

Fragments d'Histoire de la gauche radicale

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The
failure
of an

influential movement to survive

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THE WAR OF 1914-1918 : CATALYST OF THE DECLINE

The opposition that tore the *Temps Nouveaux* team apart between supporters of the Sacred Union and pacifists, in 1914, was not the direct cause of the paper's decline. At the very most, the war acted as a catalyst for a decline that had begun a decade earlier. Nevertheless, an analysis of the positions taken by the paper's editors in the face of the war seems interesting how was a homogeneous team, united around a project, led to take such diametrically opposed positions ?

Until 1914, there was no doubt about the anti-militarism of the *Temps Nouveaux*, with the notable but marginal exception of Kropotkin. Their vision was internationalist, opposing the arbitrariness of borders. National sentiment was seen as a veritable religion erected by the bourgeoisie to maintain its oppression. Any war was seen as a clash of capitalist interests, aimed at maintaining the privileges of the minority ruling the state. Anti-militarism was therefore de rigueur within the team, without, as we saw above, being the subject of specific propaganda. When it came to the desertion advocated by certain revolutionaries, their position was more nuanced. While deserting was a courageous act of rebellion, serving one's time while developing anti-militarist propaganda could also be beneficial to the movement. J. Grave refused to advocate one or the other, contenting himself with encouraging conscripts to test the strength of resistance of which they were capable:

It is for you to decide whether you will be in a better state to resist the certain misery that awaits you in exile (...) unless you have (...) more strength of character to resist the inevitable harassments and vexations of two years in barracks. [1]

Having himself had difficulty with military discipline, he declared that if he had it to do over again he would prefer desertion, as there was a great risk that one day of discouragement, of irritation, would lead to "too sharp a response", which would then be the council of war, Biribi, "the irremediable fall". However, he refused to establish his own reaction as a general attitude because "in this matter, each person is the sole judge of what he must do, of what he can do". [2]

In 1905, Kropotkin, in a letter to *Temps* takes a position that triggers the wrath of his fellow anarchists. He did not deny the need for anti-militarist propaganda, with peace remaining the ideal to be achieved, but circumstances dictated a different tactic. Faced with a German attack, the conscripts' strike advocated by anti-militarists was not enough; the people, as the sans-culottes of 1792 had done, "must defend the soil of France while continuing the Revolution" [3]. It seemed to him desirable to defend democratic countries, such as France, from attack by a strong, military and centralised state, such as Germany :

If France were invaded by the Germans, I would regret one thing it would be that, in my sixties, I would probably not have the strength to pick up a gun to defend it... Not as a soldier of the bourgeoisie, of course, but as a soldier of the revolution, in the frank legions of revolutionaries, like the Garibaldians and the francs-tireurs of 1871 (...). A new crushing of France would be a misfortune for civilisation. The triumph of the German centralised military state in 1871 brought thirty years of reaction to Europe, and to France it brought the cult of the military, Boulangisme, the Dreyfus affair and the halting, or rather the forgetting for thirty years, of any socialist development that was taking place towards the end of the Empire. It is because I have lived through the social and intellectual reaction of the last thirty years that I think that anti-militarists of every nation should defend every country invaded by a military state and too weak to defend itself ; but especially France, when it is invaded by a coalition of bourgeois powers who hate above all in the French people their role as vanguard of the social revolution... [4]

Ch. Albert responded sharply to him in the paper: he criticised him for advocating an untenable attitude by asking us to be "anti-militarist revolutionaries and revolutionary nationalists at the same time". Moreover, this attitude was aimed at accepting national defence, accepted "en bloc by Jaurès and Clemenceau as a cruel but holy necessity". Instead, he preferred clear-cut anti-militarism, with no scruples, restrictions or concessions, with a single formula that answered everything: "conscripts strike and come what may! The only way to avoid war was by setting an example, to get "our brothers, the foreign workers to put down their arms when they wanted to turn their weapons against French breasts" [5]. The controversy lasted a few weeks, with the paper's team preferring to "forget" their differences, which would only come out into the open when current events dictated.

