



Our discussions - About the Manifesto of the Sixteen - M. Isidine, Auguste Bertrand, Jean Wintsch and M. Pierrot

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To the series of considerations issued on this subject by comrades in the columns of *Plus Loin*, I would like to add a few words. This disagreement in anarchist circles has been going on for years, and neither time nor events seem to have taught either side anything. Every time this point is touched, the anger flares up again with new force. And yet, hasn't the importance of this disagreement been exaggerated? Is it not amplified by a kind of autosuggestion, by the habit of arguments, always the same ? Let us remember how many of those who later called the signatories of the "Manifesto of the Sixteen" renegades were, in the early days of the war, ardent supporters of the resistance to the German armies marching on Paris. Let us also remember that when, in 1912, during the Balkan War, the *Temps Nouveaux* published articles by Kropotkin and Cherkessoff expressing more or less the same opinions as those that were to arouse so much indignation later, no one dared to cry treason. It is clear that the differences of opinion did not acquire their gigantic proportions in the eyes of the comrades until later and gradually.

Can it be said, in fact, that the outcome of *any war* - except a civil war - is indifferent to us ? There are wars where the outcome decides the political or national independence of peoples ; there are wars where the victory of one of the adversaries can lead to a strong general reaction. Let us suppose that a power or coalition of powers currently declares war on Russia. Whatever our opinion of Russia's present internal regime, the Russian Revolution itself is of such value that we cannot remain indifferent to a danger that threatens its conquests. It is indisputable that such a war would bring the old world face to face with the beginnings of a new life, albeit in the form of a conflict between two states and two armies.

One can discuss whether a particular combatant is worth defending, or whether the outcome of the war will take mankind a step forward or a step back, but one must not make a question of assessment or prediction of events into a question of principle of the first importance.

There is another side to the question that seems to have been overlooked until now. Yes, there is undoubtedly a contradiction in the attitude of the anarchists who, in the Great War, sided with one of the adversaries. We must not close our eyes to this. It cannot be denied that taking part in a war is a violation of pacifist and anti-militarist principles, that joining an army and submitting to discipline is a major concession. But wasn't this lack of logic inherent in life itself? Could the anarchists escape this contradiction? And didn't those who had taken the opposite point of view fall into an equally flagrant contradiction, although in the opposite direction? In reality, there was no escaping it. For if participation in war violates pacifist and anti-militarist principles, non-resistance to invading armies is at least as great a violation of the primordial principle of resistance to oppression, at least as great an abandonment of the spirit of revolt. These conflicts are the work of life itself. The most serious is that which confronts the conscience of every revolutionary: on the one hand, the indisputable principle of the inviolability of human life and personality; on the other, the right to insurrection and revolutionary struggle in the name of the emancipation of that same human personality. We have to choose, just as we had to choose at the time of the war. And even abstention and inaction are no solution: non-resistance to evil is always, in reality, a service rendered to the strongest. One way or another, anarchists were obliged to weigh their opinions in the balance. Now, of the two principles in conflict, which is the more general, the more profound, the more precious: the pacifist and anti-militarist principle or the principle of resistance to oppression? Unquestionably the latter. Anti-militarism is just one *particular* form of opposition to the state, just as war is just one *particular* manifestation of the capitalist and hierarchical organisation of society. On the contrary, the idea of resistance, of the struggle against strong power, of the defence of the rights and liberties of every social grouping, of the struggle against reaction in all its forms, is the fundamental idea of anarchism. It is true that both tendencies can be pushed to absurd extremes and distort the true face of the anarchist movement, but it is not under this abnormal aspect that they should be represented in a serious discussion.

At the moment, moreover, the question seems to have shifted slightly: the focus is on the results of the war, on whether the reaction has become stronger or weaker, on what things would have been like if Germany had won, etc. The current reaction strengthens the thesis of the opponents of participation in the war, that is a fact but if events had turned out differently, the reaction that would have followed Germany's victory would have been the same. But if events had turned out differently, the reaction which would have followed Germany's victory would likewise have strengthened the opposite thesis and would have changed the opinion of anarchist circles accordingly.

