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The Truth about the Bonnot Gang

Albert Meltzer

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1966

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Economy*"

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propaganda, with its display of abundance, LITERALLY. They want to possess IMMEDIATELY all the objects shown off and made abstractly accessible: they want to MAKE USE of them. That is why they reject their exchange-value -the COMMODITY REALITY which is their mould, purpose and final goal, and which has PRESELECTED everything. Through theft and gift they retrieve a use which at once gives the lie to the oppressive rationality of commodities, disclosing their relations and invention as arbitrary and unnecessary. Plunder is the simplest possible realization of the hybrid principle: 'To each according to his (false) needs' — needs determined and produced by the economic system, which the act of pillage rejects. But the fact that the vaunting of affluence is taken at its face value and discovered in the immediate instead of being eternally pursued in the course of alienated labour and in the face of increasing but unmet social needs — this fact means that real needs are expressed in carnival, playful affirmation and the POTLATCH of destruction. The man who destroys commodities shows his human superiority over commodities. He frees himself from the arbitrary forms which cloak his real needs. The flames of Watts consumed the system of consumption! The theft of large fridges by people with no electricity, or with their electricity cut off, provides the best possible metaphor for the lie of affluence transformed into a truth IN PLAY”

Contents

THE ECONOMIC & POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF “L’AFFAIRE BONNOT”	5
BLANQUISM	7
ANARCHISTS	8
THE BONNOT GANG CULT	10
JULES BONNOT	13
BONNOT & ANARCHISM	14
THE BAND	15
THE BOYS WITH THE DASHING AIR	16
OUTRAGE	16
THE POPULARITY OF THE GANG	18
THE SHOWDOWN	20
THE TRIAL	22
YOU CAN’T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT...	23

the Loop area if he followed his (their-your?) pattern, because 400 East in the downtown area would be somewhere out on Lake Michigan. People were taking bets on the chances of another large one. Finally, the bomber struck — at 400 North, the Tribune Tower, the home of the Chicago Tribune — one of the most reactionary papers in the country. But unlike before, the bomb was not placed in a garbage can, but in an auto parked on a submerged street adjacent to the building. The pigs looked like utter fools again. The press was, by this time, going through traumatic fright; Mayor Daley told everyone the police had lots of clues and would capture the “creature” who was destroying our (his) city, and lots of ordinary people were having lots of fun trying to second-guess the next target.

More time passed and another large explosive went off at 400 East! Not in the lake, not in the Loop at all, but south and east of it at the R.H. Donnelly Co., the huge non-union shop which prints among other magazines, TIME, LIFE, and PLAYBOY. Other, smaller, bombings of all variety continued for several weeks throughout the city. No one was ever charged with the four large bombings.

Traditional revolutionaries, not only are highly wary of folk-heroes outside their narrow perspective on society, but also, as a.m. mentions at the beginning of this tract in reference to Marx’s prejudices, they harbor rather strange suspicions regarding “criminal behaviour.” It’s generally labelled “infantile” and dismissed for lacking a wheelbarrow full of assorted qualities supposedly needed to overthrow capitalism. Too bad, societies are always more complicated than someone’s blueprint.

“The Blacks of Los Angeles — like the young delinquents of all advanced countries, but more radically because at the level of a class globally deprived of a future, a sector of the proletariat unable to believe in any significant chance of integration and promotion — take modern-capitalist

heroes are in fact “anti-social” -that is, if they express a popular opposition to the dominant society, their power to unleash emotions (politically repressed) is all the more explosive. But that power is mysterious, not easily dissected or observable, and therefore not readily predictable. Add today the power (or the impotence, depending upon which aspect you wish to dwell) of the mass media and its unceasing “hype” of “personalities” as commodities and the folk-hero syndrome descends into a pit of total chaos where some passions cancel each other out and others form alliances in a mad desire to utterly subvert established reality. This is no place to begin to unravel the threads; all we wish to note here is the beautiful spontaneity of the people when rebellion’s chords are struck by, for example, Jules Bonnot and his gang or Chicago’s mysterious bomber of 1966. This mad bomber set off a large detonation, in a city garbage can, in the early morning hours, directly in front of a huge Loop glass-steel office building. Over a hundred thousand dollars worth of glass was shattered and not a soul harmed. Several days later, just as the incident was being forgotten by the press (and presumably the police) another huge downtown explosion took place. Again much property damage, but no one harmed. It took the police a few days to find a pattern, but a pattern they did find. The first explosion they said occurred at 400 West, and the second occurred at 400 South — astonishing! Immediately, the Chicago Police Department sent plainclothesmen into the loop; many officers were disguised in some manner to catch the culprit. They usually stood in doorways and watched the garbage cans.

