



The Trial of the Sixteen - Auguste Bernard

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Under the title : *The Coming War and the Anarchists*, Luigi Fabbri sought to define in *La Protesta* of Buenos-Aires what the attitude of anarchists should be in the face of a new war, the threat of which he considers very serious, if not imminent. He examined several possible scenarios, including a conflict between one or more European states and fascist Italy, or a war between the Western capitalist states and Russia. This theme gives him the opportunity to compare the situation as it would be, in his opinion, if one or other of these eventualities occurred, with the situation as it was, again in his opinion, in August 1914. He shows the error of the anarchists who, by signing the so-called "Manifesto of the Sixteen", denied their doctrine in one of its essential principles, and the contradiction of such a manifesto with the theories spread during half a century of anarchist propaganda.

This is not the first time this criticism has been made. It has rarely been expressed in the moderate tone that Fabbri brings to it. Even in our group, young comrades are insisting on it, and if it seems unnecessary for the signatories of the Manifesto to justify themselves to those who reproach them for their attitude, they willingly accept to explain it to those who ask them why. This debate has not yet taken place publicly here, because we are sparing of the printing surface and there was no urgency, whatever our young friends may say. It is also because it leaves many of us indifferent, including, I believe, the signatories of the Manifesto.

However, the noise made about this question shows that it concerns a certain number of sincere anarchists. It therefore deserves to be examined once and for all. It is, moreover, linked to a set of subjects for discussion which must also be tackled and which Goujon classifies among "the contradictions of anarchy", so as not to confuse them with what others have called "the confused notions of anarchy".

Everyone will have to explain themselves. I didn't sign the Manifesto, so I could say nothing, but it's thanks to a very fortuitous circumstance that my name doesn't appear in it. On the other hand, far from clarifying matters, I fear that Fabbri's article will increase the confusion. So, by a stroke of fortune that perhaps falls to the less qualified, and mainly because Pierrot is passing Spanish-language literature on to me, I find myself led to give my opinion, not so much as the seventeenth signatory of the Manifesto of the Sixteen as in an attempt to put some order into the ideas between Paris and Buenos Aires.

This is what. Fabbri writes:

"At the beginning of the previous war and during its duration, we were given to witness, not only the rout in all countries, of the so-called II^o International, of Social-Democracy, but also the sad, painful and degrading spectacle of anarchists, in small numbers, but among the best known, who lost their heads to the point of forgetting their own principles of internationalism and liberty, and among these, the most essential one, which is the negation of the State and which denies the State the horrible power of suppressing the right to life for individuals and for peoples. Thus we had, in a glaring and abominable contradiction of terms, "*State anarchists*", who sided with some governments, stood in solidarity with them, vouched for them before the peoples, and took sides against the immense majority of their comrades. And all this in the naïve and anti-anarchist illusion of saving some atom of freedom, of this democratic freedom whose lie and inadequacy, or even non-existence, they had denounced for fifty years for the majority of the poorest and most disinherited proletariat.

"The fruits of the "*democratic*" war for the salvation of small peoples, for the end of all wars, we have seen them. What is more, we have felt the bitterness of it, we have suffered the most painful wounds in our flesh. The populations oppressed by foreign states are more numerous today than before the war, the small peoples more enslaved, irredentism more numerous, democratic freedoms diminished and even more derisory. The reasons for war have become innumerable; war today is a real danger a thousand times greater than on the eve of 1914. The war that was supposed to liberate and pacify has given rise to a monster: fascism, which is spreading like an oil stain across the world, threatening the very ancient sources of civilisation.

"The only fruit of the war that can be said not to have been lost and not to have been useless is that, after it, the illusions about bourgeois democracy have fallen away once and for all. If the Central Empires had won, after an equal duration of the war, we would certainly be no better off than we are. Instead of certain disasters, we would have had others, perhaps less terrible. But the interventionists of the time would still be able to retain their old illusions and would be sure to say: "Ah, if the Allies had won, today we would be happy! And we would have to do a whole new job to combat the old error that had remained. The victory of the so-called "*democratic states*", which leaves us no less unhappy than we would have been with a victory for the opposite party, has shown that it was we who were right, and destroyed the evil illusion right down to its roots. But at what price, and with what diminution of those who once again cherished it after having denounced and anathematised it for fifty years!

