

About a Project for Anarchist Organization

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Translator's introduction

This letter, published in the Italian-language New York journal "Il Martello", is Fabbri's reaction to the project for an Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists. Fabbri was involved in the discussions on the setting up of an International Anarchist Communist Federation, as part of the "Pensiero e Volontà" Group together with Berneri and Fedeli. This article was published several months after the aborted attempt to set up the international, but it is not clear when the article was actually written.

General considerations

It was with a strong sense of goodwill that I read the project for an anarchist "Organizational Platform" which a group of Russian comrades published last year in Paris and which has been the cause of impassioned debate recently between anarchists from various countries. My first impression was that I was not in disagreement with many points, in fact I found the project to contain many painful, unarguable truths. The whole project breathes such an ardent desire to do something, to work for the good of the cause, that it is quite seductive.

All this is certainly of no little merit for the authors of the "Platform", whose great value is due to another reason — it places under discussion a number of problems inherent to the anarchist movement, to the place of anarchists in the revolution, to anarchist organization in the struggle, and so on. These need to be resolved if anarchism is to continue to provide answers to the growing needs of the struggle and of present-day social life.

Despite these favourable observations, however, and unless I am much mistaken, I do not think that the project proposed by the Russian comrades can be accepted by any anarchist organization of any importance since, in my opinion, it contains errors which are of little import should they remain within the realm of the personal (and debatable) opinion of a few comrades, but which could become the cause of serious deviations in the anarchist movement if accepted by the organization and acquire any programmatic value.

As a programmatic basis for an organization, the "Platform" is too ideological and too impractical. On a number of problems (such as the class struggle, democracy, the State, the revolutionary transitional period, syndicalism, etc.) it establishes axiomatic points of view, some correct, others not, though opinion on these may be said to vary from comrade to comrade. Unanimous agreement or even wide agreement on these points may be almost impossible (and indeed pointless, as far as practical effects on the organization are concerned). What is important are the concrete and positive objectives of Anarchism which must be realized. The important thing is what we must and what we want to achieve as regards action, independent of the doctrines and ideologies with which our actions can be justified or evaluated. It seems to me that not enough space is dedicated in the "Platform" to this realistic, voluntarist part, if it is to be considered a real programmatic project.

But I do not wish to dwell too long on criticism of the "Platform" as a programmatic basis for an organization. I believe that its proponents themselves do not insist on it and are prepared to lay it aside in order to seek a more concrete basis which is better able to unite. Among other things, in fact, one consequence of the "Platform" would be a tendency to exclude from the anarchist organization not only individualists and anti-organizationalists, who could not join for reasons of

the very contradiction in terms, but also not a few anarchist-communists and organizationalists, including some (such as myself) who have for many years supported the need for an anarchist organization and have been working towards that goal.

There is much in the “Platform” which I find good and which I approve of completely, above all as it seeks to demonstrate the need for anarchist organization and the need to leave this vague and indeterminate terrain in order to realize the organization as concrete, permanent and wide-reaching on the largest possible scale. Correct, too, are the many criticisms of our movement past and present and the many painful observations. Likewise the important presentation of some of the problems of anarchist organization in the here and now. On this part, given that there is agreement, there is no need to dwell. Neither do I wish to deal with certain aspects of the “Platform” with which I personally agree, but with which many comrades disagree, as they are not essential for the practical movement of Anarchism.

I will, however, only examine those parts of the “Platform” which seem to me to be in error or which I believe contain the seeds of error. My approach will be to consider it, not as a simple exposition of ideas, personal or of a group, as if I were simply dealing with one of our many pamphlets regarding theory or propaganda.

Unity and Variety

The departure point of the “Platform”, as expounded in comrade Arshinov’s introduction, is sound. It establishes that the anarchist movement has devastated itself, sterilized for the most part by the “yellow fever of disorganization”. The experience during the Russian Revolution was decisive from this point of view.