In the meantime, bombs, generally smaller in power, started to go off all over the city. Everything imaginable was being blown up: cars, offices, small factories, and just city space. The city became a target on a wide scale. The press stopped carrying news stories about them, but the bombings continued. People heard them all over. For almost two weeks, the police staked out 400 North, the only place the bomber could hit in

THE ECONOMIC & POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF “L’AFFAIRE BONNOT”

Back in the days of the First International, Marxists, Anarchists and Blanquists had concerned themselves, among other problems, with the phenomenon in capitalist society of the “criminals of want.” It is a common mistake amongst contemporary bourgeois philosophers that they “idealised the proletariat;” least of all Marx, with his unsentimental approach, would have done such a thing. Some believe that they “idealised the criminal class.” It is with this minor (but important) belief that we are dealing here.

It was generally agreed that it was impossible to condemn crime or a criminal class in terms of the old morality, though it is natural that people found it difficult to shake off acquired terms. To what extent did the three trends of thought regard the underworld as an ally, an enemy, or an embarrassment?

Marx defined in economic, not moral, terms: the laboring class had only its laboring power to sell. If reduced by persistent unemployment, or uprooting from countryside (or country), to the position where it no longer could sell its labor power because of chronic lack of demand, the laboring class was reduced to the LUMPEN-PROLETARIAT. Yet the term implies a moral censure: the “lump” (not to be confused with the same word in English) means “rogue.” Marx’s rogue-workers were the “submerged tenth” of Jack London; the “darkest London” of General Booth; the world of Dickens and Mayhew. It does not now exist in this country. Marx’s contemporaries in London were the originals of Mealy Potatoes, the Artful Dodger, Bill and Nancy, Jo the crossing sweeper (who died at the door of the African Mission) ...this was the “whole rabble of Soho” of which he complained to Engels, that gathered to jeer and scream at the evicted Marx family. Indeed, there is a resem-

blance (not I think heretofore noted) between the Micawbers and the Marxes: the “declassé intellectual” who had (by virtue of his academic failure, racial origin or radical opinions) failed to go on from being a student to becoming a professional man, and had to live with the “submerged tenth” having no labor power to sell, has become a subsequently well known character. In Marx’s case, too, while he was waiting for “something to turn up,” Frau Marx — like Mrs. Micawber sighing for her family — went out to pawn the family Stuart crested spoons, and was reported by the pawnbroker to the police (who found she was indeed a von Westphalen and her brother was the very Prussian Minister of the Interior whose spies were occasionally keeping watch on her husband). Something similar must have happened to Mrs. Micawber, unknown to Copperfield!

It was, of course, the Micawber attitude that determined Marx in his harsh stricture upon the “lumpen-proletariat:” (Micawber’s views upon Uriah Heep are much those of Marx’s upon Lassalle’s dealings with his Duchess, and their final verdict much the same. Today, of course, this class (more charitably described as the “Lazarus Class” by other sociologists, and pictured as waiting for handouts by the “do-gooders” who have been let loose on them for a matter of three generations) does not really exist. Crime in London is like any other form of business. But the Marxian attitude lingers in a contempt for the poorer strands of the population and the more transitory-natured occupations.

I am assured by a catering worker, former Communist Party militant, that he was constantly urged in his C.P. days to change his profession; and that when he at last was seen working as a cinema commissionaire he was greeted by fellow-members with the cry, “So you’ve really joined the lumpenproletariat now!” Marx certainly did not mean the lower-paid or the menial jobs were “lumpen” (though he did not rate them highly, if they were not productive) — it was to the “children of the Jago” he was referring (born to crime

THAT was the end of the story. But it was not quite the end of the story, either. For some reason the romantic legend of the ‘bandits tragiques’ would not die. They obstinately popped up into folk culture; to the exasperation of the police and the lawyers. Procureur-General Fabre stated that they ‘used anarchy as a cloak to cover a long series of crimes against the community.’ But nobody believed him...Like the wild colonial boy, like Robin Hood, everyone believed they robbed the rich to help the poor and could not find it in their hearts to say that this was a crime against the community. ‘Much ink has been spilled on the story of this band,’ protests M. le Prefect Morain. And songs, too, and anecdotes each more fantastic than the last... And now the film industry has found out the story of the Bonnot Gang. Paris filmgoers today, the rest of the world tomorrow, will learn a new — but we doubt true — version.

