-adjacent political movements over the years.

After the Alliance dissolved in 1981, I went through a short period of political inactivity, mainly due to my mother's illness, then I joined the Anarchist Federation, where many comrades from the Alliance had preceded me. Our 'irruption' into the Anarchist Federation, which was somewhat dormant at the time, provoked some reluctance, which faded when it became clear that the groups in which former Alliance members were involved were developing well.

Looking back, I realise that my involvement in the anarchist movement in the strict sense has always been limited as most of my time was devoted to my trade union duties. I joined the Anarchist Federation in 1984 because my friends from the former Alliance were pressuring me to join, but also because I thought it was unacceptable for an anarchist to remain unorganised. But in fact, the Anarchist Federation proved to be extremely useful and efficient because of its federalist structures and the autonomy of its groups, which made it possible to achieve some pretty important things.

For example, we actively supported the British miners' strike of 1984-1985 and organised a support tour throughout France, with the presence of two miners from Shirebrook (Derbyshire) and a comrade of the IWA from Doncaster; in this respect, the relationships we had established during the Alliance period proved very useful. More recently, the FA was the driving force behind the organisation of the International meeting in Saint-Imier in 2012.

After retiring, I became quite involved in a number of debates within the anarchist movement, particularly on the question of the opposition between anarchist synthesis and platformism.⁶ It's an extremely tedious matter, one in which I don't feel involved, but it stirred up passions and I tried to take the heat out of the debate. I'd come to the conclusion that it was completely outdated, with the 'platformists' seeming much more attached to their platform than the 'synthesists' to their synthesis.

The French Anarchist Federation had often been attacked in a rather contemptuous manner by certain proponents of platformism (mostly North American), but when one takes the trouble to examine things honestly, the

5 This experience is recorded in a book: *Crise syndicale du Livre parisien*, https://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Crise_syndicale_du_Livre_parisien_CGT.pdf

6 See:

• René Berthier, *Réflexions à propos du « plateformisme » et du « synthésisme »* <https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article1017>

• René Berthier, *A propos du « plateformisme » et de l'« affaire Fontenis »*, <https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article473>

FA has nothing 'synthesist' about it: the word 'synthesis' does not even appear in its 'Basic Principles', nor is there any mention of an individualist current: it is quite simply an anarchist organisation that recognises the right to different tendencies. The Anarchist Federation has now been in existence for 80 years. It overcame the crisis caused by Fontenis' entryism⁷ and has overcome all the crises it has faced since then thanks to the resilience of its structures and its tradition of debate.

There came a time when I began to distance myself from the French anarchist movement. Not because I disagreed with it, but simply because I had decided to take a step back: I continued to actively collaborate with *Le Monde libertaire*, our newspaper.

I became increasingly involved with the Brazilian anarchist movement following two six-week trips I made to the country in 2014 and 2017. I had a contact in Sao Paulo, a small militant publisher who was doing extraordinary work spreading anarchist ideas. He contacted me one day to ask if he could translate and publish one of my texts. Since then, he has published about ten of them, I haven't counted. We discovered that we had deep intellectual affinities and became very close.

It was undoubtedly thanks to him that I was then contacted by Brazilian anarchists, and one thing leading to another, in 2014 they invited me to give a series of lectures on the bicentenary of Bakunin.⁸ I stayed for six weeks, travelling around different cities and meeting some great guys and girls. Then they invited me back in 2017, again for six weeks, for the centenary of the Russian Revolution.⁹ During my two stays, I made some strong friendships and found the Brazilian anarchist movement very interesting. That's when I started doing a lot of translations of texts for Brazil, but also for Portugal, where I had also been invited several times.

My stay in Brazil led me, *at the request of Brazilian comrades*, to take an interest in the book by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame*, which aims to provide a general overview of the international libertarian movement. It is an extremely interesting book with a laudable objective, but it is based on questionable methodological assumptions and debatable concepts. My comrades were concerned because the book was beginning to influence many researchers in Brazilian universities and risked imposing a false vision of anarchism. I therefore spent a lot of time analysing the book, translating some of my analyses into English¹⁰ and Portuguese.