Under these conditions, the question loses its acuteness: it is no longer a question of the anarchist principles of the authors of the Manifesto, but of their political perspicacity: were they mistaken when they believed that the game was worth the candle? But can the question thus posed retain the importance it has been given and prevent comrades from working together, separated only by a different appreciation of the political situation at a given moment?

Marie Isidine

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I'm afraid at the root of all this prose is a misunderstanding.

Descarsins is "deeply saddened that, in all the comments that have appeared, it is not possible to glimpse the slightest outstretched perch that would allow a rapprochement, a reconciliation between the anarchists of *Plus Loin* and all the others.... In posing the question of the Manifesto, it was in this sense that he hoped to see it resolved."

That's not how it was posed, and that's not why *Plus Loin* put it on the agenda. We were told in essence : many young comrades know the Manifesto only from the tendentious or insulting interpretations that have been made of it. For them it is an article of faith that it is in flagrant contradiction with anarchist doctrine. It would be useful, from all points of view, to give the signatories the opportunity to explain the reasons for their attitude.

But this is not enough to restore anarchist unity, which the Manifesto appears to have irreparably compromised. The defendants were expected to plead guilty, invoking extenuating circumstances, in return for which, because of their good record, they could have been given a suspended sentence. However, they were no more willing to make amends than the other anarchists were willing to absolve them.

It is quite natural for followers to separate from their masters when they believe they have good reason to do so, and it is not in this journal of free examination, which is constantly opposed to the doctrinaire spirit, that this will be found to be wrong. If political parties, for electoral or recruitment purposes, are obliged to reconcile the contradictory tendencies of their congresses in motions of unanimity where majorities and minorities strive for the necessary mutual concessions, anarchists do not need such disciplines, they can afford the luxury of total independence of thought.

It was this independence of thought that was claimed by the signatories of the Manifesto of February-March 1916 and the contributors to the *Enquête sur les conditions d'une Paix durable*, of January-June 1917. With the articles published in *Plus Loin*, it is no longer possible to ignore their point of view, nor to expect from them some belated disavowal that might finally dilate the souls of other anarchists.

Auguste Bertrand

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It seems that my little point of order about the Manifeste des Seize earned the editor of *Plus Loin* a heap of insults, two or three friendly and civil replies, a few newspaper articles in a serious tone, as befits. In this concert of recriminations, one voice is predominant it is that of the *Réveil Anarchiste* of Geneva. As Bertoni represents for himself and for some Italian workers (at a certain period of their existence) the purified, severe, definitive anarchist truth, I think it useful to bring to the record a fact I have already had occasion to give.

In 1914, before the Marne, the Germans were descending on Paris at a rate of fifty kilometres a day. He was appalled at what was about to happen: "It would be a dreadful disaster," he told me, "if the Germans beat the French; there would be monarchical and military oppression all over Europe, and any fight for freedom would be compromised."

Finally, six days later, the Congress of the Federation of Workers' Unions was held in Lausanne, and I declared that the violation of Belgium was a monstrosity, that in the name of the ideas of freedom and justice that we defended, we should support the cause of the Allies, and in any case protest against the German invaders, because there would be no internationalism as long as one nation was subjugated by another. I was painfully astonished to hear Citizen Bertoni reply that these questions did not concern us, that for the working class there was only one enemy, capitalism, and that by siding with Belgium we would become allies of the bourgeois governments of France and England, imperialists like those of Germany, and so on.

So what! between the four eyes, people were anxious about the French, and, in public, they doctrinally tried to lump them in with the Germans! There was a truth for the augurs and a truth for the people.

That was the beginning of our separation.

If Bertoni expressed concern in 1914, that only honours him, because it showed that he was human, and a man who vibrates, who suffers, who seeks, is always moving. The fact that Bertoni then boasts, and has done so for fourteen years, that he has always had a clear and categorical opinion on the 1914 war does not do him any particular credit, for what will be left of his clear-sightedness if it is proved - which is entirely plausible - that the 1914 war did not follow Marxist theses and that its causes were not essentially capitalist?

Jean Wintsch

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What Wintsch reports is interesting from the point of view of the psychology of certain propagandists.

