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# the anarchist question

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1972

René Furth, "La Question anarchiste," *Anarchisme et Non-violence* 31 (Octobre-Décembre, 1972): 2-30. Retrieved on 2020-12-21 from <https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/rene-furth-the-anarchist-question-1972/>  
[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]

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tation of particularism and fragmentation, the rejection of everything given and the passionate impulses are inseparable from anarchism. No tradition, however flexible and evolving, can avoid questioning, least of all in an anarchist environment. The drying up of cultural life, and not its demand for form and continuity, leads to the sclerosis of tradition. The effort of construction and unification does not suppress negativity; on the contrary, it directs the destructive tendencies towards their true aim: the “old world”, its ideology and its apparatuses of domination.

The anarchist question — since we must speak about it once again in closing — awaits a practical answer. Prove movement by walking. Reappropriation and assimilation only take on their meaning and effectiveness in a new production: the development of a language through precise analyses and experiments in communication, the extension, in our writings, of writings passed down or recognized.

I list here two particular steps, because they can be undertaken immediately, with all of the incomplete, approximate and provisional character that our situation will lend to them (as evidenced by this text...) The more-or-less groping and erratic search for a new kind of life also continues its course, with a first effort (part of the “underground” press) to achieve expression.

This attempt at communication, which is itself in search of antecedents, should naturally converge with that which derives from the written word.

We can hardly say more. I have tried to indicate some necessary steps, some starting points and some potentialities. The concrete forms of our cultural life will take shape along the way, each stage being able to open up, for the stage to come, possibilities that were unforeseen until then.

movements or in daily life manifest the logic of a libertarian struggle. It is time to recognize that the same is true of thought and cultural activity. We have no more monopoly on libertarian expression than on libertarian action, even if it is up to us to develop to the end the anarchist logic of certain attitudes or certain ideas.

Particularly incandescent “fragments of anarchy” have been emitted by the surrealists, and quite recently by the situationists. After the war, existentialism released a current of ideas that had clear libertarian components. The anarchists have gone right past surrealism as if nothing had happened. (A regular collaboration of the surrealist group with the *Libertaire* group began in the early fifties ... but the newspaper was already in the hands of “revisionists.”) Existentialism has been no better understood — and even the sponsorship that Stirner could give it has been of no consequence.

Situationist ideas have had a more direct impact, as they have had on the whole of the authoritarian movement (even if the mark often remains superficial); but as regards the official spheres of the anarchist “movement”, they above all triggered a panicked reaction and helped to ripen one of the periodic schisms of the F. A. (1967).

I am sticking here to clearly marked cross-currents, in order to go quickly. Each group, each individual, according to their own coordinates, can be led to look for their references outside of the tradition. No limit, except that of internal cohesion, can be opposed to the absorption, by an anarchist theory, of substances and radiations useful for its growth and vitality.

**Order and progress.** — It is above all from the anti-authoritarian movement of recent years that anarchism will draw its energies for the time being. Such a process of assimilation calls in return for questioning. But anarchism carries within itself the impetus for its own questioning. Its negative and dissolving tendencies are unlikely to lose their vigor with cultural revival. Contestation, the will to rupture, the temp-

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open to questioning and new contributions. It would already be a big step forward if we found face to face — with all the contradictions and interferences that entails — with well-structured and well-informed theories.

A thought centered on the idea of freedom (“it is the emptiness of the hub that makes the wheel turn” said Lao-Tzu) is inevitably led to plurality, because it cannot base its orthodoxy on any authoritarian body, even of a “scientific” nature, that would distinguish between the straight line and heresies. But we can interrogate each theory regarding its consistency and the value of its information.

**Theorization and culture.** — We have such a delay to make up for that shaping one or more theories will necessarily be a long-term project. It is the theorization that is to be immediate. It has as a condition a plural intellectual activity that must be able to inscribe itself in a diversified cultural life. I have particularly mentioned the “founders” here, but cultural life implies the circulation of much more varied texts: works relating to testimony or rage, imagination or the lampoon. Déjacque, Darien and Cœurderoy will have their say. Biographies, memoirs, books filled with souvenirs maintain the traces of the “lived tradition.” The very multiplicity of small, ephemeral publications is not a cause of weakness and loss if there exists a current of clarification and unification that can serve as a relay and a stimulus.