An Italian friend of ours who lived for some time in Germany and in Russia immediately after the revolutionary period, was telling me that it is impossible to continue being anti-organizationalist and individualist once one has experienced the situation in those places. He, himself, who had once belonged to the individualist current of anarchism, became personally convinced of this¹.

Arshinov, in fact, notes that during the Russian Revolution, the libertarian movement demonstrated a certain confusion and fractioning of its forces; this is what is supposed to have driven some anarchist militants into the arms of the Bolsheviks. And it is the same reason which has caused a certain passivity among some others...² And the conclusion of the need for an anarchist organization is fully justified and correct in every way.

Nonetheless, one can note from the Introduction that the spirit which pervades the “Platform” is in effect excessively exclusivist, tending to place outside the anarchist movement all those, not only practical but ideological, currents which do not agree with it. There are also some statements in it which merit greater development, for as they are, they give an unfavourable impression, for example when it demands the “rigorous unity” of a party, unity of ideology and of “strategy”.

It is true, among other things, that the anarcho-syndicalist method does not resolve the question of anarchist organization, and I too am contrary to the letter and the concept intended by the term “anarcho-syndicalism”, which is still widespread in Russia, Germany and (in a somewhat different form) in South America. If I am not mistaken, excluding this current of anarchism from

¹ The comrade referred to is Ugo Fedeli.

² See the Introduction to the “Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists”.

a general anarchist organization would be a serious mistake: it would result in transforming it into an extraneous, adversarial movement, when in fact it is an internal current which can easily co-exist with ours, which prefers to call itself simply “anarchist”.

We witnessed this in Italy in 1919–20 and within the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*, where the anarchist elements tending towards syndicalism were perfectly at home and co-operated actively and usefully in the movement of the whole Union, despite disagreement on some particular questions referring to syndical action and the place assigned to this in the general movement. It was generally speaking discussed in the press and in congress, but in the end some print of agreement was always found to enable us to continue to fight together as part of the same organization.

While it is very true that it is not possible to live practically in the same organization as the individualists, who are much farther from us than the anarcho-syndicalists, the individualist ideology should not be completely discarded just for that reason. On the contrary, some principles regarding the demands for the rights of the individual, the autonomy of the individual and the group, are held in common with us, the organizationalists, and not to recognize this would be the start of a deviation. So in affirming the need for organization and being, in effect, separate from all those who refuse a general, permanent organization, considering this anarchism to be somewhat defective from the point of view of principles, we must guard against letting ourselves judge its proponents as un-anarchist, nor should it stop us (when the occasion presents itself) from possible reciprocal solidarity and co-operation with them.

I do not really know the programme of that group of Russian comrades who speak to us about an anarchist “synthesis”³. However, if it conceives that anarchism will also, in some way, be individualist and syndicalist, not in an exclusivist doctrinaire sense, but in the practical sense that anarchists believe syndicalist action to be useful and the defence of the freedom of the individual to be necessary in order to arrive at the maximum possible autonomy in harmony with the freedom of all other individuals, then such a conception seems to me to be entirely right and near enough to our own conception, despite defective formulation.

When we speak about a “General Union of Anarchists”, we must not be afraid of the words, but rather of the ideas they express, which do not seem to us to be good. On condition, however, that it cannot be expected that an organization which has given itself such a name can represent the entire “generality” of anarchists, and exclude from its generality those who do not belong to the organization, which would then in effect be “particular” and not general.

We, who want to organize as many anarchists as possible for propaganda and struggle, anarchists who agree on determinate aims and determinate forms of action, we must distance ourselves from the danger of thinking of our “area” as being the whole, of acting unjustly towards others who do not agree with us and of imagining that we (who are only a part, albeit the largest part of Anarchism) represent the whole of Anarchism. We must avoid this exclusivist error which has afflicted the socialist and authoritarian revolutionary parties who, once they established a programme and their own organization, dogmatized that they alone shall be saved, in other words that there is no other possible socialism or revolutionarism.

