On the uses of the political *chanson*: anarchist production before 1914

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of man”, namely that of the “total anarchist”: “Living out of doors, with the freedom to go wherever he likes, [signify] a rupture with one’s social assignment, with a function and an existence that have been determined in advance [...].

The tendencies displayed by some comrades in favor of nomadism or the return to “natural” forms of life fit logically into any such assertion of a way of life radically at odds with the marketplace values that are triumphing in a rapidly industrializing France. Once again it is Paillette who best encapsulates this particular mindset of the libertarian movement of the time, writing:

Wanderers [flâneurs] like schoolboys,
Artists rather than workers,
We flee the stuffy atmosphere
Of factories and workshops.

Here, we are far from the mystique of the producer that it was still possible to detect among the militants of the First International and that can be found once again among the revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists of the CGT before 1914. In the imaginary expressed in the heroic period of song production in the libertarian movement (1880–1900), the anarchist does not think of himself entirely as a proletarian or as exploited but also as “insubordinate [réfractaire],” irregular, outside the norm. He is the one they always finger, one who refuses to submit to the constraints of marketplace society. While anchored in the extension of workers’ struggles of his time, he constantly seeks to combine the imperatives of independent working-class action to those of the individual’s revolt against the evils of industrial society. And ultimately, it is in the simultaneous coexistence of these two imperatives that we believe we must seek the primary originality of French anarchism at the fin-de-siècle.

What does the chanson say? Much more than you think.

Chansons are an exceptional tool for the historian of political ideas, as they provide one of the most direct keys to the currents of thought or movements from which they emanate. All songs tell of their society, and political songs are no exception to this rule. It is unadorned and without consideration of opportunities that the songs tell us about the ideology of political forces. The song provides a sort of snapshot of the feelings that circulate among militants. It also provides an effective account of changes that may occur over time within the same current.

The production of chansons should be considered thus as a leading source that the historian can not afford to ignore. This is particularly true for the nineteenth century, given the close ties that the song has with contemporary popular culture and the exceptional importance as a tool for propaganda and agitation that the political right and left him grant. There is no single political group that is convinced of the power of inspirational songs and has sought to use as a weapon to gain the support of the masses or to educate them.

The chanson and the imaginary

We believe, however, it is not possible to properly study the political song if viewed exclusively as a means among others (posters, leaflets, brochures ...) available to activists to mobilize the masses. This simplistic approach is very wrong to bring those who adopt it inevitably to consider the production songwriter as a simple reflection of the ideology of a current. So it’s no surprise that we find mentioned in the stories devoted to the socialist movement and worker songs that illustrate the feelings of workers and socialist groups studied, the stories devoted to the nationalist currents of songs detailing the nationalist point of view and so on. Almost always the song is used to describe the stances and ideas of a political

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16 A. Pessin, op. cit., p. 79.
force committed without trying to go beyond a literal interpreta-
tion of the text without even looking at whether, in addition to
its propagandizing role (mobilizing and/or educating), other uses
were possible or conceivable.

Just as superficial, to us, seem attempts to write histories “through the song” or “sung histories” of a particular episode in
the history of France (the French Revolution, the Commune, the
Third Republic, etc.) For here, too, the song is a pretext for giving
an account of events that we know from elsewhere.

In both cases, we see a genuine under-utilization of this source,
which remains of secondary interest to the historian, often merely
as a way to strengthen his arguments rather than to deepen or poss-
sibly challenge them. The song, however, does not simply neutrally
reflect a given political and social reality; rather, it tends to reinter-
pret it according to the militants’ hopes and expectations. By the
images it projects, it selects and distorts as much as it describes.
One could even say that the song genre is naturally inclined to ex-
aggerate, sometimes to a ridiculous extent, the distinctive features
of a political current or the feelings of those who identify with it.
That is why, beyond the stereotypes and ideological burdens that
entirely pervade it, the song, much better than any other written
source, captures the interiority, the idea that militants are able to
form of themselves and their cause. Because of this song, especially
when it is the direct expression of militants, provides access to what
might be called the imaginary of a political current, that is to say,
not only its ideology but also its hopes and dreams.

But these imaginary representations, far from duplicating other
forms of political expression, give the possibility to better un-
derstand how a community, in the words used by Baczko,
“chooses [désigne] his identity in the process of elaborating a self-

If an anarchist is primarily a man of the people who defines him-
self by his class situation above all, he does not think thereby to
be eternally enclosed in this situation. Unless he can overcome it
immediately, he will seek an opportunity to escape from it by ideal-
izing a lifestyle at odds with the living conditions of the time or the
capitalist mode of production. Again, the song allows us to grasp
the profound aspirations of the comrades. Always inclined to ex-
alt those who refuse to be kept down by the factory or office, not
worrying about tomorrow, they hail the figure of the unattached
vagabond. Nothing in common, however, between the condition of
a vagabond by choice and that of the traditional tramp [clochard]
or beggar [mendiant]. The anarchist, although he may be led to live
day by day, remains a rebel, an untamed. As pointed out in a song
by Paillette:

Far from us the vile beggars,
Submitive and supplicant;
If we live by our wits,
It’s to fleece the old world.