I had long noticed that a lot of nonsense was circulating in the North American anarchist movement about Proudhon, spread in particular by the

⁷ See:

[Georges Fontenis : Journey of an adventurist of the Libertarian movement](https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article371) (part 1)
<https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article371>

[Georges Fontenis : Journey of an adventurist of the Libertarian movement](https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article376) (part 2)
<https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article376>

⁸ See: <https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?rubrique15>

⁹ R. Berthier, *Octobre 1917: Le Thermidor de la Révolution russe*,
<https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article463>

¹⁰ Concerning 'Black Flame', <https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?rubrique66>

‘platformist’ current. I had begun translating two chapters of Pierre Ansart’s *Sociologie de Proudhon*, a sociologist well known in France, and uploaded them to monde-nouveau.net. I was then contacted by American anarchists who offered to translate the other chapters and publish the book, which came out some time later at AK Press.

Now, at the age of 78, I spend most of my time writing, translating and maintaining contacts around the world, mainly Brazil, the United States, Australia, Portugal and Spain.

5. What is your personal understanding of ‘anarchism’? What attracted (and/or still attracts) you to anarchist politics? Do you identify as an anarchist now? If so, why? If not, why not?

To be honest, I don’t really consider myself an anarchist, but rather an anarcho-syndicalist.

Leaving aside the interest I felt in anarchism from 1967 onwards as a student attracted by the spectacular or heroic aspects of the movement’s history – the Makhnovist epic, the Spanish Revolution – my ‘integration’ into anarchism came about partly through a chance encounter with Gaston Leval, and partly through an awareness of my condition as a wage earner and my contact with anarchist activists in my workplace.

As for my understanding of anarchism, it comes naturally from my reading, my personal experience as an activist, but also greatly from the contacts I have had with activists of my generation who had more experience than me, as well as from my many contacts with older activists who had lived through the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. Oral exchanges played a huge role in shaping my anarchist consciousness, both during meetings and afterwards, when we would meet up in cafés or restaurants. That was where the older activists would tell us fascinating stories that you would never find in history books.

In my view, anarchism is a movement that emerged in the mid-19th century from the convergence of two factors:

1. Humanity’s age-old tendency to fight against political oppression and economic exploitation; on a practical level by the creation, by the workers of Europe and America¹¹, of their first organisations of resistance and struggle.

2. The industrial revolution and the formation of the modern labour movement and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s elaboration of a workers’ philosophy, taken up and developed by Bakunin, advocating the total separation of the working class from the bourgeoisie and the State.

The movement then quickly spread across the globe, either through the emigration of anarchist activists who took their beliefs with them, as in Latin America, or through the presence of workers or students who came to Europe and then spread anarchist ideas to the Far East.

I don’t believe that anarchism dates back to Lao Tzu or Epictetus or whoever: that’s a false debate, but I do think that throughout human history there has been an unbroken line of men and women fighting against oppression and exploitation. Anarchism is simply part of this line, but it is

11 When I talk about America, I mean America, not the United States.

absurd to say that Lao Tzu was an ‘anarchist.’ Some authors can, however, be considered *precursors*, such as William Godwin, provided that one is also aware of all the aspects of his thinking that are *not* anarchist. (Incidentally, my master’s thesis in the Sorbonne was on Godwin).

Anarchism is a current within the labour movement which, to borrow Proudhon’s words, fights against the economic exploitation of capital, the political oppression of the state and the ideological alienation of religion.¹² These three axes of struggle are inseparable, and anarchism cannot in any way be defined solely by the struggle against the state.

But it was, above all, through the practical experience of social struggle and class solidarity within the International Workers’ Association that the collectivist or revolutionary socialist movement (later called ‘anarchist’) emerged as an organised mass movement.

As a result, in my opinion, the idea of ‘individualist anarchism’ makes no sense. Anarchism is a comprehensive political doctrine, holistic I would say, which includes a reflection on all phenomena of society and contains, *among other things*, a theory of the individual within a global reflection. No one was more interested in the question of the individual than Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, but for them the individual is part of society and can only develop within society.

Anarchist individualism appeared late, and paradoxically Engels is partly responsible for this because he made great efforts to persuade people that Bakunin was a supporter of Stirner, who is anything but an anarchist.¹³ One cannot cut a political and social doctrine into slices of salami.

Things really began for anarchism during the years of the First International, during which Bakunin contributed to the development of the doctrine.