Finally, there has been a lot of talk in these notes about work, effort, elaboration, etc. It is true that there is a lot to do, but we will do it all the better if we do not forget the pleasure of encounters and discoveries, the taste for exploration and experiment, curiosity and receptiveness. A cultural life is largely made up of those things.

**“External” ideas.** — The “reinvention” of an original tradition in no way means a return to a vacuum. We recognize a spontaneous anarchy on the plane of action: regardless of any anarchist label or any filiation, certain interventions in social

## overture

The “program” that I have just outlined is the result of great optimism. I will invoke in favor of optimism the current extension of an anti-authoritarian movement in all aspects of life and I will recall the historical precedents. The anarchist movement has already experienced periods of intellectual turmoil, which indicates that it is not congenitally insane.

That said, the proposed program is tainted with a primary weakness: it is the work of a single individual. This is common in anarchist milieu, but that is no reason to put up with it. From my point of view, like that of *Anarchisme et Non-violence*, these notes are therefore intended first of all for the discussion of the reasons and the modalities of a cultural activity. From there, we will see if a “common program” is possible, not in the form of a manifesto in  $x$  points, but as a coordination of actions already initiated or at least planned.

To prevent this debate (and the expectation of debate is another proof of optimism) from starting with misunderstandings, I would like to put some of my positions in perspective. The negative and dissolving tendencies of anarchy prevail by force of circumstances over its positive and creative tendencies. To really bring into play the dialectic between one and the other, it seems necessary to me to reinforce the latter, and I have oriented my remarks in this direction. This does not mean that I wish to eliminate the negative.

**The search for unity.** — I do not believe that a re-reading of anarchism (as a social movement, as an intellectual tradition) can lead to a single theory. An anarchist “system” is unthinkable, but we can at least consider a systematization, always

## dispersion

Anarchism is a permanent obstacle for the anarchist.

It scatters more than it gathers. It fritters away energies rather than concentrating them. It squanders its gains when what is necessary is to mobilize them for new acquisitions. Summary judgments and the remnants of old popularizations stand in for the methods of analysis and the precise knowledge that it lacks.

Instead of devoting the best part of our efforts to the struggle against capitalism and political power, we exhaust ourselves struggling to patch up and hold together our fragile means: groups, press, networks of communication. It is with great difficulty that we find the means to support ourselves on any kind of basis. The groups and organizations keep breaking up; those that take their place slip despite themselves in the ruts dug by the predecessors — unless they refuse everything, and toss and turn, for a while, this way and that.

The majority of the publications are as ephemeral as they are little known. Their theoretical basis — when there is something that resembles a theoretical basis — remains unstable and ragtag. In the best of cases, they earnestly reframe the old questions: celles those that had been forgotten for fear of the challenges. Or else they inject into the little anarchist world some elements of research and analysis done elsewhere, which is certainly useful and only too rare.

## to depart or to begin again?

This complete lack of cohesion and continuity reduces the anarchist movement's powers of attraction to such a point that it can only retain a minority of the minority that traverses its sphere of influence. The numerical insufficiency contributes in turn to the limited life span of the initiatives, the poor quality of the contributions and the resorption of the exchanges.

That penury does not only concern the "specific" milieu, the groups and formations that proclaim themselves libertarian. Those who identify their practice with a libertarian perspective, without associating themselves with the milieu — precisely because they observe its deficiencies and because they are wary of the confusion that tarnishes anarchism — would have everything to gain from the existence of a living movement: information, theoretical reflection, variety of experiences, contacts, stimulants (even in polemics).

It remains to be seen whether we must stick with this admission of failure. Many have done so and have left for revolutionary tendencies that offer them greater means, a coherent theory and a more stimulating intellectual climate. Others hang on, unmoved by the confusion and fragmentation, because all that interests them is the radicality of specific, ad hoc actions or the rough outline of a lifestyle. Let's not speak of those who have ordained themselves the proprietors of an "inalienable anarchy," anarchists of divine right and guardians of orthodoxy, assiduous above all to track down the deviations not provided for in the catalog of their ideological bric-à-brac. Let's leave these dealers in second-hand goods to call the shots in their shops; the innocents who stumble in there linger less and less.

If we want to put an end to this critical situation, the question arises: is anarchism condemned by its nature to fragmentation, to outbursts with no future, to vague ideologies? If not, can it find within itself the unifying principles that would give it strength of conviction and power to intervene?

— why skimp? — means of publishing, and one more step will lead us to a community built around an activity of publishing and printing (some American communities live on the publication of a newspaper.)