Still, there it is! And talking at streetcorners to unheeding people does not get one that far! If we are discussing Anarchism, then the exploits of the Bonnot Gang, or of Ravachol and similar figures, do not get us very far. But if we are studying the warp and woof of revolutionary movements under capitalism; the effect of such movements upon a deprived and almost outcaste ‘submerged’ class; and the way in which it will respond since it does not exercise any other form of power, then an examination of the legend (and the fact) is absorbing.

YOU CAN’T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT...

So-called folk heroes (so-called, by academicians) are an excellent index of the popular mood. The stories, songs and poetry that begin with them, expand, permeate the entire society, become distorted to fit popular expectancies, and if the time is propitious, release social latency on a large scale. If these

THE TRIAL

Bonnot left a note acquitting other people of responsibility. But the entire gang, such as remained alive (with one exception, who escaped) went to trial. Others were arrested for mere association. These included the editor of "l'Anarchie", De Boe, and Louise Kaiser. Gamier and Valet having been killed while resisting arrest, many of the deeds they had committed were blamed on others who had not participated in them. But Gamier had left a confession, implicating himself and exonerating others, countersigned and his finger-prints in case of dispute. The general trial opened in February, 1913. Many alleged crimes had to be struck off the sheet for want of proof. It was quite clear that the police had arrested innocent and guilty alike. Among the innocent were Mme. Maitrejean, who had taken over the editorship of "l'Anarchie" and probably Dieudonne. "Callemin, Monier, Carouy, and Metge never ceased during the whole case to meet and to call for 'proofs' " protested Alfred Morain, Paris Prefect of Police (The Underworld of Paris — Secrets of the Surete, English trans.) "It seems undeniable that Dieudonne was not concerned with the murder of Gaby...Callemin openly stated his own guilt and the innocence of Dieudonne. 363 questions were put to the jury, who deliberated for fifteen hours. GUILTY was pronounced on Dieudonne, Callemin, Soudy, and Monier — death; Carouy and Metge — life sentences; Renard — six years; Kilbatchiche, Payer, and Croyat — five years; the others, lesser terms. NOT GUILTY: Rodriguez, and the woman Maitrejean, Schoop and Barbe le Clech. (Apart, of course, from those finally not brought to trial.) Carouy committed suicide. Dieudonne was reprieved at the last moment. The other three were guillotined. Some of the survivors are still alive: Kibaltchiche (Victor Serge) has only recently died, and one or two returned to the labor movement to pursue humdrum lives in the union offices.

because there was no alternative to starvation); those upon whom the Salvation Army was to batten. As a legal-minded Socialist, though he blamed the capitalist, a class born to crime was repugnant to him.

BLANQUISM

This was not the view of the Blanquists. For a long time their views were not considered, because when the Paris Commune marked "the parting of the ways" between Marxism and Anarchism, Blanquism was nowhere to be seen. It missed its chance. Blanqui was in prison before, during and after the Commune. His revolutionary vanguard to "lead the masses" was not there to lead. Since that time Blanquism has reappeared; it constitutes the strand of Bolshevik-Leninism with its idea of the elitist Party leadership. The more modern extension of this, that believes that military adventure, fighting in the streets for power or peasant rising suffices itself, without industrial backing, has forgotten it owes all that to Blanqui. The idea of student leadership is merely a younger version of the belief in leadership by the failed ex-student or "declassé" intellectual.

However, it was among the Blanquists proper that the idea (that for a long time animated many movements, including the Social-Democratic, especially the Russian) came about of the professional revolutionary leadership supplementing its earnings by armed robbery. The Party was above morality. It condemned the private criminal, however; Stalin, for instance, though he himself took part in bank robbery, denounced as "adventurism" any form of "premature" armed uprising.