If one day find a comrade should be obliged to beg, it is with
“dagger in hand” that he would approach passerby.

“Independent and proud,” such were the adjectives used to de-
scribe the preference be an anarchist. The figure of the tramp gar-
ners favor to the extent that it corresponds, in the libertarian imag-
inary, to a lifestyle that is chosen rather than suffered. Memories
of the guild [compagnonnage], still very strong at that time, may
also explain these preferences. Let us not forget that before 1914,
the libertarians were mainly recruited from trades that were arti-
sanal in character. But this is not essentially because, as Pessin has
rightly observed, the “trimard” defined first and foremost “a type

On these points, see two very stimulating works by Louis-Jean Calvet: La pro-
duction révolutionnaire : slogans, affiches, chansons, Paris, Payot, 1976, and


Le Poignard à la main, handwritten text reproduced in a police report of De-
cember 1892 (Ad Loire, 19 M 5).
It is to popular common sense that they appeal in order that the workers should cease to be “suckers” and follow their advice:

Then don’t be so stupid:  
Instead of voting,  
Bash them in the face!\(^{13}\)

Denouncing exploitation, the anarchist identified with the exploited class whose suffering and hopes he espouses. Struggling to “the proletariat in the face pale,” he justifies in advance the “fires of St. John for the villains as” Jacques “in the world are ready to ignite. The miseries of the proletariat are his own, and every time a proletarian suffers, he suffers with him. Thus, in the songs, there is an almost total identification between him and the people. When he speaks, it is the people who speaks through his mouth.

**Pariahs and tramps**

The comrades, in addition, evince no *a priori* negativity toward the “lumpenproletariat”. Quite the contrary: many witnesses attest to their desire not to reject any of the exploited. Those employed in illegal forms of production, as well as the unemployed, will always be considered as a reservoir of potential energy and rebellion, even after the syndicalist turn of the movement. The sympathy they have for society’s forgotten people, however, is not motivated by adherence to their way of life but by a deep sense of identification with the status of outcasts rejected by everyone including their own. The anarchist, in his own way, also feels himself to be a social outcast, which allows him to forcefully express another facet of his dream of otherness, to symbolically affirm the uniqueness of its situation and to mark thereby the distance that separates him from other exploited proletarians.

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\(^{13}\)F. Brunel* Faut plus d’gouvernement*, Paris, [1889].

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representation” how he “expresses and imposes certain shared beliefs”\(^{2}\).

We must not forget that when one sings, it is not only for others but also for oneself. At the same time it seeks to mobilize, the song effects a labor of differentiation vis-à-vis others and identification between members of the group. It is not directed exclusively to external parties to be conquered but also to militants for whom it reaffirmed the validity of the common struggle to be carried out. It helps keep alive the sense of group membership and encourage participation in its system of values. Just as the color of the flag or other distinctive signs, it constitutes a powerful means to create and strengthen the feeling among the militants of belonging to a single school of thought, and this feeling, whether it is in idealizing or in directly establishing a number of real or imaginary frames of reference, is shared by all. Often, the songs are only written and sung for the militants themselves. Therefore, they must be regarded as a privileged means of expression for the political cultures that they support and to which they give structure.

**The *chanson* and libertarian identity**

This use of the song seems particularly fruitful for the study of anarchism. The production of songs, especially in the years 1880–1900, plays a crucial role in constituting a libertarian identity by spreading, both among the public and among comrades, a certain image of anarchism and of the anarchists who will ultimately embody it. In these compositions are asserted, in a manner that is very direct — or naive — the images and representations that, in the eyes of the comrades, simultaneously justify their dream of otherness and allow them to think as a distinct group within the labor movement.

Anarchism in France only really took off after the return of the former Communards. In the early 1880s, however, the proven comrades are only a tiny fraction of a labor movement that is still recovering after the bloodletting of the Commune. Furthermore, the existence of a plethora of socialist and/or revolutionary sensibilities and schools of thought that are close to libertarianism (Blanquists, communalists, Fourierist) poses pressing problems of identity for this rather young movement, placing its militants in a somewhat adversarial position. On the one hand, it is vital for anarchists, if they want to emerge as a political force in its own right, to mark, by any means, including symbolic means, their difference vis-à-vis other Socialist factions. On the other hand, to legitimize their ideological and tactical choices in the eyes of the masses, they cannot renounce inscribing their activities in line with the already strongly established tradition of social struggles in France (the French Revolution, the silk workers’ revolt, the insurrection of June 1848, the Commune). They are concerned to appear as a new and innovative force and, at the same time, as the most authentic representatives of the proletariat that has been fighting, since “the great upheaval of 1789,” for “the advent of the Social Republic”.

Anarchism, from its inception, is thus faced with the equally compelling need to develop distinctive signs of its own and constantly refer to the past. A daunting task if ever there was one — difficult to surmount in terms of doctrine, but the militant chanson will perform the task admirably.