Finally, community or not, we would have there a nerve center for the libertarian movement, at once memory and factor of invention, laboratory and good hostel, in short, to return to science fiction, a "powerhouse." A Foundation.

Above all, it will be necessary to create meeting places and times, where contacts would be established beyond the limits of organizations or particular sectors of intervention. I do not see these meetings primarily as “seminars” or “colloquia” (which I do not exclude, far from it), but as crossroads where the exchange of ideas would take place as current events (significant events or actions taken) dictate.

The interest of these “cultural centers” would be to be independent of “organizations”, whose exclusivity and rivalries are not very conducive to unprejudiced encounters.

So much the better if each group hosts its own intellectual activity. But to set up cultural networks, it is much better to start from personal relationships and affinities, communities of interest or relations that certain groups maintain between themselves according to the needs of short-term actions. Nothing would, of course, prevent the members of an organization from participating in these contacts.

One could object that it is, once again, to remain informal. The forms — when there is a need for forms — would be determined by the tasks pursued: debates to be prepared, journals to be published, editing, etc. And, in any case, it is a question of allowing precisely those forms (theoretical structures, language, cultural ramifications) to emerge that could provide a *raison d'être* and some transparency to the formalization of relations.

Here I would like to leave the field of hypotheses and proposals, in order to jump into that of utopia (or even the science fiction dear to many of us.) These networks could give themselves a center, or centers (let us remain federalists), points of interference and passage, places for permanent meetings. Friendly bookstores are already playing this role. More is needed: access not only to recent books but also to older or rarer documents with reduced print runs. And above all the possibility of working on site, alone or with others, of living for a while at the “center”, of meeting people there. Scattered teams would meet there, meet other teams, take and give the “news”. Let us add

What is serious is that these questions are so rarely posed, except by those who respond by leaving anarchism behind. They are at least implicitly at work in the attempts made by certain grounds to find their way out of the fog. The inertia of the milieu reins in these attempts and limits their duration; they nevertheless constitute a first positive element, without which it would hardly be worth the trouble of struggling with this sort of questioning.

## **the absence of forms**

At first glance, what characterizes anarchism and its lack of continuity is the absence of forms. At all levels, we encounter the shapeless.

Its most obvious manifestation is the inevitable return — always in the same terms — of the problem of organization: the absence of forms in the relations between individuals, between groups. The proclamation of the informal is only a resignation to the unformed. We can indeed perceive that spontaneous relations are more to be valued than being stuck in a closed group, set against all others and worn out by internal conflicts. I also admit that nothing is more delusive than the formalism that consists of mapping out mighty organizational schemes and waiting for the masses to throw themselves into them, or the formalism that wears out people in the maintenance and upkeep of some bit of machinery that cannot find a use in real life. But the informal cannot be a solution, precisely insofar as the temporary and fluctuating character of this type of relations does not allow the preservation and extension of gains.

The problem of organization is, in fact, secondary. It is a question of consequence, and not of causes. No real accord is possible as long as we limit ourselves to pooling refusals, vague formulations and slogans. At the slightest debate regarding substance, the facade of unity cracks. It could hardly be oth-

erwise: how, in the absence of some clearly defined bases, can we know what we've signed up for? Agreement on a particular point does not make up for indecision and contradictions on a variety of other questions, which remain in the shadows because no effort is made to achieve an overview. It is impossible for us to offer newcomers a comprehensive vision with which they can engage.

It is this way that the dispersion and loss reach their culmination. It has become customary — for a long time now — to carve anarchism up into little, clearly separated segments, each of which bear the marks of some popularizers. The link with the original works or the social movements that furnished the “label” is most often cut. The “individualists” know as little of Stirner as the “libertarian communists” know of Bakunin or Kropotkin. What does it matter? The founding fathers (and Stirner is one despite himself...) tended to have a general view of the problems, and a connection with the knowledges and ideas of their times. They often show themselves to be more modern than their followers.

Another purely internal and outdated criticism? It is true that a new generation of libertarians is better able to avoid arbitrary splits, by no longer separating the social revolution from the subversion of everyday life. But it pushes negligence, and even pure and simple refusal, even further as soon as it is a question of giving a coherent expression to its reasons for acting and its practice.