This is a view that was revived in France during the Second World War. It was hard at times to tell where the "underground" finished and the "underworld" began. When the Black Market flourished in France, it was possible for the workers to

eat: they naturally took a different view of it from the English workers, who denounced “profiteers.” When the underground broke German laws, even the French bourgeoisie, such as was not actively collaborating, could “scarce forbear to cheer.”

ANARCHISTS

The confusion between underworld and underground had always been strongest in Tsarist Russia. Asked about the Houndsditch affair, Rudolf Rocker told the “Morning Post” it was “not easy in England to understand what had driven such men to becoming desperadoes. It was necessary to consider the situation in Russia where the Government had instituted a reign of terror ...the entire populations of many Lettish villages had been publicly flogged, including old women, men and children. Their homes were burned down and the people were living in the forest like wild beasts.” The Anarchists did not idealise the “Lazarus Class” but their attitude was different from Marxists or Blanquiste, though individual Anarchists might accept the views of Marx or Blanqui. Their attitude was largely determined by French experience. After the repression of the Commune, the French workers had been systematically reduced to poverty. The whole of the previous economy, which rested upon the one-man workshop, had been broken up; capitalism was being imposed late, and with all the callousness of the early nineteenth century. Thousands of Communards had been shot, deported or were in exile. Anyone who tried to re-establish the working-class movement was liable to be exiled; imprisonment or unemployment were certain to follow upon militancy.

In the middle of this, Anarchist propaganda began again; and in particular “propaganda by deed.” Political assassination, and attacks upon the bourgeoisie became a commonplace of French Anarchism. It struck terror in the hearts of the

Bonnot killed Jouin and wounded one of the inspectors with him. As they retreated, he escaped. Four days later, however, he was found in the home of Jean Dubois, not a member of the gang, a Russian who kept a garage in Choisy-le-roi and who was sympathetic to Bonnot.

The superintendent of the Surete Nationale, M. Guillaume, himself, with a head of armed policemen, raided the garage. When they burst in, Dubois was repairing a motorcycle. According to the police, he resisted arrest by shooting back at them; but another version states that he immediately hid behind a car, shouting “Murderers!” when they opened fire. It may be that Dubois, though an anarchist, did not know Bonnot’s identity. The police charged through the house, and encircled Bonnot’s room, sending for reinforcements to the local police, gendarmerie and National Guard. When finally the Commissioner for les Halles, M. Guichard, came with the gendarmerie, he found Dubois bullet-ridden, dead, and the Surete surrounding the room where Bonnot was hiding in a mattress. They all burst into the room and riddled the mattress with bullets. He was dragged out, to die on the way to the police station (according to the official report) although according to another report, the police would not enter until a local civilian — the postman, to be exact — ventured in to see if Bonnot was really dead; when he reported that he was, not only the police but the entire army of soldiers, Zouaves, bystanders, onlookers, hysterical civilians, all Nogent-sur-Marne and its military reinforcements, came charging in.

The police complained bitterly of the lack of military support; indeed, they came to a punch-up with some Zouave officers, and tore the epaulettes off one officer as a supreme insult.

having a peaceful existence. As you've been frank enough to admit, the fact that I've been traced has not been due to your perspicacity, but to the fact that there was a stool pigeon amongst us. You can be sure he's had his come-uppance since. Your reward of 10,000 francs to my girl-friend to turn me in, must have troubled you, NLGuichard... you really shouldn't be so lavish with State funds. A bit more, and III hand myself over, with guns thrown in.

You know something, Guichard, you're so bad at your lousy profession I feel like turning up and putting you right myself. Oh, I know you'll win in the finish all right. You have a formidable arsenal at your disposal, and what have we got? Nothing. Well be beaten because you're the stronger and we're the weaker, but in the meantime, we hope that you'll have to pay for your victory.

Looking forward to seeing you (?) -Gamier."

