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The Red Flag of Anarchy

Anarcho

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As discussed in “The Symbols of Anarchy” in *An Anarchist FAQ* [AK Press, 2008] anarchists at first used the *red* flag as their symbol of choice, with the Black Flag slowly replacing it over a period of many decades from the 1880s. Both flags, however, had their roots in working class struggle and protest, both were anti-capitalist symbols raised by working class people in revolt against exploitation and oppression. As the person who first raised the Black Flag as an explicitly *anarchist* symbol in Paris on March 9th 1883, Louise Michel, put it the “black flag is the flag of strikes and the flag of those who are hungry.” (*The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel* [The University of Alabama Press, 1981], p. 168)

Given that the Black Flag only became the preferred anarchist symbol in the 20th century, it comes as no surprise to see that both Proudhon and Bakunin praised the use of the red flag. Bakunin wrote of “the flag of theoretical materialism, the red flag of economic equality and social justice, is raised by the practical idealism of the oppressed and famishing masses, tending to realise the greatest liberty and the human right of each in the fraternity of all men on the earth.” (*God and the State* [Dover, 1970], p. 47) Proudhon wrote in his notebooks that the red flag was “the federal standard of

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humanity, the symbol of universal fraternity” signifying the “Abolition of the proletariat and of servitude” and “Equality of political rights: universal suffrage.” (*Carnets* [Marcel Riviere, 1968] vol. 3, p. 289) Publically he proclaimed:

“The Revolution, one cannot deny it, has been made by the red flag: the provisional Government, however, has decided to keep the tricolour ... To deny the red flag, the crimson! — but it is the social question you are getting rid of. Every time the People, defeated by suffering, wanted to express its wishes and its complaints outside the law that kills it, it has walked under a red banner ... Poor red flag. Everyone is abandoning you! Me, I embrace you; I clutch you to my breast. Long live fraternity!

“Let us keep, if you wish, the tricolour, symbol of our nationality. But remember that the red flag is the sign of a revolution that will be the last. The red flag! It is the federal standard of humanity.” (*Property is Theft!* [AK Press, 2011], pp. 257–8)

So, as historian Jack Hayward notes, a few weeks after helping to build barricades in Paris at the start of the 1848 Revolution “predicted in March 1848 the internationalism of the Red Flag.” Originally, as Hayward reports, the Red Flag was flown from the Paris town hall “to signal the proclamation of martial law to deal with food riots in 1789 and in July 1791 it was used at the massacre of anti-royalist demonstrators. In 1792, the republican revolutionaries turned it into a symbol of defiance by inscribing on red flags: ‘Martial law of the sovereign people against the rebellion of the executive power.’” After that “the Red Flag went into eclipse. The *tricolore* carried all before it for the rest of the Revolution and under Napoleon, being readopted at the 1830 Revolution as the emblem

of the July Monarchy. The Left sought an alternative and at first it was the Black Flag symbolising a fight to the death that appeared in the 1831 Lyons riots, with its slogan: ‘Work or Death.’” (*After the French Revolution* [Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991], pp. 245–6)

So the Black Flag was a recognised symbol of the Left, so it was unsurprising that when the Red Flag became too associated with Marxist social democracy in France, the likes of Louise Michel urged anarchists to raise the Black Flag in the 1880s and onwards. Yet both are symbols of working class protest, both are flags raised by striking workers:

“The red banner, which has always stood for liberty, frightens the executioners because it is so red with our blood. The black flag, with layers of blood upon it from those who wanted to live by working or die by fighting, frightens those who want to live off the work of others. Those red and black banners wave over us mourning our dead and wave over our hopes for the dawn that is breaking.” (Michel, pp. 193–4)

Michel, it must be noted, is referring to a workers revolt in Lyon in 1831 when “*Vivre en travaillant ou mourir en combattant!*” (“Live working or die by fighting!”) was painted onto a Black Flag carried by protesters. Interestingly, Proudhon stayed in Lyon in the early 1840s was deeply influenced by these workers, going so far as to call his own ideas *mutuelisme* after the word they used to describe their associative socialism.

Why did the Red Flag become the symbol of choice for the socialist movement, Proudhon and Bakunin included? For this, we need to look at the 1848 Revolution in France and, in particular, the activities of that perennial state-communist revolutionary, Louis Auguste Blanqui. It was in February 1848 that the Red Flag “appeared during the insurrection for the first time as a workers’ banner on a large scale, alongside the *tricolore*. It symbolised their wish for break with the Orleanist past.” Blanqui’s first symbolic act of that revolt was to issue a manifesto “deploring the decision to retain the *tricolore* as the national flag instead of replacing it with the Red

Flag.” The 25th of February saw a demonstration of armed citizens carrying red flags. (Hayward, p. 245)

As with the use of the Black Flag by anarchists, the use of the Red Flag by socialists of all tendencies spread from France. In Britain, the Red Flag was adopted as a Chartist symbol on 31st of December, 1849. On 10th November 1850 European Socialists in exile in London adopted it in place of their national flags, “a prelude to it becoming the emblem of the First International in 1866.” (Hayward, p. 246) Its adoption by the *International Workers Association* should come as no surprise given the key role the French followers of Proudhon played in setting it up.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the newspapers in the 19th century denounced “*the Red Flag of anarchy*”, given that anarchists (like others in the revolutionary workers movement) raised it in their struggles and revolts. Both Proudhon and Bakunin associated themselves with that symbol, just as they both proclaimed themselves socialists. However, after their deaths state socialism came to dominate most labour movements in the world and the Red Flag became associated with Marxian social democracy and anarchists sought other symbols. With Communard and indefatigable revolutionary Louise Michel taking the initiative, that other flag of French working class revolt, the Black Flag, was taken up as a replacement.