But in my opinion, we need to put Bakunin’s actual role in developing anarchist doctrine into perspective. Like Proudhon before him, he was primarily an *observer* of the practices of the labour movement of his time, and it was from these practices that he somehow ‘deduced’ the doctrine. This in no way diminishes the merit of either man, but it shows that anarchism is a *natural* product of the working class (I prefer to say ‘natural’ rather than ‘spontaneous’). I deduce from this, that the development of anarchism is a process that follows the experimental method, unlike Marxism, which is primarily an intellectual production.

The formation of the so-called ‘anti-authoritarian’ IWA in Saint-Imier in 1872 was not a new International resulting from an ‘anarchist’ split, as can often be read in bourgeois and Marxist publications, and unfortunately also sometimes in anarchist literature. This is incorrect. The Saint-Imier congress was nothing more than an extraordinary congress, which decided to reject the decisions of the previous ordinary congress and amended the organisation’s articles of association. The ‘anti-authoritarian’ International

12 ‘God in religion, the state in politics, property in economics: these are the three forms under which humanity, having become alienated from itself, has continually torn itself apart with its own hands.’ (*System of Economic Contradictions*.)

13 See: R. Berthier, ‘Stirner, the Individual and Society’

<https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article1039>

See also (in French): *Lire Stirner*, <https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article291>

was the same as the one founded in London in 1864, and the congresses that followed merely continued the numbering of the previous congresses.

It was at the Saint-Imier International Congress in 1872 that anarchism began to emerge, which the recently founded Italian Federation had already claimed. This congress affirmed that ‘the autonomy and independence of workers’ federations and sections are the first condition of workers’ emancipation’. The congress also proposed the conclusion of a ‘pact of friendship, solidarity and mutual defence between free federations’, establishing direct correspondence and joint defence between them, for ‘the salvation of this great unity of the International’. Finally, the congress declared that ‘the destruction of all political power is the first duty of the proletariat’, that ‘any organisation of a so-called provisional and revolutionary political power to bring about this destruction can only be one more deception and would be as dangerous for the proletariat as all the governments existing today’, and that ‘the proletarians of every land must establish solidarity of revolutionary action outside of all bourgeois politics.’

The ‘anti-authoritarian’ IWA survived for a few more years after the Saint-Imier congress, but in 1878 it was decided not to convene any more congresses. A lot had changed in terms of mentalities, but also in the society of the time. The 1872 Saint-Imier congress had been a remarkable success for the IWA’s federalist current, but a few years later, it literally vanished into thin air. As far as I know, the causes of the decline of the ‘anti-authoritarian’ IWA have not been analysed by the anarchist movement.

My reflections on anarchist history and theory have led me to conclusions that are perhaps not very ‘orthodox’. It was with the end of the International Working Men’s Association that the history of the anarchist movement as a specific political movement began. But it was also at this time that, within the ‘anti-authoritarian’ movement, a separation gradually developed between a current that could be described as ‘pre-revolutionary syndicalist’ and a current that called itself anarchist.¹⁴

The rift within the ‘anti-authoritarian’ movement – which had existed for some years – took shape at the Verviers congress (September 1877), when those who now clearly called themselves anarchists led the IWA to adopt an anarchist program, thus doing precisely what Bakunin had criticised Marx for wanting to do. Bakunin had always said that the International should not have a compulsory program, because the international labour movement was not homogeneous in its development. Only gradually could a program emerge, through the debate of ideas. Imposing a single program would inevitably lead the various currents to try to impose their own program, and ultimately to split, at which point, said the Russian revolutionary, there would be ‘as many Internationals as there were different programs’.¹⁵ This is exactly what happened. The IWA had to focus absolutely on its task of uniting the proletariat of all countries into a single organisation and implementing international solidarity. By changing the nature of the IWA, transforming it from a class organisation into an affinity group, the ‘anarchists’ broke with the principles that had been affirmed by Bakunin and

14 See: René Berthier, *Social-democracy and anarchism in the International Worker's Association*, Anarres editions, 2015.

15 Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*.

contributed to the departure of federations that did not identify with the anarchist programme.¹⁶

This split would later manifest itself in practice, in the debates between collectivists and communist anarchists, and in theory, between the defenders of the thesis 'to each according to their work' and the defenders of the thesis 'to each according to their needs.' This debate is still ongoing today, regardless of the fact that it is completely outdated.