THE SHOWDOWN

The showdown was not long in coming. At Berck-sur-Mer, Soudy was arrested (30th March). It was a few days after the band had seized a car, and in the course of the struggle, the driver had been shot dead. Soudy, the little man with the gun, with his "gentle grey eyes", had always been unlucky in life, and now he was the first to be caught. But the net was closing in on them all. The police had been alerted to the district. In a few days they had taken Carouy and Callemin. The Deputy Superintendent of the Surete, M. Jouin, had himself taken charge of the operation. Searching house-to-house in Petit-Ivry, they found where Gaudy was lodging. They surrounded the house and raided it. Bonnot was there himself. They shot it out, and

bourgeoisie. Mere political assassination they could understand: it was part and parcel of the French ruling-class game. (Louis XIV's lettres de cachet; Napoleon's kidnapping of the due d'Enghien; Napoleon III's membership in the Carbonari) The idea of attacks upon the bourgeoisie, non-politicians ("innocent people!" they cried — "there are no innocent bourgeoisie" replied the condemned) threw them into alarm. It was a terror quite unequalled in other countries where kings, queens and presidents were assassinated. It was well understood by the French proletariat. They began to sing about the assassinations ("la Ravachole") and to remind the bourgeoisie they were not all-powerful. The employer about to sack his militants heard the songs about Ravachol or Emile Henry whistled in his factory, and decided a few francs extra a day would not ruin him. Within a generation, a mass movement was born: the syndicalist movement which aimed at nothing less than the occupation by the workers of their places of work.

Needless to say in such circumstances the Parisian worker, and ultimately the Anarchist movement, retained a soft spot for the "underworld." It is true that many ordinary criminals used to speak about social equality in order to justify their aims. But nobody in France expected that the criminals "should contribute to the party funds." The French worker, awakened in his self-respect by individual acts of individual workers, felt no need for an elite.

When that particular struggle was over, and the long years of the Dreyfus Case, that split France, were also over, the Bonnot Gang appeared. They claimed to be anarchists; they probably were. They appealed to the imagination of the Parisians. They were hardly "gentle grafters" but the nearest to it in France was "bandits tragiques," romantic robbers. It was believed they took from the rich to give to the poor. They were "good guys" and the flics were "baddies" because the Parisians understood that when the chips were down,

the Bonnot Gang was ultimately on their side and the police with their clubs would be on the other (even in time of war, even in time of foreign occupation). They were not “lump” to the Parisians. They were at most “les miserables.” In the finish they did not awaken the proletariat a la Blanqui; but their subsequent careers showed they learned a lot from the proletariat. In particular, that the bourgeois criminals of society had the big battalions on their side, and would ultimately come to dominate the underworld; the Bonnot Gang went down fighting as the last of the Apaches.

a.m.

THE BONNOT GANG CULT

Recently, the Bonnot Gang has become a popular cult, a folk tradition set to the tempo of commercial entertainment. Since the imported American cult of “Bonnie and Clyde,” who had scarcely a thought in their head between them but for the fact that they were sound on the banking system, the impresarios have cast their eyes on the “bandits tragiques.” Films, books, stories, even clubs devoted to their memory. Middle-aged Parisians who grew-up with the Bonnot Gang sinking into their memory as some sort of modern Robin Hood and his Merrie Men, may pause to wonder at the cult of Bonnot dead from those who would have been his bitterest foes alive...

The conditions of the Paris workers, and in particular of the so-called “underworld” (not quite the same as ours, but rather a “lumpenproletariat” with its own quarter and traditions) were reaching bottom level in the period before the first World War. After the Franco-Prussian War, the master-artisan — who constituted the bulk of the working class and though described as ‘petit bourgeois’ was in fact the main productive unit — was to be wiped out of existence. To some extent, the Paris Commune

took power, and with triumphant Freemasonry in the saddle, there came about a complete change in personnel in the Intelligence Services and also in the Surete Nationale.

The police force underwent a change considerably more drastic than that which took place in Russia in 1917 (where Lenin relied on the old Tsarist Lettish mercenary police to establish his power). For many reasons, however, this police force was more inefficient than the old. The Right Wing was now a dissident force; there were many of the Old Guard lingering in high places before being rooted out, and they relished the spectacle of the Surete Nationale being made to look fools. This situation lasted well into the war (it was Clemenceau who altered it). The case of Mata Hari is one of the classic cases of Surete Nationale bungling. (She was a high-class whore, resident in Paris as a danseuse, not a French-woman, and one of her clients in the German Intelligence had, for intelligible reasons, entered her on his expense account; but she was not a spy, and the only reason she died as a spy was because the Surete could not admit it had made a mistake that would have covered it with ridicule, or risk the accusation that the Freemasons were letting one of their own, a traitor, go free.)