Leaving aside the anticipations of a coming war, Fabbri's article is a faithful echo, with a minimum of invective and without the usual insults, of everything that has been said and repeated about the Manifesto. And, if I've understood correctly, it can be summed up as follows :

"Anarchists are against war, against all wars. They are antimilitarists because war is the logical, inescapable end of militarism. Whatever the circumstances, whatever the consequences of an armed conflict *between capitalist states*, anarchists, to whatever nation they belong, must not collaborate in national defence. If they are forced to do so, they must not, at least, give it the support of their voluntary consent, nor declare themselves in solidarity with their fellow citizens in opposing the invasion of the territory or in liberating it if it is invaded. Nor must they take sides with one or other of the belligerents, or investigate whether the victory or defeat of one or other may or may not be harmful to the ideas of freedom and political, economic and social emancipation, it being admitted once and for all that wars are quarrels of capitalist governments and that the fate of the peoples is always *equally* sacrificed in them, whatever the outcome.

"Let us beware," Fabbri writes, "of allowing ourselves to be deceived by the mirage of the *lesser evil*, of allowing ourselves to be led by contingencies, only to remember that the *lesser evil* will always be just as harmful to peoples, to the proletariat and to freedom, and fraught with the same horrible consequences for the future .and also to leave all responsibility to the rulers and the ruling classes, avoiding any act of complicity with them, and trying instead to prepare ourselves and to be in a position to make the most of events for our revolutionary cause."

This is clear and unambiguous. Let us now consider the point of view of the signatories of the Manifesto. They were unanimous in thinking that no peace was possible, or desirable, until the Central Empires had been defeated militarily they did not even suspect that in publicly condemning the aims of German militarism, they were contradicting their anti-militarist principles that by standing up for the right of oppressed peoples to self-determination, they were contradicting their libertarian principles; that by showing solidarity with the fighters who were being slaughtered so that this war would be the last war, they were contradicting their pacifist principles. They did not know that their status as anarchists forbade them to associate themselves with any agitation, any movement, any event whose immediate goal was not social revolution on the communist-anarchist plan. There can be no doubt that they acted with the same inconsistency as at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, when they compromised themselves in the promiscuity of the liberal bourgeoisie and academics, with Jews and Protestants, in order to get this insolent little staff captain, an innocent Israelite, out of prison.

There does seem to be a latent anarchist orthodoxy somewhere, as yet ill-defined. Does the attitude of Kropotkin, Grave, Cherkessoff, Paul Reclus, Malato, Pierrot, Cornelissen and others conform to it? Certainly not.

First point.

As far as believing anarchists are concerned, I belong to a category of reprobates that it is not possible to convert, but I am not a Voltairean; I mean that, not having faith, I do not seek to destroy it in those who do. Besides, these disputes are of no use; they only end up upsetting people without shattering their convictions. I will not, therefore, criticise Fabbri for his doctrinaire absolutism which claims to confine the anarchist conscience within a few very simple formulae outside of which there would be no salvation. I shall not attempt to demonstrate to him that, in the case of a European coalition against Soviet Russia, the place of combat for anarchists would be in the ranks of the Red Army, although it seems to him that...: "There again, the (Russian) anarchists and in general the revolutionaries who are enemies of the Bolsheviks could remain themselves, not show solidarity with their government, while being hostile to the foreign oppressors, and if they (the anarchists) had a regular force, behave according to the circumstances in order to take advantage of them, to fight the enemy from without without yielding to those within (the Bolsheviks), to remain in a situation which will enable them, at the opportune moment, to get rid of the latter as well, to continue the revolution which they have interrupted and to give it an increased impetus up to the most complete egalitarian and libertarian achievements."

I leave it to the Russian comrades to examine the objections of a moral and practical nature which would surely oppose the realisation of such an attractive programme. I shall confine myself, in order to remain on my subject, to pointing out to Fabbri, in a friendly manner, that the epithet "State anarchist", with which he labels our comrades in order to make his thought more concrete, is inappropriate. The interventionists, as he calls them, did not stand in solidarity with a few governments, they did not vouch for them before the people. They did exactly the opposite. They have stood shoulder to shoulder with the peoples of the world and, far from supporting a few States, they have, on the contrary, aroused the suspicion of the peoples of the world against those States. As for their illusion of saving some atom of this democratic freedom, which is still terribly lacking in so many peoples, and which they have the weakness to hold on to "while denouncing its falsehood and inadequacy, or even non-existence for the majority of the poorest and most disinherited proletariat", let Fabbri make no mistake: they still have this illusion, naïve if you like, but not anti-anarchist, comrade.