When the last issue of the paper appeared on 8 August 1914, the editorial team was divided over the attitude to adopt towards the war: around Kropotkine, Tcherkessoff, Cornélissen, Pierrot and J. Guérin, J. Grave (who had taken refuge in London from the summer of 1914 to the summer of 1919), more or less quickly came out in favour of the Sacred Union. Opponents of the war included Benoît, Girard, Mignon and the revolutionary syndicalists who contributed to the paper, such as Monatte, Dunois and Desplanques. It took J. Grave more than five months and a lot of hesitation to join the rallies, and about the same time for Girard, Benoît and Mignon, grouped together in the "Groupe des *Temps Nouveaux*", to adopt determined pacifist positions. Although the paper ceased publication, its editors continued to meet within the Groupe des *Temps Nouveaux*, which brought together revolutionary trade unionists such as Delesalle and Dunois, artists such as F. Jourdain and M. Luce, journalists and intellectuals such as J. Mesnil, M. Pierrot and F. Delaisi...

In November 1914, the group became a support group for persecuted anti-militarists and their families, and maintained extensive correspondence with the front. A small minority were opposed to the war from the outset and left the group in August 1914, although they kept in touch until 1915. While the vast majority turned to pacifism, this evolution was gradual at the start of the first winter of the war, they began to question the position in favour of national defence, only to abandon it in May 1915 the break was decisive in August 1915 and they adhered to the decisions of the Zimmerwald conference [6]. In January 1916, the *Temps Nouveaux* group published a *First letter to friends and subscribers* of the journal, reproducing the group's declaration of membership of the "Committee for the Resumption of International Relations" [7]. In February 1916, J. Grave, in disagreement with their position, asked Benoît to give up the premises that had been the newspaper's headquarters, leading to a second letter of protest that mentions the correspondence exchanged with J. Grave by Girard and Benoît. The dispute was made public in the *Bataille syndicaliste* of 8 March : J. Grave refused to allow the newspaper's title to be taken over by the group. On 14 March the famous "Manifesto of the Sixteen" [8] appeared, signed by Kropotkin, J. Grave, Pierrot, P. Reclus, Cornélissen, Tcherkessov... which explains the reasons for their rallies. From then on, the opposition appeared irreducible. The two groups had their respective forums: *La Bataille syndicaliste* for the rallies, while S. Faure welcomed the pacifists in CQFD. In May 1916, the supporters of National Defence, described by Malatesta as "government anarchists", irregularly published bulletins that took up the pre-war title : *Les Temps Nouveaux* ; sixteen publications were distributed until June 1919. A new monthly series took over from July 1919 to July 1921, hosted by Pierrot and J. Grave. J. Grave broke with the editorial board for personal reasons in 1920. He found himself, until his death in 1939, very isolated, with for all propaganda activity the publication of modest bulletins, under the title : *Publication de la Révolte* and des *Temps Nouveaux*. Dr Pierrot, surrounded by the same team, founded the review *Plus Loin* on 15 March 1925, which lasted until the Second World War. It maintained some activity by organising monthly banquets and debates. Nevertheless, its circulation and influence remained modest. Faucier, of the Union anarchiste, bears witness to this:

Relations were very distant between the members of the **Plus Loin** team and those of the Union anarchiste, who did not forgive them for their collaborationist attitude in a conflict of interest between capitalist nations in 14-18. (...) It follows that the review **Plus Loin** remained confidential and without much influence, even in libertarian circles (either through ignorance or sectarianism). On the other hand its team, made up of fairly elderly intellectuals, each retaining their freedom of action, was very small and kept a distance from the social struggle proper. [9]

The Great War thus marked the dislocation of the entire newspaper team. While J. Grave, Pierrot, J. Guérin and P. Reclus remained faithful to the spirit of *Temps Nouveaux*, the pacifists A. Girard, Ch. Benoît, and A. Mignon moved closer to the Communist Party or the SFIO.