Even groups anxious to translate their experience into a more rigorous formulation, to widen the discussion and allow a reflection on their journey, have difficulty avoiding breaks. First, because they want to keep their distance from the anarchist milieu and, on the other hand, because the consciousness of making an original and modern attempt tentatively releases them with little thought from seeking in the past of the libertarian movement for the precedents or arguments that could support their research. So they remain

current ideas, these two structuring efforts constantly sending us from one to the other.

And as soon as we tackle the shaping of our ideas for the present, we find ourselves confronted with the stream of modern intellectual life.

## **communication networks**

We would again be the losers if the “rereading” was done to the detriment of a “reading” of the present: a theoretical interpretation of the new forms of alienation and of the fight against alienation, a confrontation with the theoretical research that is developing around us. The libertarian movement will be animated by an effective cultural life when all these processes are intimately linked, when we can approach the intellectual life of the moment with the knowledge originally acquired by our tradition and re-examine our past with both acquired knowledge and current experiences.

We will arrive at this degree of “mobilization” in stages (if we arrive there at all...), through a collective work that will require great diversification. So there is a new risk of dispersal. We could only remedy this by increasing the overlaps, by forming teams based on common interests, on synergies or interactions. Here again, we will be hampered by our small number and our geographical dispersion.

The first condition, and the most stimulating, will be to multiply the number of encounters, using all the means of communication at our disposal (including the means of transportation...). Periodicals will be needed so that everyone can be kept abreast of other research, and so that all of this output can be used and discussed. At a more spontaneous level, we can envision networks of correspondence (relayed if necessary by newsletters) that would announce projects, provide information on the research and maintain the more informal discussion.



yet to invent our tradition... A tradition is always in the process of transformation. Some of its elements are falling into disuse, others are unearthed and reactivated. Links are made which were not given at the start. Connections are established between different stories. Stirner is introduced into the anarchist current by his posterity. Kropotkin places Fourier at the source of libertarian socialism, and as a function of Fourier's current "return" we can expect an imminent injection of his ideas into modern anarchism. These processes of appropriation can also carry much further in time: Etienne de la Boétie, Epicurus, Lao-Tzu... A living tradition is a conquering tradition.

The reestablishment of certain connections prompts us to reconsider some renunciations. The libertarian communist groups are tempted to assert that they owe Proudhon nothing. No doubt they are far from the People's Bank. But libertarian sociology is the essential work of Proudhon and we all remain dependent on his hypotheses and analyzes. Rather than concentrating on some of his utopian constructions, we should re-examine — and reuse — his methods of analysis, his dialectics. Let us not forget either that the theory and practice of self-management have solid roots in Proudhon. Not to mention his influence on Bakunin, on the anti-authoritarian current of the First International (even if the "collectivists" had to fight "proudhonian" reformists there.) Likewise, non-violent anarchists deny Tolstoy and more readily attach themselves to Gandhi,... who himself owes much to Tolstoy,... who himself was marked by Proudhon.

This is not a genealogy undertaken for fun. The interest of the thing is to discover what is implicit in our positions and what are the lines of cohesion. The search for unity comes through the search for foundations. But this is still only one aspect of the real foundational work, which for us takes place in the present. The anarchist past is not lacking in disparity or inconsistency. Our reading of the past will therefore also depend on the consistency that we have introduced into our

engaged in a very compartmentalized activity, which prevents them from grasping as a whole the links, theoretical and practical, that connect their enterprise to the global project of the anarchist revolution.

## fragments of anarchy

Another fragmentation further weakens our capacity for expression: ideas circulate very badly across borders. Few translations are made and the French, to take one example, pour prendre un exemple, are largely ignorant of the anarchist books published in German, England or Italy.

We can ask ourselves whether the dispersion results only from temporary conditions or if it is inseparable from the anarchist movement. A backwards look leaves no doubt; the multiplicity of tendencies and sub-tendencies is chronic. But this is also more a symptom than a cause. The fragmentation does not only come from loss, from the fact that, of the essential works, we only retain isolated elements, detached from the unity that gave them their true sense. The "inaugural" works are themselves fragmented. Even at its highest level, libertarian thought remains fragmentary.

In Proudhon, anarchy clearly underlies certain books (those of the period 1848–1852) more than others; it fades in some periods, or remains mixed with reactionary slag. His multiple activities, the crises of daily life divert Proudhon from ordering and clarifying his concepts, which often leads us to believe there are contradictions where there is only imprecision. Eltzbacher rightly reproaches him for his irregular and changing language. (But it is also true that a theory does not immediately create its own intellectual domain, and we have made no effort to reread Proudhon.)

