

Anarchism in France

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2009

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Foundations of French Anarchism

From the 1840s to the 1920s an upturn in the number of anarchists in France had an important impact on the development of anarchist thought. In its most basic formulation, anarchism meant the absence of government, not the absence of organizational structures; however, different ideas about how society should be organized legally and economically engendered theoretical evolution and synthesis. Various anarchist tendencies evolved and emerged at this time, both internationally and from within France, such as collectivism, anarchosyndicalism, and anarchocommunism.

Early in the nineteenth century the precursor to full-fledged anarchism – mutualism – emerged and quickly spread throughout France. Mutualism was championed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), who perceived it as an alternative to both capitalism and socialism. Unlike the socialists, who advocated economic distribution “from each according to ability, to each according to need,” or the “every man for himself” philosophy of the laissez-faire capitalists, the mutualists posited “from each according to ability, to each according to *deed*.” In 1864 French mutualists, anarchists, and workers actively participated in the creation of the International Workers’ Association (the First International) in London. The anarchists who participated placed emphasis on spontaneous action, voluntarism, and federalism, informed by an overarching *ouvrierisme* (suspicion of non-working-class people). This put them in direct opposition to the Marxist platform: nationalization of industry, electoral activity, and the centralization of both the International and the state. Based in French-Switzerland, the Jura Federation, an anti-authoritarian anarchist group that participated in the First International, was influenced greatly by Proudhon’s antistatist, federalist, and mutualist ideas. The bulk of delegates from the French section, which came to be the largest national section in the First International, were Proudhonists who supported workers’ activity in the economic realm through the formation of unions, cooperatives, and mutual banks (rather than party activity). Interaction with an increasingly militant working class radicalized Proudhon and many of his supporters, however, causing a distinct shift away from mutualism toward collectivism.

The violent government repression of the 1871 Paris Commune destroyed confidence in the Proudhonist notion that emancipation would occur through peaceful evolution. Subsequently, the anarchist movement engaged in terrorist tactics that would beget increased government surveillance and repression of anarchists. Known as “propaganda of the deed,” this concept was accepted by anarchists in France, Spain, Italy, and other countries who sought to murder industrialists and heads of state. Exponents of propaganda by the deed included François Claudius Koenigstein (known as Ravachol), Auguste Vaillant, and Émile Henry. Repression following the terrorist period greatly damaged the anarchist movement.

From the 1890s to the 1920s a distinctive group of social movements, known variously as revolutionary syndicalist and anarchosyndicalist, developed in many parts of Europe. In contradistinction to the craft unionism prevalent in the United States and England, syndicalism was a form of labor unionism that aimed to overthrow capitalism through revolutionary, industrial class struggle, and to build a utopian social order, free from economic or political oppression.

Twentieth-Century French Anarchism

By the turn of the century there was a clear orientation toward the labor movement and the development of anarchosyndicalism. Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), who had himself been a supporter of propaganda by the deed, now argued that anarchist communists must turn away from individual action to mass agitation and education. Among those anarchists who orientated themselves towards syndicalism were Fernand Pelloutier (1867–1901), Paul Delesalle (1870–1948), and Pierre Monatte (1881–1960). Emile Pouget (1860–1931) and his paper *La Sociale* supported this trend, as did to a lesser extent Jean Grave (1854–1939) and his paper *Les Temps Nouveaux*. Sebastien Faure (1858–1942) and his paper *Le Libertaire* were opposed to the syndicalist tactic until 1899. This was reinforced with the departure of the individualists in 1905, who set up their own weekly paper, *L'Anarchic*. Whatever the differences, the French labor movement was dominated by anarchism from 1894. The Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) was both led by anarchists and infused with its ideas.

In addition, the new tendency known as revolutionary syndicalism emerged. This was developed by predominantly militants who had been anarchists who now wanted to break with intellectualism and individualism. This new current gradually took on a life of its own separate from anarchism and many within it saw it as a synthesis between Marxism and anarchism, rejecting the parliamentarism of the former and the small group mentality of the latter.

Impatience among some with the lack of organization led some anarchist communists to found the Fédération Communiste Révolutionnaire Anarchiste in 1913. The individualists were expelled from this conference, sparked by their general obstructive behavior and the reaction to the exploits of the Bonnot Gang, a group of anarchists known for criminal activity. World War I led to a split in the movement, with a minority, including Grave and Charles Malato (1857–1938), backing Kropotkin's support for the Allies. The surrender of the CGT to the wave of patriotism also had a demoralizing effect. The outbreak of war could not have come at a worse time for the proponents of organization, who after years of striving had finally set up a national organization. The majority who opposed the war as internationalists saw their papers closed down, and many militants were conscripted or imprisoned. The outbreak of the Russian Revolution saw an initial enthusiasm for Bolshevism. In fact the first – and short-lived – Parti Communiste, founded in 1919, was made up almost entirely of anarchists. Anarchist communists made another effort to organize, setting up the Fédération Anarchiste, which became the Union Anarchiste (UA) in 1920. By that point, there was a distancing from Bolshevism, and in 1924, following an armed attack by communists on anarchists, this became an irreconcilable rift.