In the case of the Bonnot Gang, few members of the gang made any attempt to disguise themselves. Their photographs were circulated by the Press, which jeered at the police for their apparent inability to do anything about the matter. When the Press made accusations about the gang which were not true, its members wrote and complained. Hunted and in flight after three months of success, they did not hesitate to send sarcastic notes to the bourgeois Press. For instance, the irrepressible Garnier wrote to *le Matin* (in March 1912):

“Please pass the following note to Gilbert Guichard and the rest (police agents). I assure you that all this hue and cry doesn’t prevent me from

such liberties had not been challenged, the “outrages” had not taken place; where they did not exist, they multiplied. This was particularly the case in Tsarist Russia, where a whole section of the police was actually engaged in the business of “outrage” in order to justify its own existence. Its foreign section paid agents-provocateurs and bribed foreign police and provokers, in order to stir up feeling against political exiles. (This was particularly the case in England.)

THE POPULARITY OF THE GANG

If the undoubted popularity of the Bonnot Gang with the workers made it some time before the conclusion was reached, on the whole that conclusion, so far as the Anarchist movement was concerned, was hostile to the suggestion that criminality was any aid to the revolutionary movement. It is characteristic of the engaging nature of many of the participants of the Gang, however, that many of them, too, came to the same conclusion. Not that “crime did not pay”, but that criminality like legality was merely a form of capitalism.

There was one other factor that influenced their popularity. The entire intelligence service of Paris had been discredited during the Dreyfus affair. It was perhaps reasonable for the old-time Royalist generals and clerico-fascists, the anti-semitic bores of the 1900's, to assume that if there was a spy in the Staff and there was a Jew in the Staff, the two must be identical, and no further proof was needed. But it was totally unforgiveable from the point of view of the whole of France, the bourgeoisie no less than anyone else, that the Second Bureau, the most highly-paid officials in the country, planning for military revenge on Germany, was unable to discover that the whole case against Dreyfus was a mere clerical mare's nest. Not only did they get the wrong man; they let the right man go. Politically, the ultra-Right was ruined by the Dreyfus case; the Radicals

was the last stand of the independent worker against the factory system. Now the manufacturing class was endeavouring to force the independent-minded worker, with his background not far removed from that of the peasant, into the conveyor belt and factory line. As in England during the Industrial Revolution, there was dispossession, misery and economic stress. The main means of economic existence for the lower strata of Paris was the great influx of wealthy foreigners, since the Great Exhibition had invented a permanent tourist traffic of which Paris was the first beneficiary. It had become a regular part of Paris life that there should be a “criminal quarter”; the tourist paid heavily to see it; the police guarded comfortable bourgeoisie around the brothels and the night life; a large and growing part of the population was in effect sold into a type of bond slavery from which there was no escape. Zola has depicted it graphically.

And yet this was the Paris of the revolutionaries; which had in 1871, “stormed the heavens” by changing society and challenging the grand-bourgeoisie; it had been sternly crushed by the Versailles troops when the Commune was overwhelmed, but with the activities of the Anarchist terrorists in the 'eighties and 'nineties, they had begun to get their confidence again. From a period in which no worker dared speak of increased wages or combination against the employers, there was a sudden transition to militant syndicalist activity. During the Versailles repression, the best a militant worker could expect was the sack; it was more likely that the gendarmerie would come for him. And suddenly, with a “whiff of dynamite,” all that was changed. The factory owner who had once been so confident that he had suppressed the workers for good and all, now found that there was a wave of sabotage, or that his managers were beaten-up, or even (but this was the final horror) that they might leave a bomb in his own chateau. Suddenly the employers began worrying about their workers not forming themselves into law-abiding trade unions. For the C.G.T. was

not a legalistic body. It began as a militant body: and the local Bourses du Travail combined the best features of our Mechanics' Institutes and Trades Councils with the ideas of take-over workers' control. By the early years of the century, it was a formidable force; it was an anarcho-syndicalist union aiming at the abolition of government by means of the General Strike, and actively preparing for the replacement of the management of industry by the workers themselves.