I can confirm what I observed myself about a few anarchists who remained neutral for fear of compromising themselves. They confessed to me, "between four eyes", that without espousing the nationalist madness they had trembled for the defeat of France [1].

Some propagandists end up with such a professional deformation that they don't dare tell the whole truth, or at least what they think, deep down, is the truth, for fear of diminishing themselves or their influence on their followers - perhaps also because they believe, like Christian propagandists, otherwise known as priests, that you mustn't tell the whole truth to the people, because they wouldn't understand, and, by the same token, propaganda (or religion) would be compromised.

Many people are confused and disorientated when they find themselves in exceptional situations or faced with morally complex phenomena. They are only able to follow their immediate interests or habits.

Here, for example, are the common people, especially those who earn a miserable living. Many of them have no sense of freedom. I remember, some twenty years ago, giving my services to cobblers, some of whom, factory workers, were socialists, and the others, shop assistants, were anarchists. It is probable that chance had favoured me, and that men of all political opinions would have been found among both factory workers and craftsmen. It is none the less true, *allowing for exceptions due to the character* of each individual and his temperament, that the poor devil, the labourer, is often content with socialist demands for immediate and assured material well-being, and accepts Bolshevik state communism. A craftsman, an independent or skilled worker, will often want more: he will demand moral well-being, freedom, and his demands will take on an anti-statist character.

Among these, some will leave it at that, "they will place themselves on the terrain of the working class alone, which for them is the entity they feel, while the others feel something wider, more abstract too, civilised society, the interests of a civilisation, something more broadly human, which is close to our hearts, because we have been able to benefit from it, if only through our education."

This sentence, which I detached from a particular letter by Wintsch, seems to me to correspond to a psychological reality. Of course, education has no effect on the selfish bourgeois, on those who understand only their own interests or the interests of their class, or whose ideals amount at most to national self-love. But there is no possible confusion between these bourgeois and a Marcus Aurelius who defended the Roman Empire against the incursions of the Barbarians, or Kropotkin who took the initiative of the Manifesto of the Sixteen.

So what is patriotism from a psychological point of view?

It is the state of mind of individuals who project their self-esteem and need for superiority onto the group, team, corps or nation to which they belong. However intimate they may be, because of their individual inferiority, and to escape the feeling of inferiority, they make it a point of honour to belong to a group that is superior to the others. In this way, esprit de corps and patriotism can be explained by the vanity and jactance with which the members of each community adorn themselves, and by the contempt they profess towards outsiders.

It is certain that this state of mind cannot be attributed to any of the signatories of the Manifesto. I believe, on the contrary, that among our adversaries, several anarchist propagandists have remained at the stage of feeling inferior. I am not talking about those who did not feel the interests of civilisation and who in good faith refused to take sides. I am talking about those who, having given up trying to make the simplistic crowd understand the momentary necessity of joining a war of defence, did not want to appear to public opinion as having been bankrupted by events. Fanaticism seemed preferable to the situation of inferiority, which was too painful for their self-esteem.

It is not for them to attribute to us feelings and ideas that are not our own, to blame us for the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Trianon. They are behaving like public speakers, for whom bad faith is the rule and who only understand the satisfactions of vanity. The amusing thing is that they reproach us for our vanity, judging us by their yardstick.

Even those of our opponents who are in good faith, even those who, like Descarsins, are our friends, cannot resist making generalisations in the course of the discussion which distort our thinking. For example, according to Descarsins, we are obliged to take sides in any war and to side with one of the belligerents, and so on. All we have to do is accept this starting point and, with our eyes closed, by which I mean without observing anything and using only logical reasoning, we will arrive at irrefutable conclusions.

The psychology of the reasoner is not enough to transform facts to his liking, any more than logic can replace experience and observation. I would even go so far as to say that logic is a dangerous tool when it comes to biological and sociological facts, because of their complexity. It often only gives the illusion of being right and leads to fanaticism, such as Tolstoyism.

On the substance of the subject, I refer readers to Isidine's article, and urge them to read it a second time.

Mr Pierrot

Notes

[1] I'm not talking about those who were the playthings of their sentimental oscillations : first afflicted with chauvinist madness, a few later became fiery Zimmerwaldians and switched to Bolshevism, for no further reason.