What can we say about Bakunin? His work is made up mostly of unfinished books, of immoderate letters. Stirner

himself, the most purely “theoretical” of the anarchists, is the man of a single book, composed of fragments: commentaries on works read, polemics, the still trembling transcription of interminable tavern discussions. Nothing is more characteristic than the title of Tucker’s book: “Instead of a Book. By a man too busy to write one. A fragmentary exposition of philosophical anarchism.”

More generally we can say that anarchism appears only in fragments in the life of an anarchist. It is not just a question of “crises of youth.” The conditions of existence are such, and the mental pressures, and the influence of the mechanisms assembled through education, that anarchy struggles to free itself from authoritarian reflexes, intolerance and fear of liberty. It is the same for events: revolutions are anarchist in their beginnings...

The fragmentation is still more intimately connected to the nature of a current that attaches more importance to life than to thought, and has always emphasized passion, intuition and instinctive urges. “Science only deals with shadows,” said Bakunin. “The living reality escapes it and only gives itself to life, which, being itself fugitive and fleeting, can and indeed always does grasp everything that lives, which is to say everything that passes or flees.” The sentence could be from Stirner...

## **the words of the tribe**

Everything leads us toward the rupture. Where would we find the unifying energy capable of susceptible gathering up the fragments, of resisting the dispersion? We lack the elementary basis for any possible cohesion: a common language. We have no language. That is why we are still always reduced to speaking of anarchism, instead of speaking as anarchists regarding today’s world and the life that we lead here. How

In the end, within the limits that I have already noted, we can count on the contagion of the “counter-culture”. The clarification that is taking place in the movement of ideas that emerged from May 68 may become another component of our cultural life, insofar as spontaneist agitation and its systematic anti-intellectualism are beginning to give way to the demand for theoretical reflection and more in-depth information on the currents that have come together in leftism.

This panorama will appear very optimistic after the admission of bankruptcy in my first chapter. It is, in part, a matter of perspective. Yes, there were living cells that endured in the atrophied tissue of anarchism. The irrigation is now better, and new cells have come to graft themselves on what remains. But we still haven’t found the forms (theoretical structures, communication networks) that would allow us to unify and assimilate the disparate material of the anarchist revival.

## **the anarchist tradition**

This is why I insisted so much on the need to first identify the forms produced by anarchism in its genesis and its evolution. To take up against a word I used despite an apparent contradiction, it is about reconnecting with the anarchist tradition. If a tradition is sclerotic, it is because the community that claims it is sclerotic.

A living community, in permanent evolution, has an active tradition (in the same sense in which I spoke of an active past.) If we content ourselves with bringing to light fragments of our past, we will end up at best creating a mosaic of information, a fragmented knowledge. A tradition, on the contrary, retains and nourishes everything that lets itself melt into its organic unity.

However, we have not escaped the paradox. Tradition implies transmission, continuity, available funds. While we have

meeting point where discussions and exchanges of information continue. Let us not forget *La Tour de feu*, some issues of which (“Salut à la tempête”, “Artaud”, etc.) represented the counter-culture well at a time when it was hardly mentioned. The reflection on anarchism has also continued in personal works. That of [Charles-Auguste] Bontemps, for example, who in the elaboration of his “social individualism” has always been concerned with the rigor of the foundations and the persistence of an anarchist intellectual life. Or that of Guérin, announcing — and stimulating — this current of ideas that is now rediscovering anarchism starting from Marxism.

Another notable sector of our cultural activity is the historical studies undertaken by certain of our comrades on the stages of the anarchist movement, on pedagogical experiments, etc.

Research on anarchism once again becomes an anarchist research. The CIRA (Centré international de recherches sur l’anarchisme) can become an essential link in the network of exchanges since it allows not only the circulation of documents but also information on the works in progress and contacts between those engaged in them.

With regard to the established anarchist movement (I am speaking of its situation in France), we can consider as positive the renunciation of the illusion of a single organization whose basis of agreement is the vagueness of common principles and the flight from substantive discussions.