The entire history of the anarchist movement is marked by this opposition, which in certain circumstances took violent and sometimes tragic forms, as in Spain and in Argentina.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that there is a deep affinity between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism (or anarcho-syndicalism) and that the existence of a mass libertarian movement was only possible when these currents managed to achieve a symbiosis, perhaps not without conflict, but in which the points of agreement prevailed: it is true that when revolutionary syndicalism was deprived of its libertarian compass, it drifted away. The same applies to anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism.

I want to try to show that these two visions of revolutionary action reveal, in fact, two approaches, the first inherited from Bakunin and the second from Kropotkin; that the theoretical arguments on which this division is based are unfounded; and that this opposition is now completely outdated. The tragedy of the anarchist movement today, and one of the reasons for its confidential nature, undoubtedly lies in the difficulty of finding an effective form of complementarity and collaboration between these two currents.

When the International Worker's Association disappeared in 1878, it was no longer a mass organisation for two reasons¹⁷: first, its membership had collapsed, except in Spain; second, its sociological structure had been transformed: it had become an affinity organisation dominated by various anarchist intellectuals.

The period following the dissolution of the anti-authoritarian International saw the development of the collectivism/anarchist-communism 'debate' within the anarchist movement. This debate, initiated by Italian militants, taken up and theorised by Kropotkin, was largely a false debate and represented a real break with Bakunin's positions; it manifested itself in different ways and in different countries, but basically ended up taking the form of a syndicalism/anarchism debate. This 'debate,' which was in reality an opposition between two visions of anarchism, took on great proportions in France and Spain, even if the protagonists were not necessarily aware of its origin and nature:

- The collectivists, heirs of Bakunin, who believed in the need to create union-type organisations, bringing workers together in the field of class struggle, were the precursors of revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-

16 This question is discussed in R. Berthier, *Social-Democracy & Anarchism in the International Workers' Association 1864-1877*, The Merlin Press Ltd

17 By mass organisation, I mean an organisation that brings together workers based on their role in the production process and not on the basis of an ideology or political programme. This definition implicitly implies that the organisation actually brings together a significant proportion of the population in question.

syndicalism. They supported the principle of ‘to each according to their work’;

- Anarchist communists, formed under the impetus of Italian militants, especially Malatesta and Cafiero, but also Pierre Kropotkin¹⁸, wanted to form affinity groups based on locality. They supported the principle of ‘to each according to their needs.’

I will not go into detail on this debate, which is based on the one hand on a misunderstanding of the collectivist point of view by anarchist communists, and on the other hand (like the synthesism/platformism debate) is completely outdated.

Let us simply say that the collectivists who supported Bakunin never intended to limit the right to consumption to those who work, strictly speaking, as the anarchist communists would have us believe: they simply wanted to exclude social parasites (bosses, priests, cops, judges, etc.), which obviously does not include the elderly workers, schoolchildren, the sick, housewives, etc. Furthermore, the kropotkinian slogan ‘to each according to their needs’ is a slogan that makes sense in a society of scarcity where not everyone has access to the bare minimum: it does not apply in a society where most consumption needs are not individual but collective: health, transport, education, energy, etc. which was obviously not the case in 1870 or 1890.

These are aspects of anarchist thinking that require us not to cling to concepts from the past and that need to be updated.

6. Does anarchism have any role to play in contemporary politics? Does it have a future? If so, what might that future look like?

There is no doubt that the anarchist movement will not make the revolution alone, that if a major social upheaval takes place, it will have to reckon with the presence of other organisations, other political projects, make compromises and form alliances. However, historical experience has shown that when it comes to alliances with Marxism, ‘fair play’ has rarely prevailed.

Today’s Marxists are trying to challenge the most ‘authoritarian’ aspects of their political heritage, which is to be welcomed. Unfortunately, this challenge is being carried out by obliterating disagreements rather than by re-examining contentious issues.¹⁹

18 ‘Libertarian communism’ was proclaimed by Andrea Costa, Errico Malatesta, Carlo Cafiero and Covelli in 1876 at the Florence Congress of the Italian Federation of the IWA.