TENTATIVE EXPLANATION OF THE DECLINE

How can we explain the newspaper's heyday around 1902, then its decline after 1907 ? How can we explain the golden age of anarchism from 1885 to 1907, and then its failure to survive as an influential movement?

There is no doubt that the anarchists were able to offer a real alternative to the bourgeois society of the late 19th century, imbued with triumphant rationalism and positivism. In a society where the need for irrefutable technology prevailed, the anarchists brought a different conception of life where dream and utopia were intertwined. In the face of dogmatic social Darwinism, Kropotkin developed his famous laws of mutual aid: the struggle of the strongest against the weakest was not the inescapable law of societies, which were based, on the contrary, on feelings of mutual aid and harmony. Faced with the positivist scientism that prevailed in emerging sociologies and political doctrines alike, anarchists preferred to rely on imagination and spontaneity. As Alain Pessin rightly points out, the anarchist alternative had a playful dimension: the idea that a flowering of new activities and forms of life would be discovered, experimented with and tested in future society. The new man would set out to discover, like an eternal child, a vast and marvellous adventure where he could give free rein to his spontaneity, his spirit of invention and creation [10]. It's understandable that some artists and writers might have given in to the enthusiasm of this "reverie", but how could the working class, who could less easily afford the luxury of such dreams, caught up in the difficult struggles they were waging to improve their material lot on a daily basis, have been seduced ? And above all, why, after 1907, were they no longer willing to wander in the anarchist imagination? Because until 1914, the paper never regained the sales it had enjoyed at the height of its popularity in 1902, and so embarked on a decline that symbolised the failure of the anarchist movement. There were several reasons for this, firstly internal to the paper and then to the anarchist movement (because the crisis affecting the paper was not specific to it). The anarchist movement as a whole was running out of steam. There were also external reasons, caused by a society in the throes of change.

For Grave, the problems encountered from 1906 onwards were largely due to a material factor: the increase in printing costs had considerably aggravated the paper's financial difficulties. What's more, it seemed to him that the period was not conducive to the expansion of an organ of ideas :

We were going through (...)," he recalls, "a period of weakening and apathy which meant that the population accepted the blows of those in power without a second thought. Added to this was the economic crisis, which was being felt above all by those we were addressing, the workers. [11]

Readers' criticisms published on several occasions brought new elements the paper was criticised for "being the preserve of a small group", which, for lack of variety led to a certain monotony, for not being combative enough, for being incomplete on current affairs, for being intellectually inaccessible to workers [12]. The editors are deemed too old, sectarian and incapable of understanding the idealism of young people [13]. Indeed, in twenty years, the team has aged while new contributors have joined the paper (doctors Pierrot, Mignon, Duchemin), while other trade unionists have taken over from P. Delesalle, the central core (J. Grave, Kropotkine, A. Girard) has not changed, leading to a certain monotony. This monotony was accentuated by the very longevity of the journal and its orientation: for twenty years, by favouring propaganda, neglecting current affairs and confining itself to doctrinal conformism, it had been led to repeat the same watchwords. As far back as 1899, P. Delesalle was sounding the alarm: attending the Dreyfus trial before the Council of War in Rennes, he realised that by neglecting current affairs, especially when they were so mobilising, in favour of theoretical articles, the paper was depriving itself of many readers. Few young militants came to swell its ranks. J. Grave attributes the cause to a general apathy spreading through the movement and regrets "the good old days" when anarchists, although fewer in number, were more active and united. He also stresses the harm done by individualists who "have deprived the movement of a host of goodwill" [14].