With the controversy over the Organizational Platform, the UA saw itself transformed into the Union Anarchiste Communiste Révolutionnaire and the departure of some, including Faure, to found the Association des Fédéralistes Anarchistes. However, the platformists lost control, leading to the return of most of the AFA and a return to the original name. Meanwhile, the anarchosyndicalists had organized their own union, the CGT-Syndicaliste – Révolutionnaire. During the Popular Front there was a growth in numbers, but another split occurred with the setting up of the Fédération Anarchiste de Langue Française, which judged the UA too centralist. This remained outside the UA until World War II.

The war paralyzed the movement. It started reforming toward 1943 and was able to reestablish a public appearance by 1944. The Fédération Anarchiste was founded in 1945, but was already

plagued by differences. The FA was to have a certain influence in the Renault strike (1947) and saw its paper *Le Libertaire* reach a print run of 100,000.

The anarchosyndicalists organized themselves within the CNT-France, though this remained a minute body. In 1950 a group around Georges Fontenis and Serge Ninn began organizing a secret group within the FA to counter the individualists. This culminated in the transformation of the FA into the Fédération Communiste Libertaire and the expulsion or departure of many. Many of these regrouped in a new FA set up in 1953, which united different tendencies. Another group that emerged in this period was the Groupes Anarchistes d'Action Revolutionnaires (GAAR) which had left the Fontenis grouping and published a magazine, *Noir et Rouge*, which was to become an influential instrument of theoretical clarification and had a certain influence on the events of 1968. The magazine took on a life of its own when a majority of the GAAR went into the FA.

Certainly, anarchist influence could be seen in the demonstrations in the student committees and in some of the workplace occupations during 1968, but the movement failed to take full advantage. This in part led to the emergence of a tendency within the FA, the Organisation Revolutionnaire Anarchiste (ORA), which became an independent body in 1971. The ORA organized over 100 circles of sympathizers in the 1970s, but by 1976 this had split between the Organisation Communiste Libertaire and the Union des Travailleurs Communistes Libertaires (now Alternative Libertaire).

Today, the movement remains divided into a number of different organizations and groups, but has a certain implantation it has not had for a long time. The FA has a radio station, a weekly paper, and a network of bookshops and is more clearly aligned with social anarchism, while Alternative Libertaire appears to be small but vivacious and growing. The French CNT has experienced a number of splits over the years, with one fragment bearing this name and enjoying a certain growth. Nevertheless, the movement remains divided, despite various unitary initiatives.

Fontenis, Georges (B. 1920)

The son and grandson of militant socialists, Georges Fontenis played an important role in the twentieth-century French anarchist movement. He made contact with the movement through Spanish solidarity work in 1936, joining a group of young militants. In 1944 he joined the underground CGT and as a member of a teachers' union took part in commissions to root out Vichyists (Nazi sympathizers) in national education in 1945. He participated in the reconstruction of the anarchist movement in 1945 and the founding of the Fédération Anarchiste. He was general secretary of the FA in 1946–8 and 1950–3 and director of the FA weekly newspaper *Le Libertaire*.

In 1950 Fontenis helped found the Organisation Pensée Bataille (OPB), a secret group within the FA which gained control over some regions and many leading posts. In 1953 the OPB forced the expulsion of the individualists and turned the FA into the Fédération Communiste Libertaire (FCL). It adopted the Manifesto of Libertarian Communism, written by Fontenis. In 1951 Fontenis took part in an assassination attempt on Francisco Franco, with Spanish anarchist exiles. The FCL was involved in support for the anti-colonialist struggle in Algeria, resulting in fines, raids, and jailings. Fontenis was imprisoned in 1957. That same year the FCL took part in a disastrous election campaign, leading to the departure of some of its militants. These events led to the collapse of the FCL. In 1968–9 Fontenis, together with Daniel Guérin, founded the Mouvement Communiste Libertaire and was a member of its successor organization, the first Organisation Communiste

Libertaire. In 1979 he joined the Union des Travailleurs Communistes Libertaires. He is a member of its successor organization, Alternative Libertaire. He wrote *L'Autre communisme*, his view of the events of the 1950s.

SEE ALSO: Kropotkin, Peter (1842–1921) ; Paris Commune, 1871 ; Proudhon, Pierre Joseph (1809–1865)

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Daniel, Evan Matthew, and Nick Heath. "Anarchism, France." In *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present*, edited by Immanuel Ness, 119–122. Vol. 1. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

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