19 The best and most recent example of this obliteration can be found in a book entitled ‘Revolutionary Affinities’, in which the two authors, leaders of a former Trotskyist party that has converted to left-wing social democracy, attempt to appease libertarians and highlight the “alliances and solidarity between the two movements”. The discourse in this book gives the appearance of a desire for rapprochement and dialogue, but this is not the case at all. They blunt the differences between anarchism and Marxism. When one reads that the Bolsheviks helped the masses to “organise the socialisation of production at the base”, one immediately understands that one is no longer in a “historical” register. https://www.monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/interview_affinites.pdf and https://www.monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/affinites_intro.pdf

Anarchists believe that daily militant action should be the prefiguration of the emancipated society they want to build. Their opposition to electoral activity is not a metaphysical opposition. They fully understand the arguments put forward by the 'radical left' to justify the incredible efforts devoted to this activity, which has no hope of success: 'to make ourselves known', 'to make our voice heard', 'to count ourselves', etc. I believe that these efforts are futile, a waste of time and energy, and a huge factor in demoralising activists. We have also observed that all socialist parties, at the beginning of their history, claimed that they were only presenting candidates for 'propaganda purposes'.

There have been two types of conjunction between Marxists and anarchists. The first was on the ground. But in reality, these were not alliances with Marxists *per se*, but strategic choices made by anarchists who, for reasons of circumstance, were moving in the same direction as the communist movement, because when it came to choosing between reaction and the working class, anarchists never mistook their enemies – even if they didn't always have the friends they should have needed...

We do not know what tomorrow's revolution will be like, the one that will finally liberate the forces of society and enable it to march towards its emancipation, but as Bakunin said, 'a political program has no value if it deals only with vague generalities. It must specify precisely what institutions are to replace those that are to be overthrown or reformed.'²⁰

No doubt the revolution, if there is to be one, will take completely unexpected forms. We cannot even say that it will be a revolution in the usual sense of the word. Perhaps it will be the consequence of an ecological catastrophe on an unprecedented scale. Perhaps it will be the result of a series of violent upheavals. No one can say. However, we can define a few prerequisites.

- A significant proportion of the population must be aware of the need for fundamental social transformation.
- This population must first be organised in such a way as to be able to take control of production, distribution, etc., on the one hand, and to organise its existence locally, regionally, etc., on the other.
- This population will need to be educated about how the political and economic organisation of society works in order to be able to immediately restart the wheels of society.

Unfortunately, I believe that today's anarchists overlook two things of paramount importance:

1. The reasons why the anarchist movement is so small.
2. The incredible capacity for repression acquired by states and para-statal organisations.

On the first point: A minimum of historical perspective shows us that revolutionary movements have been able to develop in contexts where there was no mediation between the working class and the capitalist class, with the state serving as the protector of the latter. By mediation, I mean any institution that can encourage the two antagonistic classes to negotiate: parties, trade unions, parliamentarianism, various associations, etc.

²⁰ Bakunin, 'Écrit contre Marx'.

This was the case in Western Europe throughout the 19th century, where any serious workers' demands were met with troops, who opened fire. Similarly, we see that whenever universal suffrage and parliamentarianism were introduced into relations between the working class and the capitalist class, revolutionary movements declined and disappeared.

Thus, in Belgium, the Bakuninist current of the IWA was powerful, but after two very violent general strikes that established universal suffrage, the revolutionary current disappeared.

In France, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists advocated direct action and confrontation with the state, until a series of workers' defeats between 1908 and 1910 led the confederal leadership to opt for negotiation rather than confrontation: it was during this period that the decline of revolutionary syndicalism can be identified.

The case of Germany is different: there was never a revolutionary movement before the end of the First World War because the state had granted universal suffrage in 1871.

The situation in Spain is the opposite. There has been talk of a 'Spanish exception', which is absurd. The crass stupidity of the country's ruling classes led them to categorically reject any form of social mediation, which meant that a worker or peasant simply could not be reformist: as soon as he went on strike, the state or the bosses' thugs shot him. This is why a revolutionary movement was able to survive long after it had disappeared elsewhere in Europe.

Concerning the second point: it seems to me that there is a total misunderstanding of the capacity of anarchists (many of them, at least) to realise the incredible extent of the means of repression and surveillance of any opposition movement as soon as it exceeds certain limits. This misunderstanding is particularly evident among the 'Black Blocs', who genuinely believe they are destabilising the state when all they are doing is strengthening it. A film illustrates my point perfectly: 'Enemy of the State' with Will Smith, released almost thirty years ago – it is easy to imagine the progress that has been made in surveillance since then. It seems to me that today's anarchist movement has not learned the lessons of the past and continues to rely on a narrative that belongs to the past, preventing it from implementing a strategy for the future.