It is difficult to discern "the fruits of democratic war for the salvation of small peoples and the end of all wars". There was the Russian Revolution, the German Revolution and the Turkish Revolution, which are positive facts. There is Fascism, which, I still believe, is an accidental fact and, in spite of everything, of a duration which a popular explosion, all the more sudden and violent because it has been suppressed for longer, will sweep away when the Italian revolutionaries least expect it. Independently of these facts, the liquidation of the war has fulfilled some hopes and accumulated heavy disappointments. But this should not be used as an argument to accuse the authors of the Manifesto. They agreed with the Wilsonian doctrine, but they suspected Clemenceau and Lloyd George. They did not foresee Lenin and Mussolini. Mussolini, nor did the non-interventionists. What did the proletarian masses do, what did the veterans do, the man in the German trenches and the man in the Allied trenches? My memory goes from Jaurès to Kurt Eisner, Liebknecht, Rosa Luxembourg, Erzberger. I think of May 1st 1920, of the revolution that might have been possible in France, and for which no one would dare reproach the CGT for not having assumed its formidable responsibility. Fabbri asserts that the victory of the Central Empires would have borne less bitter fruit. This

seems so obvious to him that he doesn't need to demonstrate it; it's the starting point from which he condemns the interventionists and reminds them of their anarchist duty. But the sabotage of peace proves nothing for or against the Manifesto of the Sixteen. Why were we fighting? It's all there.

To stand above the fray, you had to have a soul accustomed to the very high altitudes of thought and capable of perching comfortably on some inaccessible peak from which the mind's eye could see all the combatants as an indistinct and confused swarm. Fabbri offers us this tour de force of a complete athlete of European culture as an exercise in anarchist cultural flexibility.

We are too close to people.

And this is the second point I would like to highlight.

The communist-anarchist ideal is both the proudest assertion of individuality and the fullest expression of individual solidarity. There is no choice between the twin terms of this double definition. Anarchy is not an abstraction, it is not a system. It was not born, all in black or red, in the brain of a man of genius. It is a social phenomenon that is gradually emerging and becoming clearer as a result of the instinctive and then reasoned efforts of the human community to ensure that all individuals have the best possible intellectual and moral opportunities.

That is my opinion; I would not claim that all anarchists share it, but what gives it a certain strength is the profuse nature of libertarian ideas and the impossibility of dissociating them from what Fabbri calls contingencies. Anarchists have the merit of having liberated this universal aspiration towards a better future from formulas and systems, and of showing the final goal to which it tends. It is because they clearly distinguish it that they are in the vanguard of humanity on the march towards this goal, and when an unforeseen obstacle stands in the way, it is not up to them to sit on the back of the embankment and wait until the main body of troops has cleared away the obstacle and cleared the road. The anarchists, more than anyone else, had a duty to resist the German military coup.

Fabbri can argue that the evils from which the world has suffered would not have been worse if this coup de force had succeeded. That's what it's all about! It was the very principle of the independence of nations that was in jeopardy. Might is right. It was to ensure the triumph of this aphorism that the Germans agreed to fight. It was against this aphorism that the French were beaten for five years.

In 1914, the people of the West did not believe in the possibility of a European war. Today, no one dares to believe that the monster unleashed by the German imperialist clique has been definitively muzzled. The barely convalescing world, still shaken by convulsive upheavals, lives in fear of a new cataclysm, with nations busy licking their wounds watching each other with suspicion. Do they sincerely want peace? In any case, their governments see it only in terms of an armed struggle, and the chemical laboratories are working underhandedly for war. What are the German, English and French trade unionists, the only organised forces capable of opposing further massacres, waiting for to sign a solemn non-aggression pact on behalf of workers? Is it more difficult to convene an International Workers' Congress than to found the League of Nations? Would the Locarno policy also meet with diplomatic resistance among the proletarian classes?

The only fruit of the war that can be said not to have been lost, Comrade Fabbri, is that the Allied victory dealt a mortal blow to German militarism. As for French militarism, we fight it like all militarisms; but, since 1870, it has never been powerful enough to constitute a danger to world peace. If it were to be otherwise, I doubt that this country would repeat the spontaneous unity it achieved in August 1914 against the German invaders, and with which, in my soul and conscience as an anarchist, my capacity as a citizen of the invaded nation dictated that I should show solidarity.