If there were just one dissenting anarchist outside our organization, then it could not represent all anarchists. To whatever extent this may be of little importance, it is a question of principle which we anarchists should not forget, we who do not believe in any intrinsic virtue of the

³ The reference is to Volin’s group which was proposing an organization based on a “synthesis” of anarchist trends, as originally propounded by Sebastien Faure.

majority or the minority simply for what they are, or deny either the right to subordinate to their own ends the will of all those, be they few or many, who do not agree.

Some errors: workers' organizations and anarchist groups

One part of the "Platform" that I believe is wrong is the section which would have "class struggle" as practically the main characteristic of anarchism, reducing to a minimum the human element and the humanitarian objective.

The expression "class struggle" includes a nucleus of theories which can of course be shared by anarchists but which are not necessarily anarchist. They are, in fact, common to certain other schools of socialism, in particular to Marxism and bolshevism. This is not the place to argue whether or not it is true that human history is determined by the class struggle — it is a scientific question or a question regarding the philosophy of history which does not impinge excessively on anarchism. Anarchism follows its own path whether that theory be true or false. The main characteristic of Anarchism is the refusal of all imposed authority, of all government; it is the affirmation of individual and social life, organized on a libertarian basis.

But anarchism is above all human, inasmuch as it seeks to *realize* (to use Bakunin's expression) *Humanity* upon the destruction of class and state divisions, and to realize it in the individual as much as in society. The class struggle is a fact which can be denied neither by anarchists nor by anyone with a head on their shoulders, and in this struggle the anarchists will stand with the oppressed and exploited classes against the dominant and exploiting classes. For this reason, the workers' class war against capitalism corresponds with the methods and forms of revolutionary action of anarchism, having the aim of expropriating the capitalist class. This expropriation must be to the benefit of *everyone*, so that the exploited may cease being exploited and the exploiters may cease being exploiters, and everyone voluntarily agrees to produce in common and consume the fruits of their common labour together, according to their needs.

In this sense it could be argued that anarchists are "against the class struggle", given that they bring to this struggle of the workers against capitalism the objective of ending the class struggle in order to substitute it with human cooperation. It is better, too, not to clutter our propaganda with formulae that can lead to misunderstandings and could, given the use made of them today, be interpreted in a sense which is contrary to Anarchism.

Historically speaking, it seems inexact to me to speak of Anarchism as a "class ideal". The working class more than anyone else has every interest in the triumph of liberty in the anarchist sense, and consequently we anarchists address ourselves especially to our brother workers, amongst whom we know we can find the most comrades. Indeed, most anarchists, we can even say almost all anarchists, are themselves workers. But neither does this mean that the aim of anarchism is exclusively workerist, or that the triumph of the working class should necessarily lead to Anarchy. We do well to persuade ourselves that, unless I am mistaken, there is among the proletariat even a tiny, unhealthy part which is prey to overbearing, authoritarian or servile ways such as can be found among the bourgeoisie. Unless our anarchist will is able to prevent it, the victory of these elements could end up in new forms of domination which would in no way be desirable. The example of Russia can teach us something.

Anarchism is also a human idea, the idea of all those, without exception, who want to destroy every form of violent and coercive authority of one man over another. By subordinating this idea

to any class bias whatsoever, be it the old bourgeois bias or the more recent workerist bias — we would diminish it and in fact prepare the way for a dangerous psychology which would facilitate the formation (through revolution) of a new class domination.

The working masses, the vast majority of whom are not anarchists, contain many tendencies, some good and some bad, some authoritarian and some libertarian, some servile and some rebellious. They do not in themselves constitute a creative force in any determinate, let alone libertarian, sense. This they can be inasmuch as the individuals which make up the masses can consciously become anarchists and anarchist propaganda can develop in them and increase their libertarian tendencies, combating and weakening the other tendencies. Therefore, the masses are a “creative and liberating force” inasmuch as they are anarchist and to the extent they are anarchist and not because they are workers.