I would like to highlight one last point concerning the legacy of anarchism in French society today. It is not, in fact, a direct and conscious legacy. In 17th-century French theatre, there is a character, Monsieur Jourdain, who spoke prose without knowing it. It could be said that French society has unknowingly adopted two specifically anarchist ideas, one developed by Bakunin and the other by Proudhon, which were rooted in the collective consciousness of the working class.

1. The federalist structure of trade union organisation. This structure consists of two levels, horizontal (geographical) and vertical (industrial). In practical terms, these are the labour exchanges, which are federated among themselves, and the industrial unions, which are federated among themselves. This structure, which allows for struggle both in the workplace

and in the locality, was described in detail by Bakunin²¹ and can be found in the CGT of the historical period, and it still exists today. It was the merger of these two structures in 1902 that truly constituted the CGT.

2. Mutualism. The “historic” CGT, that of the revolutionary syndicalist period, had developed alongside its protest activity, a set of mutualist structures linked to mutual aid, education and leisure, to which the activists devoted themselves and which constituted *a full aspect* of their activity. Emma Goldman gave an eloquent account of the existence of these mutualist organisations.²²

The militants who committed themselves to mutualism did the same thing as those who were unionised – they were most of the times the same people, moreover – they engaged in militant demands. Devoting oneself to mutualism did not mean that the capitalist system would collapse as a result, but a large mutualist sector would have provided a basis for the reorganisation of society after the revolution because the structures were in place and many men and women had concrete experience of organisation in the sectors concerned. This is what happened in Spain: the workers organised in the CNT already had experience of self-organisation. Mutualism is still very much alive in France today: it forms the very foundation of the country's healthcare system.

When I say that federalism and mutualism are still very much alive in France, I do not mean to attribute direct paternity of these two principles to Bakunin and Proudhon: simply, based on their observations of the labour movement, both men described and elaborated principles that were deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the working class. The first paradox is that when the communists took control of the CGT, they were never able to change the federalist structure of the organisation. The second paradox is that the social security system established after World War II, along with other measures of Proudhonian inspiration, was the work of a communist minister...²³

I have been a CGT activist for over 40 years, and I have observed that the involvement of the union militants in the mutualist structures created by the CGT or supported by it has constituted an important part of their activity in the fields of health, leisure, holiday camps for children, etc. and that there was no hierarchy between strictly protest-based activity and mutualist activity.

7. Any final remarks?

Since the 1990s we are witnessing the emergence of social movements that have developed ‘libertarian’ practices: assemblies, rejection of parties and trade union hierarchies, anti-globalisation, horizontalism, etc. The significant extension of protest movements organised in a ‘horizontal’ way and opposed to their manipulation by political parties, shows that ‘real

21 See: René Berthier, “Bakounine, une théorie de l’organisation”, https://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/1-bakounine_une_theorie_de_l_organisation.pdf

22 Emma Goldman, ‘Syndicalism, The Modern Menace to Capitalism’, Mother Earth Publishing Association, 55 West 28th Street, New York, 1913

23 See: René Berthier, ‘Mutualism and Gradualism in Proudhon’, https://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/mutualism_and_gradualism_in_proudhon.pdf

things' happen outside all 'official' revolutionary organisations, including anarchists.

It must be said that the 'horizontalism' that is often claimed, if it is limited to that, has little to do with the anarchism whose organisational model is *federalism*, consisting of both a horizontal *and* a vertical structure, both operating in cooperation. Horizontalism is a form that can be effective at first in a period of struggle because it allows to react in real time. But permanent assembly, which is the characteristic of horizontalism, presents a danger that Proudhon had denounced: it allows people who have the means to be constantly present to take power.

There is nothing easier than manipulating a general assembly. Moreover, if horizontalism allows for one-off action in a restricted space, it is inevitable to resort to federalism if the organisation, or action, takes on a large scale and for a long period of time. In this case, abuses can be avoided by establishing procedures for the control and revocation of mandates.

Can we imagine tomorrow determining the energy policy, the distribution of water, the organisation of transport, etc., of millions and millions of people by holding permanent assemblies?

