

[Home](#) [Anarchism\(s\)](#) [2 - Anarchism\(s\) between the wars \(1915-1939\)](#) [Plus Loin \(1925-1939\)](#)



The debate on the Manifesto of the Sixteen - a letter from Descarsins - Descarsins and M.Pierrot

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I would like to respond, in *Plus Loin*, to the comments that have been published on the Manifeste des Seize. But I don't feel up to doing so with all the breadth that would be appropriate, because the debate is expanding singularly. It is no longer just a question of knowing whether or not the signatories of the Manifesto were right - and there are a thousand arguments against them on this point - but the discussion itself poses the problem of the attitude of anarchists in war. Are we going to accept as a point of anarchist tactics that we should, in any war, intervene by aligning ourselves under the banner of one of the belligerents? Following the comrades of *Plus Loin* in their reasoning, such should nevertheless be our attitude, since, inevitably, there will arise in any government-to-government conflict, one of the latter who will be less wrong than the other, who will be less imperialist, or more revolutionary, etc. It remains to be seen, then, what benefit the peoples can derive from any war whatsoever - and by that I mean the people who die from war - or even what gain the world workers' and revolutionary movement can derive from it, or again what benefit civilisation - not mythical civilisation, but civilisation which results in the well-being of the dispossessed masses and in moral progress for individuals - can derive from it.

I think, more strongly than ever, that the Sixteen were wrong and that not only every anarchist, but every thinking man, cannot give his assent, still less his collaboration, to a government-to-government conflict. And I am deeply saddened that, in all the comments that have appeared, it is not possible to glimpse the slightest outstretched perch that would bring about a rapprochement, a reconciliation between the anarchists of *Plus Loin* and all the others. These others realise that the essential cause of the regression of the anarchist movement, of the considerable loss of influence of our ideas, lies in the signing of the Manifesto, which in a way separated the followers from the masters, decapitated the movement from its spiritual leaders, who in 1914 had an attitude that contradicted their life, their acts, their propaganda, their writings, all their anarchist work of yesteryear.

And, without spiritual leaders, the propagation of our ideas will go further and further into decadence, demagoguery will take an ever greater place in it... and at the end of it all, nothingness. A result not foreseen by the signatories of the Manifesto. And a regression in the ideas of freedom is not precisely progress in Civilisation.

In posing the question of the Manifesto, it was in this sense that I hoped to see it resolved. All is undoubtedly not yet lost, since none of the commentators on the Manifesto have apologised for it. Explaining an attitude is no longer the same as claiming it. And if you don't claim the Manifesto, isn't it because it's 'irrevocable', because you've made a mistake? If this great step were taken in practice, as I am convinced it is in people's minds, we could witness a new upsurge, a regeneration of the anarchist principle... and of the anti-warrior principle.

I don't want to despair of this, and I would be infinitely happy to have been a modest architect of this great and beautiful action.

LOUIS DESCARSINS


* * *

RESPONSE

Descarsins takes up the thesis of sacred egoism, the sacred egoism dear to Mussolini, dear also to Marxists. Mussolini declared that Italy should only be interested in itself. Marxists profess that the working class should concern itself only with its own interests,

The feeling of justice is universal. A denial of justice strikes all well-born men, all those who are not perverted by prejudice or fossilised by conventions, formulas and dogmas. The old revolutionaries, including the old anarchists, honoured themselves by standing up against iniquity, whatever it was. But idealism is on the wane. The people of the forties, who symbolise the cult of the ideal, are treated as old fogies. Today, utilitarianism rules the world. We take the right to take an interest in any denial of justice, any act of violence against a weak person


to shout our protest and to act, if we can. We take the right to intervene against the iniquity committed against a sabre-runner, an officer of the bourgeois army. We were Dreyfus supporters, and would still be, if we had it to do over again.

So, if we once took the right to intervene in a conflict between galleons, without being otherwise diminished  on the contrary - why should we not have the right to take sides in a conflict between governments ; but where human progress, notions of justice and acquisitions in the field of moral freedom are at stake ? [1] When moral progress, justice and freedom are at stake, there is no longer any class or government entity, which holds, the interest of the human ideal dominates everything. So much the worse for those who are too afraid to be fooled and confine themselves to distrust. Mistrust is a rather lowly feeling, which can only lead to impotence and sterility. In fact, it is the prerogative of those who feel too weak or too fearful to act.

Let's leave these general ideas and move on to the facts. According to Descarsins, war between governments should never interest us. This was also the opinion of the Bolsheviks and anarchists in Petrograd and Moscow at the time of Kerensky's government. He wanted to continue the war. Abominable crime against the people. All the anarchist and Bolshevik propaganda focused on this point. The anarchists, simple deniers, worshippers of simplistic formulas, helped the Bolsheviks to bring down Kerensky's government. The Bolsheviks rose to power and declared that the war was over. But despite their protestations of friendship and peace and their unsuccessful attempts at fraternisation, the imperial German armies continued to advance. Trotsky tried in vain to improvise a defence with insufficient elements. The Russian army was disorganised and the soldiers had gone home. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had to be signed. Descarsins would do well to read it. The Baltic States and Ukraine came under German protectorate. The imperial government instituted military terror and the dictatorship of reactionary hobereaux. The treaty put the Russian Bolsheviks themselves in such a state of platitude vis-à-vis the German ambassador in Moscow that one wonders what they would have been obliged to accept if the Germans had not had too much of all their forces for the Western Front.