In 1905, with the publication of the journal *l'anarchie*, the hitherto scattered individualists acquired their own platform. Boasting some strong personalities (Libertad, Lorulot, Mauricius, Paraf-Javal, etc.), the novelty and dynamism of the anarchist individualist movement attracted a number of young militants who were put off by the academicism and seriousness of the *Temps Nouveaux*. The testimony of Kilbatchich, alias Victor Serge, illustrates the phenomenon :

Anarchism took us wholeheartedly because it demanded everything from us and offered us everything (...). We went to the extreme (...). We were driven a little by disgust with a certain very muted academic anarchism, of which J. Grave was the pontiff at the *Temps Nouveaux*. Individualism had just been affirmed by Albert Libertad, whom we admired. [15]

Not only did individualism deprive the movement of new recruits, but its deviance, illegalism, damaged the movement in public opinion. Twenty years after "propaganda by the deed", violence reappeared, leading to police repression and once again tarnishing the image of anarchism in public opinion.

These internal reasons cannot explain the decline of the paper. The socio-economic evolution of the working class must undoubtedly be taken into account. According to Serge Mallet the explanation for the decline lies in the fact that Proudhon and his followers, "for failing to foresee the development of industrial capitalism" were doomed "to lose all influence" [16]. The anarchists, as Marxist historians had argued before him, were merely translating the aspirations of a working-class aristocracy, of artisan origin, nostalgic for its past power, aspirations that appeared incompatible with the new demands of the nascent industrial system in terms of centralisation, hierarchy and production technique. In reality, this explanation merely repeats Marx's earlier criticisms of the Proudhonian system, which he saw as reflecting the social situation of the French petty bourgeoisie, threatened by both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The Proudhonian dialectic would merely reflect the "petty bourgeois" attitude of a class with no economic future, no political hope and therefore no original ideology [17]. Various criticisms can be made of these analyses.

The authors are a little hasty in proclaiming the irresistible destruction of workers' autonomy by the capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, it appears to be an essential feature, a constant of the workers' movement.

If the success of Proudhonism in the eighteen-sixties can be explained by the fact that it was a time of transition between the still important craft industry and the development of large-scale industry, how is it that twenty years later, when industrialisation has progressed to the detriment of the craft industry, the anarchist movement has not only retained its influence but is now at its apogee?

Another contradiction emerges : *Les Temps Nouveaux* have always regarded modernisation as beneficial to the working class yet, if they really represented these craftsmen who feared dispossession, shouldn't they have rejected it ?

Moreover, these analyses are the product of an ideological apriorism with which a desire for objectivity is ill-satisfied: firstly, the total determination of ideology by economic structures, and secondly, the historical inevitability which implies that history is linear and that the development of the productive forces necessarily implies their concentration in the capitalist mode.

So what tools and modes of explanation are needed? The two socio-historical approaches of Pierre Ansart and Mario Vuillemier are not without interest for our problematic. In *Naissance de l'anarchisme*, P. Ansart, in questioning the success of Proudhonism in the years 1830-1860, is led to look for structural homologies between a social whole and an intellectual creation. By comparing working-class practices and Proudhonian theory, he demonstrates that Proudhon was able to propose to the workers a political strategy in line with their working-class practice, their vision of the world and directly in continuity with their class reality [18]. In a similar way M. Vuillemier through the study of Jura militants and their membership of the First International, highlights a relationship between a socio-economic situation and a system of political ideas. He leads us to a "conceptual proposition", that of the "workers' figure", which enables us to discover in these Jura workers a "system of dispositions", based on a specific professional structure (Jura watchmaking), a system of dispositions that made it possible for the workers to adhere to the political theory proposed by Bakunin [19]. His invitation to identify a model of workers' praxis for each epoch would make it possible to determine the encounter, or non-encounter, between a theory propagated by an individual and a specific workers' practice.