The bourgeoisie, awakened from the sectarian panics of the Dreyfus Case, looked around themselves in alarm. They wanted to suppress the workers; but the lessons of the 'nineties had been learned. No longer could they shoot and exile; they had to turn to subtler, more English ways of influencing events and opinions; by the growth and encouragement of parliamentary socialism, for instance, and by the sudden new enthusiasms of the Radicals for the cause of the workers. Radical and socialist parties, professing revolutionary aims even to the point of Blanquism (the elite who would lead the masses through confrontation with the police — which they themselves never confronted, except as lawyers in the courts) vied for popular support. Meantime the lawyers and professional men that dominated the political parties brought in the usual arguments for participation in elections; and they themselves moved from Extreme Left to Extreme Right, with a steady progression that ever after marked French politics. They still used revolutionary phrases (Laval used them up to 1939) and still angled for popular support against the Right Wing — there was always a solid Right even beyond the Right, a cancer that moved from hooliganism to national treason. But in the early part of the century it was on the defensive. Clerical fascism had been routed, monarchism discredited and out of politics.

And as the new Left grew in size, and parliamentary socialism was able to spread its wings, and the C.G.T. itself came under the influence of socialists and radicals, so once more, as

car raids, and is thus a milestone in the march of "progress". The Societe General was raided. As the bank courier left the Societe's doors, he was attacked by the gang, who jumped on him from their car, and snatched his satchel. They jumped back again and drove off at top speed, firing on whoever gave chase. A familiar scene later on in the century; this was one of the first times it had happened. Four days later, they broke into the Foury Armoury in the rue Lafayette, just as it was closing for the holidays, and later, in the New Year, they raided the American Armaments Factory in the boulevard Haussmann. They stole pistols, Brownings and rifles.

In February, they stole their second car, belonging to an industrialist from Beziers. With it they planned to rob the Nimes mining company, from which one of them had once been dismissed for his trade union activity. They proceeded to a wave of robbery throughout February. Bonnot's name became famous; the press spoke incessantly of "les bandits tragiques". "Where would they strike next?" asked the headlines.

The working-class papers, however, had a different pre-occupation: where would such activities end? Most people in the Anarchist movement reckoned that there was a clear-cut distinction between the political attentat, directed against repression, dictatorship, political domination, or even (as in the case of Emile Henry) against the bourgeoisie indiscriminantly, in revenge for police attacks upon the workers indiscriminantly, on the one hand; and mere criminal action, for the enrichment of the perpetrators, on the other.

To be sure, any criminal could say he was attacking the bourgeoisie (which was in any case more profitable than attacking the worker). But the "outrages" at the turn of the century had clearly defined political overtones, even in the case of Ravachol, and if sometimes they had been associated with ordinary crime, this could be overlooked. However, such "outrages" had mitigated police repression to the point where it was now possible to organize legally, to publish papers and so on. Where

losing their lives. They could thrill to the exploits of the bandits without conscience about the victims. The French police have never gone out of their way to ask for public sympathy, and they have never got it either. When a police force uses brutal methods to disperse crowds, or has been used by a repressive government to fire upon its own people, or is associated with grossly unfair and inhuman punishments such as deportation to penal settlements for labor offences, it cannot and does not expect or merit public sympathy.

THE BOYS WITH THE DASHING AIR

Besides, there was always a charmingly amateur air about the Bonnot Gang that appealed to the public mind, the way a professional mobster like Al Capone could never do. It had in common with the “Bonnie and Clyde” team that it was “the damnd’est gang you ever saw”: ill-assorted, with its suave good-looking men, and horny-handed toilers; the squat Herculean Belgian and his little compatriot; the dapper intellectual and the hardened trade union militant... young Garnier, born into a tradition of military desertion; and the ladies of the gang, who supported their men faithfully; and the incessant discussions on revolution (which they carried into the workers’ press) and whether illegal activity was helping the movement or hindering it; and the articles in the anarchist papers defending themselves, not against the public or the police, but against what their comrades in the open movement might think of them.

OUTRAGE

The first time that the bourgeois press cried “OUTRAGE!” at the Bonnot Gang activity was over the affair in the rue Ordener, a few days before Christmas, 1911. It was one of the first motor

steadily as a barometer, the standard of living of the workers dropped. The French bourgeoisie was thrifty. It paid nothing for nothing. Once it had diverted the workers’ movement away from revolutionary Anarchism and into reformist Socialism, it stopped being timorous and on the pretext of an economic crisis cut wages again, sacked militants, and arrested opponents at the drop of a hat.