The political and economic servitude of the Baltic peasants and Ukrainians alone is sufficient example. It would have become permanent if the Germans had not been defeated,

Descarsins says that people are dying of war. But so are governments. At least that happens. This remark is by Paul Reclus, who adds: "The Russo-Japanese war made possible the Russian uprising of 1905, which did not succeed, but which gave Russian revolutionary elements an idea of their power." This observation is made, not to legitimise the Russo-Japanese war - far from it - but to show Descarsins the complexity of things. Ultimately, war, through the exhaustion it causes in the governmental framework, makes revolution possible. This is what happened, thanks to the war of 1914, in Russia and Germany. Without the war, the statist organisation was too strong for a revolutionary movement to have any chance of success in these two countries, despite the rodomontades of the Marxists. The fear of social upheaval is probably the best guarantee against another war. It will enable the Kellogg Pact to have real and lasting effects. Can we add," says Paul Reclus, "that from the moral point of view, from the human point of view, the signing of this pact between governments is more important than the anathemas of certain anarchists?"

Descarsins says that our attitude in 1914 was in contradiction with our life, our acts, our propaganda, our  tings, all our anarchist work of yesteryear. No doubt I shall surprise him greatly if I reply that there was no contradiction, and that we were anti-patriotic and anti-militarist before, during and after the war. But it must be understood that we took sides against the threat of all-powerful Prussian militarism, whose triumph would have strengthened reactionary militarism in defeated France (while the stone of the tomb would have been laid on the peoples of Eastern Europe), and that our adherence to the *common defence* never had in view either the exaltation of French militarism, or imperialism, or domination, or national pride, or reprisals to be exercised, or humiliation to be imposed [2]. Before the war, we made in France the most active propaganda against the nationalist incendiaries, against patriotic prejudices ; against the masquerade of military retreats. We knew that in Germany and elsewhere, our comrades, although fewer in number, were just as active in carrying out the same anti-militarist propaganda. We realised that democratic and revolutionary ideas were making progress in the German Empire, despite the obstacles posed by the feudal framework of the State. We hoped that in time the democratic and revolutionary thrust, still very weak, would become strong enough to prevent the military from being able to launch a war at will. It was even this democratic threat, however remote, that was one of the reasons why the imperial government took the decision to start hostilities, believing itself to be invincible. German hegemony, political and above all economic, was growing stronger every day. But the slightest obstacle, external or internal, irritated the impulsive and proud being who presided over the empire's destiny. War is such madness that, on 31 July, I refused to believe in it, telling anyone who would listen that it would be such a catastrophe in terms of human lives and material wealth that no government would dare take responsibility. Even today, those closest to me scoff at my optimism at the time, but I still believe I was right.

Our resistance to the invasion led by the German feudal and military clan never included hatred of the German people, nor the desire to enslave them. I personally never had the idea of disembowelling Nettlau on the altar of the Fatherland. During the war, I continued to spread around me ideas of universal brotherhood and understanding of adversaries, based on simple common sense. Once the danger had passed, we resumed our propaganda without rancour, shame or remorse, which seemed to me to have no hiatus, because my thinking had not suffered any deviation in my brain.

I confess, even if I should offend Descarsins, that I would adopt the same attitude against an invasion led by Mussolini, without any hatred against the Italians. But since I am hostile to French royalists, why should I accept the law of the fascists, simply because the fascists are foreigners? And yet fascism is much less dangerous, much less powerful than was the German General Staff. Its victory would have much lesser effects; at the very least it would provoke in France the triumphant return of the chauvinist and reactionary spirit. But I don't intend to impose my opinion on Descarsins [3].

Can I say that I breathe better since the war, that I have more confidence in the peaceful evolution of peoples, since Europe no longer drags the empires of Germany, Austria and Russia like a ball and chain ? Fascism and a few other dictatorships do exist. They are of secondary importance; above all, they are unpleasant for their own peoples. The strongest, Italian fascism, has no money, so it can do nothing. However, our neighbours will have to beware of the beast's jolts as it dies.

We have suffered, many people have died, it's true: "The drownings in Nantes during the French Revolution and the executions in Russian prisons don't enchant me either. (Paul Reclus). But the generations that come after us will, after the depression that follows such a great upheaval, find it easier to free themselves." R ✓

Before concluding an answer that is already too long, I would like to point out to Descarsins that he is confusing the signatories of the Manifesto with the Group of *Plus Loin*. Now, there are certainly comrades in our Group who do not share the opinions of the Sixteen. Yet we have never eaten each other alive. We know that we are both acting in good faith. Our discussions are exchanges of ideas. We do not pretend to be absolutely right against our opponents. We know that truth has many different faces. That's why we're not looking for absolute truth. We are trying to understand realities, to glimpse their complexity, to grasp some of their relationships. This study requires an impartial mind, a sense of relativity and a broader knowledge than that which most anarchists draw from their introspection.