To what extent can these conceptual tools be of interest to our research? Should we conclude that the political strategy proposed by J. Grave and his friends no longer corresponded to working-class practice, to the social imaginary of the working-class world ? This hypothesis of a gap, at the beginning of the century, between the project of the *Temps Nouveaux* and the aspirations of the working class world is worth retaining. The newspaper retained the line it had set itself twenty years earlier. However, under the influence of a rapidly changing socio-economic context, it revised one essential point: the imminence of revolution. In 1890, the dawn of revolution seemed very near: the numerous popular protest movements and the omnipresent myth of the general strike heralded the imminent advent of the new society. In 1895 Kropotkin declared :

And time is short... Who can answer that within twelve months, two years, we will not have the revolution on our hands, just as the people of Paris had it on 18 March, at the moment when the revolutionaries most in touch with the masses were saying to themselves that there was nothing more to be done in Paris ? Who can answer us that the revolutionary period will not be opened within a year in Rome, Berlin, Paris, Vienna... [20]

Five years later the optimism is still there. Kropotkin remained hopeful: it was on France that the anarchists had based their hopes, and it was on France that they still pinned their hopes. Such active workers' agitation would be the catalyst for a crisis inherent in the capitalist system: the vicious organisation of society would inevitably lead to revolution, which the energy of the workers would be enough to provoke. In 1901, the strikes that shook the country led Ch. Albert to predict a revolutionary outcome:

And not one of these great strike movements failed to bring with it its good news, a precious clue, clear proof that this was indeed an awakening of consciousness, and of popular energies, a real march towards total liberation ! [21]

From 1905 onwards, the time for social revolution seemed to have passed : the myth of the general strike collapsed to make way for strikes that were certainly numerous, but mainly aimed at improving workers' material conditions. This development symbolises the growing acceptance of the social status quo, or in other words, the substitution of "revolutionary eschatology for reformist ideology" [22]. Jean Grave becomes aware of this :

And instead of dawn ! it's dusk ! (...) The work of reaction is growing and rising on all sides, without losing its optimism or its faith in the rightness of its struggle. It is not enough to proclaim the truth for it to be understood, to preach revolt for the cobblestones to pile up in barricades. But the truth is still the truth, and if revolt does not erupt, the spirit of revolt will nonetheless make its way (...). Evolution is happening less quickly than we think, but it is happening. [23]

There was a growing awareness of the phenomenon, but without any doctrinal questioning : revolution was moving further away, but it remained the main objective of the struggle. By refusing to carry out their "aggiornamento" as the revolutionary syndicalists did, the anarchists cut themselves off from "the working class which had long aspired to compromise" [24]. The emergence of serious competition, at the turn of the century, through men like Millerand and Jaurès, had demonstrated that there was now an alternative, other than revolutionary, to resolving the social question. However, it seems that this alternative did not immediately compete seriously with the anarchist movement. The fact that the Waldeck-Rousseau ministry (1899-1902), which corresponded to "a veritable honeymoon between the workers and the Republic" [25] did not affect the newspaper's circulation, which remained high, shows that reformists and revolutionaries recruited from different backgrounds that did not, as yet, enter into competition. However, a few years later, the republican tradition gradually seemed to prevail among a section of the working class.

This hypothesis alone cannot explain the decline of the *Temps Nouveaux*. The entire working class did not become reformist at the turn of the century. A second problem came on top of this one. Thus, not only did the *Temps Nouveaux* see a section of the working class won over to reformism drift away from them, but, at the same time, they lost their hold on the most revolutionary elements of the working world who, impatient with a hypothetical revolution, postponed until the year 2000, preferred to join the movement of Gustave Hervé and *La Guerre Sociale*, which offered, still for a time, an outlet for their revolutionary ardour. Indeed, the appearance of *La Guerre Sociale*, in December 1907 adivified the crisis that *Les Temps Nouveaux* was going through by rallying elements seduced by the violent and eschatological Hervéist phraseology to which the paper's editors had always refused. The project of J. Grave and his friends had become rather un motivating: it was a question of bringing militants together with a view to revolution... while being aware that the times were not very favourable for this... It was difficult to motivate the troops with such rhetoric, and to avoid a flight to more combative elements. More combative or better organised, better structured and more efficient. So after the war, when the team broke up, some of the editors joined the SFIO or the Communist Party. While remaining libertarians, they seem to have looked to the socialists for an organisation, an efficiency, that the anarchist movement had lacked...