The formation of groups based on “ideological” and tactical unity presents at least the one advantage the we are entitled to expect from them: a clear definition of their bases and the elucidation of the tradition on which they claim to be founded. The need for clarification seems to be recognized, since there was talk some time ago about organization-to-organization dialogue. It remains to be seen under what conditions it will be done, and whether the absence of a sufficiently developed language will not cloud the confrontation.

to speak as an anarchist, to speak anarchistically, is not self-evident. We employ the words of other, haphazardly, with all the misunderstanding that produces, or we use worn out, lifeless words, which drag along for generations, from pamphlet to discussion and from discussion to “incendiary” tract...

Result: we have no end of trouble making ourselves understood or even to make ourselves heard; these stammerings become truly inaudible. It is at this level that the necessity of a theorization makes itself felt every day. A theory is, first of all, a well constructed language, some clearly defined notions between which we can establish logical relations.

It is not a question of a formal procedure. Clarifying concepts implies — and calls for — a clarification of ideas and methods of analysis. This also demands on our part the confrontation of different expressions of anarchism in order to discover common forms and constants. Finally, and above all, this effort of clarification demands a labor of critical revisions and updating, since the aim is not to establish a catalog but to elaborate a language capable of grasping (for purposes of knowledge, communication and action) the present reality.

It is tempting, obviously, to simply use the categories and notions produced by systems better assimilated by those to whom we wish to address ourselves (and marxism, in particular.) And in that way it is impossible to avoid the use of a marxist (or psychoanalytic) vocabulary circled widely through the human sciences. This is, however, a new source of confusion. This vocabulary reflects theoretical constructions whose cohesion is strong and whose imprint can divert our ideas, distort their meaning and obliterate their originality. To use the words of others without further examination is to lock ourselves within their ideology. Hence the need to examine what can be integrated into our coordinates without parasitism... and to check if our intellectual tools withstand the confrontation.

Whatever the domain envisaged, going beyond atomization requires a radical overhaul of our way of seeing and of our

habits. Beneath the discontinuous, we will have to look for the continuous; beneath disorder, the forms that give cohesion and meaning to the whole. More generally, we will have to come to grasp anarchism as a global reality that refuses partial and arbitrary definitions insofar as we can identify and describe its concrete manifestations in the history and in the life of men.

## **a return to the sources**

Even if this proposition appears absurd to the partisans of tradition and spontaneity alike, it is a question of becoming fully aware of what anarchism is, consciousness of the anarchist phenomenon: as historical movement, as current of thought, as a permanent feature of social ferment and individual emancipation.

This recasting implies a return to the sources that will allow, so to speak, the rediscovery of anarchism in its nascent state, not only in the events and works of the past, but in the actions, behaviors and writings that, today, give it a new expression.

To clarify the connections, most often explicit, that exist between the fragments, their common reason for being. Through gradual restructuring, to identify the connections in larger and larger wholes. And this is still only a prerequisite, which is insufficient to effectively merge in practice, in spontaneous consciousness, the fragments of anarchy that are accessible to us. It is useful to know what there is in common between a savage strike, a communitarian experiment, a past insurrection, a page from Proudhon and a new analysis. But the dispersion will only cease when a current of life spontaneously connects these exploded realities in order to establish between them a field of force capable of producing new impulses and ideas.

In other words: we will have a real chance of overcoming dispersion when we have reestablished an active cultural life in the anarchist milieu.

## **Foundation**

The arguments for a libertarian culture are limited in scope. Their interest consists above all in defining a possible field of action, in bringing together on a more explicit basis those who feel the need for continued intellectual activity. Only a vibrant and diverse cultural life will be able to create a real force of conviction by drawing a growing number of individuals to places where “something will happen”: discussions, study days, editorial boards, etc.

## **points of reference**

It is futile to seek to revive an intellectual activity if all its manifestations have dried up. We can coordinate, intensify, but not begin from nothing. Despite the dispersion, despite the occultation of the anarchist tradition, we can graft new contributions onto the fragments of anarchy that have remained alive.

The work of questioning and updating undertaken by the review *Noir et Rouge* is still recent, and can be continued. *Anarchisme et Non-Violence* reaches a circle of readers little marked by the old anarchist milieus and its concerns can take hold directly on the “counter-culture”; its working methods and approach to relations can be extended to other groups or publications. In *Recherches libertaires* (I also cite my own ties...) we tried, with modest means and intermittent perseverance, to at least maintain an awareness of the shortcomings and a conviction regarding a possible renewal. *ICO* (“Informations, correspondances ouvrières”), whose references are to the socialism of the councils rather than to anarchism, remains an active

ology is the opposition between the State and social life (society), the State being considered a parasitic excrescence capturing the energies of society and focusing them according to the interests of a minority.