Amongst anarchists there may be differing opinions on this (which is only natural), but as we are dealing with a debatable theoretical and historical judgement, it is perfectly useless to dogmatize on it one way or another. As far as the effects of anarchist struggle and its results are concerned, let it suffice to say that anarchists participate in the fight of the exploited classes against capitalism, for the demolishing of its power and for its complete expropriation. On this much we agree, without distinction. Everything else can be argued over, but let us not make of it the cause of a real split in the party.

What I really have not understood in the “Platform” is the matter of the relationship between the anarchist movement and the workers’ movement, between the anarchist organization on the basis of ideas and the labour organization on the basis of economic interests. A certain anarchist organization of the masses, it is said, must be effected, and in order for this to happen there needs to be, on the one hand, a select grouping of revolutionary workers and peasants on the basis of anarchist ideas, and, on the other hand, a grouping of the revolutionary workers and peasants on the basis of production and consumption, this too, however, “imbued with revolutionary anarchist ideology”. But does that not mean useless duplication?

Either one supports a labour organization open to all workers, and thereby having no particular ideological programme, within which the anarchists carry out their function as animators and driving force (in the libertarian sense) the workers with the aim of rendering it ever more libertarian and revolutionary but without expecting it to adopt our credo officially and a priori. In that case, there is room for a specific movement of anarchists alongside it. Or, to follow the example of the anarchists in the Argentine republic and the anarcho-syndicalists in Germany and Russia, all the functions of the movement and of anarchist propaganda lie within the one labour organization which has an anarchist programme, tactics and ideology. In this case the existence of specific anarchist groupings would be a pointless duplication with no precise mission.

The fact that here and there in the “Platform” there is talk of a “leading position” or a “leading function” of anarchists within the proletarian movement could be interpreted as something else — in other words that anarchists must in some way create a sort of leading caste which would remain more or less cocooned above the workers’ movement in a similar way to the social-democratic parties of western Europe and America or to the Bolshevik party in Russia. This, in my opinion, would be something else which would constitute a deviation from anarchism, though it may appear to benefit the anarchist party. In other words, it would be a more or less concealed sort of anarchist dictatorship over the non-anarchist or only tendentially libertarian proletariat.

A real contradiction in terms.

It is true that the authors of the “Platform” say that this leadership would be one of ideas only. But in order to exert this influence, there is no need for a third conception of the relationship between anarchism and the militant proletariat. The two conceptions specified above allow for it and make it possible to the same degree. The conception proposed by the “Platform” would not add anything — and indeed it would be a mistake; one might be led to think that the spiritual leadership could be interpreted as and could take on the form of a factual leadership which would dare to attempt an anti-anarchist division between the leading elements who are in the minority and the led mass which is in the majority. The masses would have every right to be wary, despite the denials of those who wish to function as leaders, almost as their “combined staff”.

It is not possible to explain in any other way the difference which the “Platform” establishes between the mass organization imbued with anarchist ideology and the anarchist organization itself. It is a difference which in practice could not be quantified, as nothing can establish the degree to which the former is anarchist in comparison with the latter, nor sanction the legitimacy of the “leadership” or the superiority of the latter over the former.

It may be that the intention of the authors of the “Platform” is not that expressed above. It may be that at times, I repeat, I have not fully understood what the authors were thinking. The language often gives the reader this impression. And, on the other hand, if we exclude the sense indicated above, its conception has nothing original and could happily fit with that of the supporters of a labour organization which is open to all, as with that of the anarcho-syndicalists, but closer to the former than the latter.

A certain amount of the misunderstanding and misinterpretation lies in the adoption of the expressions “class struggle” and “syndicalism” which the authors of the “Platform” fail to put to one side, defective and confusional though they be.

I have spoken already of class struggle. As for syndicalism, although they do not give this word anything but the meaning of class-struggle revolutionary workers’ movement, where the various forms of revolutionary struggle are concerned, it is impossible (if I am not mistaken) to make abstractions on all that this word has signified over the last 25 years, especially in Italy: from reformist to fascist syndicalism, through all the deviations and errors of theoretical or practical revolutionary syndicalism itself, and not only in Italy.

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