Far from the stereotypes that still clutter our memory, this study aims to show that, at the turn of the century, anarchist militants were not just the abominable bombers who made France tremble. These twenty years spent among French anarchists bear witness to their eternal rejection of injustice, oppression and anything that hinders human development...

The period studied corresponds to the apogee of the movement, the last golden days of anarchism, at a time when the movement was as present in the world of the workers, within trade union organisations and in avant-garde artistic and literary circles. Emma Goldman, a young Russian Jewish woman who had emigrated to the United States, bears witness to this when she travelled to Paris in 1900 to meet her fellow French anarchists:

France is the cradle of anarchy. It is to its most brilliant sons that we owe its paternity, in particular to the greatest of all, Proudhon. They fought exhausting battles for their ideals, endured persecution and imprisonment, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. But not in vain. Thanks to them, anarchism in France has become a social factor to be reckoned with. (...) Visiting anarchist groups, observing their efforts and the advancement of our ideas on French soil was a real lesson for me. [26]

To return to the beginning of the text...

Notes

[1] TN, n° 16, 19/08/1905.

[2] Ibid.

[3] TN, n° 27, 04/11/1905.

[4] Ibid.

[5] TN, n° 28, 11/11/1905.

[6] AN, F/7/13061, notes of 18/02/1915, 23/03/1915, October 1915, 4/12/1916, January 1917. Cf. : J.L Robert, "Une analyse d'implication : l'évolution du groupe des *Temps Nouveaux* en 1915", *Le Mouvement social*, n° 122, January-March 1983, pp. 60-74. Through the group, J.L. Robert studies the relational networks between the front and the rear. He demonstrates the synchronicity between the evolution of the group and the situation at the front, with whom the activists maintained extensive correspondence. Cf. Alfred Rosmer : *Le mouvement ouvrier pendant la première guerre mondiale de Zimmerwald à la révolution russe*, Paris, Mouton et co, 1969, 252 pp.

[7] In January-February 1916, a merger took place between the anarchist-inspired International Action Committee and the Zimmerwaldian Socialist Minority, giving rise to the C.R.R.I.

[8] Signed in fact by 15 anarchists, it appeared in *La Bataille* and stated in particular : "Along with those who are fighting, we believe that unless the German population, returning to healthier notions of justice and law, finally renounces serving any longer as an instrument of Pangermanist projects of political domination, there can be no question of peace."

[9] Letter from Faucier to Mlle Antoniolti, n.d., Archives Jean Maitron.

[10] A. Pessin, *La rêverie anarchiste*, 1848-1914, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1982, 228 pp.

[11] TN, n°37, 11/01/1908.

[12] TN, n° 13, 17/07/1907.

[13] TN, n°33, 14/12/1912.

[14] *40 years of propaganda...* op. cit., p. 406.

[15] Victor Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire*, 1901-1941, Paris, 1951, 417 p., p.25

[16] S. Mallet, *La Nouvelle classe ouvrière*, éd. du Seuil, p.4.

[17] K. Marx, *Le 18 Brumaire*, ed. Sociales, 1949.

[18] P. Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme, esquisse sociologique du proudhonisme*, Paris, PUF, 1970, 264 pp.

[19] M. Vuillemier, *Horlogers de l'anarchisme, émergence d'un mouvement : la Fédération jurassienne*, preface by P. Ansart, Lausanne, Payot, 1988, 340 pp.

[20] TN 7, 17/06/1895.

[21] TN, n°7, 15-21/06/1901.

[22] J. Julliard, *Worker autonomy...*, op. cit. p.36.

[23] TN, n° 32, 07/12/1912.

[24] J. Julliard, *Autonomie ouvrière...*, op. cit. p.36.

[25] J. Julliard, *Autonomie ouvrière...*, op. cit. p.38.

[26] Emma Goldman, *Living my Life*, Knopf, 1932, French translation Brussels, Editions Complexes, 1984, 312 p., pp 121-122.