The old and the new

All those years of song-production is under the sign of both requirements constantly bringing the militants to involve new elements of the libertarian doctrine for past references, even reinventing the role of the prophets in the midst of the great upheaval of 1789. The “Promethean” dimension of the anarchist struggle is also tempered by the simultaneous coexistence of another series of images where the comrades are presented as embodying the most complete expression of common sense. The militant, a Prometheus of supreme revolt by day, is for the rest of the time a “good bugger” who knows his rights as he knows his trade. He thinks like a good “guy” with sound logic. The model of his kind, the one who best summarizes this state of mind, is Pouget’s Père Peinard, a character with whom any “prolo” could identify. Through him, they are no longer untamed rebels, after all exceptional beings, who speak, but the “populo” itself, that is to say, everyman. His language, frank and direct, is that of every day. A language which, according to anarchists, makes a stark contrast with the rhetoric abstract and foggy rhetoric used by politicians or intellectuals to fool the masses.

Père Peinard: archetype of the French anarchist

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Simple in our tastes, our manners,
We love songbirds,
The woods, meadows, fruit, flowers,
The living water of old fountains.

Père Peinard: archetype of the French anarchist

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tative episodes of the struggle against the authority to make the highlights of the epic libertarian. The violent repression that came down on this movement during the period of attacks (1892–1894), especially, contributes to providing a true comrades martyrs who ends up taking precedence over the dead of the Commune.

Anarchism’s dream of otherness

But it is through the idealized image that the militants give themselves that it is possible to reach the deepest springs of the anarchist imaginary. That, anyway, the songs that their dream of otherness, by which they want to mark the distance that separates the old world, expressed with greater force and clarity.

The anarchists are a kind of point of honor to stand still in the guise of insurgents, lawless, having rejected all of the old society. As Paul Paillette stated, in his "Profession de foi"11

I’m a bohemian, a rebel
I’ve cut off all: Country, Family,
And the old society disgusts me,
I’d sell it for a crust.
I could become a bandit,
My grandfather was a royalist.
I burnt my letter of credit,
I’m an anarchist.

The comrades, however, say they long to be ready to die for a good cause, never seem to be afflicted by serious metaphysical problems. Even when they commit illegal acts, they remain a “perky mood. The image of the anarchist who emerges from these songs have nothing in common with that of a nihilist, but they present him as a creator of new values for all humanity. The ac-

pret them in their own way if necessary. The old and new are intertwined here, which is a key feature of the late twentieth century anarchism.

As advocates of a doctrine marked by the seal of radicality, anarchists think of themselves in their songs first and foremost as "breaker[s] of images," wiping the slate clean of all the values and beliefs of the past. Everything, “statues, emblems, mirages,” is destined to fall under the “heavy stick” of the comrades.4

Their goal, according to the dominant insurrectionary vision of social change, is to destroy all the workings of a social order that is judged to be iniquitous. A negative vision, but certainly one that is considered essential to enable the emergence of a new world. None of the symbols of “archist” society is spared by the iconoclastic libertarians, starting with the false idols that represent God to them and their country. The comrades relish declarations of atheism and/or cosmopolitanism. Thus, in Le Père Duchesne, they invited the audience to put “the Good God in the s—” while in the Réponse du laboureur they asserted that they did not “love their fatherland”5

These destructive accents could be multiplied at will should not be overestimated either. While expressing their radical difference vis-à-vis other political and social forces, the anarchists never give up claiming [se réclamer] or reclaiming [reprendre] many references to the old world they want to destroy. The use they make in their songs of a symbol such as Marianne, for example, seems to be particularly significant. Instead of rejecting what will become one of the most consensual representations of a bourgeois and opportunistic republic, for a long time, they seek to enhance its subver-

sive dimension as the promise of justice and equality left unfulfilled after the French Revolution. A similar discourse can be observed with respect to the red flag. If, from 1882–1883, the anarchists began to hoist the black flag as a sign of their radicalism, their penchant for the red flag does not disappear overnight. On the contrary, in the songs, red flags and black flags will long continue to coexist as two sides of the same emancipatory struggle of the proletariat. Overall, the study clearly shows the songs will deliberate on the part of anarchists to reclaim any part of the symbolic legacy of the labor movement while marking his distance.

**An idealized vision of their doctrine and their struggles**

This need to develop a strong collective identity is all the more imperative that anarchism has never been a homogeneous whole. What strikes anyone looking at this current is the extreme diversity of ideological viewpoints and practices among militants. Thus at the beginning of the twentieth century Paul Eltzbacher was able to write, without fear of being disowned, that libertarian theorists differed on all key issues (philosophical, property rights, means of production) except that of the State, the only subject on which there was broad consensus.

And yet, and this is not the least of the paradoxes, the anarchists have always tended to see themselves as a separate category of individuals, individuals with particular psychological traits. In 1895, for example, Augustin Hamon, in *Psychology of the Anarchist-Socialist*, tried to prove that the anarchists, even of different nation-

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