There are two kinds of propaganda. One is to fill the head and impose an imperative catechism on the credulity of others. The other is to make people think this little magazine has no other ambition.


The comrades of *Plus Loin* are neither masters nor spiritual leaders. They refuse to present their reflections as definitive formulas. Even in the revolutionary field, in the course of human history, revolts have often changed the body of doctrine on which they based their demands, despite a fairly similar ideal, whether it be, for example, the communes of the Middle Ages, the French Revolution or the Paris Commune. Anarchist dogma is not definitive either. We have kept the label out of affection and deference for the elders who brought about our moral emancipation, but without believing ourselves obliged to keep those of their ideas that seem to us outdated and outmoded.

What does it matter if the current anarchist movement returns to nothingness? The ideas of emancipation and freedom will be revived in another form or under another name. With the current proponents of the movement, these ideas are becoming fossilised in negative formulas: down with morality, down with the family (even before the war there was a sect of scientific anarchists, made up of half-wits, who denied feelings and proclaimed down with love), down with war, down with politics, down with property, down with society, etc.

all of this en bloc, without considering any contingency, for fear of being wrong or being wronged. In reality, the anarchists, who were not the only ones, were not the only ones. In reality, the supposedly emancipated anarchists are slaves to absolute principles. They have ended up by enclosing the DOCTRINE in a small circle of simplistic ideas, which give a few of them the illusion of knowing everything and the feeling of immense superiority. One of them, to whom we had by chance sent a specimen of *Plus Loin*, replied: "As a reader, I don't have much to learn..." But he thought he was honouring us by offering his collaboration.

The darkest point is that the propaganda was largely carried out either by fanatics or by selfish enthusiasts. Is it any wonder that this propaganda has put off and alienated many good people whose aspirations were our own?

It is true that in the mass of those whom Descarsins calls "all the other anarchists" there is a majority of brave idealists, impossible to discourage and the best of men. But, to please them, do we have to offer them articles written according to the clichés to which they are accustomed? Most people only want to read what flatters their opinion and repeats indefinitely what they have learned.

We retain the independence of our criticism and the freedom of our thoughts. But, to reassure Descarsins  assure him that we have always retained our former anti-militarism without ulterior motive, that we abhor, like him, the egoism and pride of patriotism, and that our hope is that one day all the barriers between nations will have disappeared.

M. PIERROT.

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RECTIFICATION. - We have received a letter from Richard (of Algiers), who states that Cornélissen is right against Pierrot. The Manifeste des Seize first appeared on 14 March 1916, in *La Bataille*. Richard adds "I attach great importance to the date of the Declaration. It shows that it was only drawn up after at least sixteen or eighteen months of war, at a time when the central empires, victorious on all fronts, seemed to be in control of the situation. We did not come to the aid of our masters, as we have been accused of doing; we were among the defenders of our threatened freedoms. For my part, in a similar circumstance, I would do it all over again".

Cornélissen, for his part, sent us the Manifesto itself. It is dated 28 February 1916. We take this opportunity to reproduce the following passages:

"... If the German workers begin to understand the situation as we understand it and as a small minority of their Social Democrats already understand it, and if they can make themselves heard by their rulers, there might be common ground for the beginning of peace..."

"... As to what people think in Germany about the conditions of peace, one fact is certain: the bourgeois press is preparing the nation for the outright annexation of Belgium and the northern departments of France. And there is no force in Germany capable of opposing it..."

"In our deepest conscience, German aggression was a threat - carried out - not only against our hopes of emancipation, but against human evolution. That is why we, anarchists ; we, anti-militarists ; we, enemies of war ; we, passionate partisans of peace and the fraternity of peoples, sided with the resistance and did not believe we had to separate our fate from that of the population..."

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From a letter from our friend Ishikawa, one of the "Sixteen", who returned to Japan in 1920, we extract the following passage :

"I completely agree with you. I find, above all, the mentality of the Japanese militarist completely changed since the European war, that is, since the debacle of German militarism. Yes, militarist Japan is democratised because it has felt that the old militarism can no longer resist against the great popular democratic movement."

Notes

[1] In moral freedom we must understand the freedom of national customs. It is these customs which form the nation. Imperialism provokes a patriotic reaction from enslaved peoples (Poland, Ireland, India, etc.), who want, above all, to be freed from the yoke of the foreigner, and for whom the conquest of social liberties takes second place. The Bolsheviks understood very well that the best policy was to respect national autonomies.

[2] All these points were spelled out in a *Inquiry into the Conditions of a Sustainable Paycheck*, published by *Les Temps Nouveaux* in 1917 the collaboration of most of the signatories of the Manifesto, and a few other personalities.



[3] It is in this sense - in the sense of freedom of opinion - that I would have liked the Manifesto to have been written. I wrote it to Kropotkin, who replied. But I don't have the worry, I was going to say the mania, of keeping old paperwork.