Compared to what I experienced when I was a young activist, today's anarchism leaves me perplexed. I feel like it's going in all directions.

First of all, its themes are being appropriated by a bunch of people I refuse to consider anarchists, such as the famous 'French philosophers': Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, and Lyotard, who are not anarchists in any sense of the word, and who, it could even be said, know very little about anarchism.

Then I discovered that there is an 'anarcho-Islam' that attempts to justify the existence of 'Islamic anarchism' based on the Koran and on Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault!²⁴

And then 'post-anarchism' was invented, according to which the state and capitalism are no longer the same enemies as before; new approaches are therefore needed to combat them. I dispute the legitimacy of the concept of post-anarchism. The authors who serve as references for 'post-anarchism' seem to me to be relatively ignorant of the founding texts of anarchism, and their commentators even more so. The updating of anarchist thought in a society that no longer has much in common with the one known to Proudhon and Bakunin is necessary, but if you want to move beyond anarchism (sorry: 'deconstruct' it...), you must first know what it is made of. 'Post-anarchism' is in fact a diversion created by authors who have absolutely no connection with the labour movement or any social protest movement, who have decided to appropriate a number of themes from anarchism, challenge others, add their own issues and call it 'post-anarchism'.

This is by no means a case of desperately clinging to the 'classical' authors: it cannot be denied that society has evolved and that new approaches must be defined to combat capitalism and the state. Significantly, Bakunin considered this work necessary, asserting the need for a science of 'general laws governing all developments in human

24 *Anarca-Islam*, Mohamed Jean VENEUSE, 2009. A thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology. Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada (August, 2009). (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mohamed-jean-veneuse-anarca-islam>)

society': this science is sociology, but, says Bakunin, it is 'a science barely born', it is 'still searching for its elements' and it will take 'at least a century to establish itself definitively and become a serious science'.²⁵ We can therefore see that there is no rejection on the part of the 'classical authors' of anarchism of the constant updating of the doctrine. Anarchism is not a frozen ideology.

There is another observation that would have greatly surprised the young activists that we were in the 1970s and 1980s, and which still surprises me today: anarchism has become an honourable subject of study in universities. It has even become a means of earning a living. Lots of people are paid to study and write about anarchism. As Jeff Shantz writes,²⁶ we see that 'there has been substantial growth in the numbers of people in academic positions who identify as anarchists. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that unlike any other time in history, the last ten years have seen anarchists carve out spaces in the halls of academia.' He adds:

'The flourishing of anarchism in the academy is also reflected in other key markers of professional academic activity. These include: Academic articles focusing on varying aspects of anarchist theory and practice; the publication of numerous books on anarchism by most of the major academic presses; and growing numbers of courses dealing in some way with anarchism or including anarchism within the course content. There have also emerged, perhaps ironically enough, professionally recognised associations and networks of anarchist researchers, such as the Anarchist Studies Network of the Political Science Association in Britain. Suddenly it is almost hip to be an anarchist academic.'²⁷

Of course, it is a good thing that intellectuals are interested in and write about anarchism, if only to counterbalance the Marxist hegemony in universities, which our Brazilian comrades also complained about. However, I am not sure how subversive this situation is: during the years of Bolsonaro's authoritarian regime in Brazil, studies on anarchism, which had been flourishing, did not decline, suggesting that they did not disturb the system.

All this raises the question of the relationship between intellectuals and the masses. The question is whether the work of these academics can serve to educate the masses or simply to provide material to justify their institutions paying them a salary. For Bakunin, the relationship between intellectuals and the masses was one of *collaboration*, not domination, as Lenin understood it. However, while today's academics working on anarchism are obviously not seeking to dominate the masses, from whom they are in fact distant, it remains to be seen whether they are establishing a relationship of collaboration with them. I recognise, however, that academics cannot limit themselves to educating the masses: freedom of

25 Bakounine, *Fédéralisme, socialisme, antithéologisme*.

26 Jeff Shantz, 'Anarchism in the academy', <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jeff-shantz-anarchism-in-the-academy>

27 Shantz *loc.cit.*

research also justifies their engaging in something equivalent to 'fundamental research' in the field of anarchism.

The old dinosaur that I am cannot help but be surprised to see anarchist educational institutions offering scholarships! It's completely the world turned upside down! But perhaps the dinosaur will have to adapt...