One of the men who was sacked at this period (1911) was Jules Bonnot. He knew one or two more in the same position. They were sitting idly in a cafe bar in Montmartre, playing cards desultorily, when he burst out with his famous declaration: “Aren’t you all sick and tired of this wretched existence? Here we are, flogging a stolen bicycle here, and pushing a few dud coins there, or even stooping to pick up our ridiculous wages from the foreman, capitalism’s galley-master, after a long week’s work at the factory — and what do we get out of it? Nothing! You all talk about revolution and illegality, but what do you do about it?”

“What do you expect us to do?” one of them asked him sarcastically. “Rob a bank?”

“Precisely,” he said. And they did. It began as simply as that...

JULES BONNOT

Alas for the romanticists, Bonnot was no film hero (it was announced there would be a film, and so it is interesting to know what they make out of him!) Born in 1876, and 35 at the time of the meeting in Montmartre, he had an ordinary working class background. He had been a forward pupil in school, had become a good apprentice, done his conscription without protest; and gone into the factory in due course. An able mechanic, he worked in Switzerland, and in Lyons and Saint-Etienne in France, travelling around to get work, as was then the custom

(“work won’t come to you,” said the wise women). Ultimately he joined the union; married; had a son; became a militant syndicalist. His activities marked him down for dismissal and more travelling; his wife left him and took his son with her (up to 1911, he was still trying to get her to come back to him).

By 1907, he could no longer find work. He tried to set up on his own; opened his own workshop; became a master-artisan; found another sweetheart. But of course his little repair workshop did not flourish. The ‘petit bourgeois’ productive worker was a dying class. He tried to make counterfeit money. The car boom was coming on, and he became one of the first to specialise in stolen cars, altering and re-shaping bodies, fitting new license plates. Later on, the press were to speak of it all as a sinister existence, investing all his actions with the aura of dread and fear. Hence the folk cult. But the truth of it was, like many French workers of the period, he could not get work; he failed as a bourgeois; and he went from failed bourgeois existence to the ranks of the “lumpenproletariat.” As he said, it was a stolen bicycle here and a dud coin there... What was the purpose of such an existence?

BONNOT & ANARCHISM

Coming into contact with the Anarchist movement in Paris, he mixed with the group publishing “l’Anarchie,” originally edited by Albert Libertad. Among them was the able writer Kibaltchiche, a young man who had begun life in extreme poverty, in Belgium, and had moved into the revolutionary struggle. (Later, under the name ‘Victor Serge’, he moved to support of the Communists in Russia, and was one of the earliest who moved from orthodox communism to Trotskyism, and subsequently to a criticism of the Soviet Union as such.)

Another Anarchist with whom Bonnot came into contact was Soudy, expelled from job after job for his syndicalist ac-

tivities, and imprisoned more than once; who had come out of prison tubercular and rebellious. He had done his military service and could handle a rifle with deadly accuracy, thanks to the French Republic.

Cheeky, tousle-haired Gamier had been born into a family of illegalists. His father, a roadmender, was a militant syndicalist who had refused his military service and gone “on the run” and he had brought up his family the same way. The son, like the father, refused military service, lived amongst anarchist friends and perforce led an illegal existence. He was the one they called ‘Poil du Carotte’.

THE BAND

Altogether there were twenty who joined Bonnot’s band after that first outburst in Montmartre. Some were Belgian: Carouy, a metalcaster, with an enormous physique, whom they sent for as soon as they were “in business.” Callemine, 21, was fond of music and the theatre, and had an overwhelming aversion to violence (which he overcame). Most of them were French: all of them had been unemployed for some time, without anything to look forward to, without any means of support at the end of the week. There was no alternative to illegality so far as they were concerned (except death by starvation, or joining the Army). The sole question at issue was: what type? Most of them had been associated with the syndicalist movement; all of them were active in the anarchist cause, and some of them continued to contribute to anarchist funds and causes after they moved to banditry, in some cases surreptitiously, because they did not want to associate the anarchists with themselves.

One can see how it was that they preserved a certain code of ethics of their own; which was perhaps why they gained public sympathy from the first. The public was not particularly concerned with banks losing money or even with gendarmerie