The battle against the State cannot be limited to an action of opposition and contestation; it also demands a permanent effort to reinforce, on all planes, social spontaneity and the collective capacity for initiative and autonomous organization. (I have developed this idea at greater length in *Formes et tendances de l'anarchisme*.) The same is true for cultural activity, which springs from a collective need, a spontaneous tendency in social life. Again, we must not forget that the multiplication of state interference and the extension of ideological apparatuses intertwine the statist and the social much more closely than at the time when the first anarchist analyzes (of liberal origin) were developed.)

So it is not a question of rejecting cultural life as a whole, but of preventing as much as possible its diversion, its alienation by ideological apparatuses. The best way is still to reinforce as much as possible the counter-currents, the anti-authoritarian tendencies, by giving them means of expression and grounds of confrontation, by radicalizing them with an anarchistic consistency. If regional cultures are already perceived as a danger, a source of division and non-conformity, the existence of a revolutionary culture, born of the struggle against capitalism and the State, constitutes a permanent risk of insubordination and deviation.

## **culture, counter-culture**

What many among us forget — or want to ignore — is that a common culture is a powerful unifying factor. When pushed, we recognize this force of cohesion when it is a question of denouncing the dominant culture: doesn't it function to join together in a single submission, in a common "ideal," the diversity of individuals and social classes? But the fact is that it ne s'installe qu'en écrasant, en disloquant des cultures particulières. The history of colonization and its cultural imperialism furnishes no end of examples. And one discovers, finally, that there exists in France an "internal colonization," that the centralizing State is built on the ruins of regional cultures, on the crushing of differences.

The bourgeoisie ideology only extends its influence by condemning to suffocation the ideas, works and modes of life that are opposed to its principles and rules. The deviant elements that are persistent enough to resist find themselves gradually assimilated and distorted. Denouncing this process is quite insufficient. The true response consists instead of reviving, reinforcing the cultural forms thus eliminated or neutralized.

One could also respond that only the complete disruption of the capitalist system will allow the implementation of a different culture. Okay... if we do not forget that no revolution is possible outside of certain "subjective conditions" (awareness, knowledge of means and end, "capacity" in the Proudhonian sense), which are precisely cultural factors.

## the state against culture

The affirmation of the liberating role of culture has long remained a constant in the workers' movement. Revolutionary syndicalism, in particular, has endeavored to put this conviction into practice. It has not only stepped forward to give militants the training (political, economic, technical) necessary to lead effective struggles and to participate, after the revolution, in the collective management of the new society, but also to develop a "producers' ethic." The very idea of a proletarian culture was to gain ground for some time: that the working class forge its own forms of expression and oppose the artistic productions of the bourgeoisie with works devoted to the life, problems and values of the proletariat.

The libertarian conception of culture was closely linked to its critique of the State. We find it expounded in all its aspects in Rocker's work (still unpublished in France) on "Nationalism and Culture:" culture and state power are two fundamentally contradictory realities; the strengthening of power inevitably calls for a regression of cultural activity, since that activity requires complete freedom of expression and respect for diversity. The stimulant of collective spontaneity is essential for the blossoming of works suited to the needs and aspirations of the greatest number. Direct state intervention, on the contrary, paralyzes creativity through its exclusions and instructions, or else it only supports production that meets the tastes and interests of a privileged minority.

We are far, today, from such positive conceptions of culture. The word is from now on invested with a negative charge, automatically serves to repel. But if we have every reason to be wary of cultural optimism, we must also react rapidly against the automatisms that replace reflection with conditioned reflexes. (There is a leftist conditioning...) The fetishized words, whether positively or negatively charged, are as pernicious as

Libertarian culture is subject to the same flattening as the cultures of the provinces or colonized countries. The mechanism of repression operates from day to day, according to the logic of the system, without even the need for visible interventions. The gaps in official history, the silences of the news media and the closure of access to the means of dissemination do their job quite naturally. Let us add, for anarchism, that the whole apparatus of conditioning renders minds unreceptive to ideas that put freedom first. In the end, the weakening of the currents thus neutralized does the rest.

Yet another factor has contributed to the stifling of anarchist culture. As dogmatic Marxism has gained the status of dominant ideology in the revolutionary movement, it has imposed a falsified image of anarchism. It has thus come to reinforce very effectively the repression exercised by bourgeois culture.

It is now a question of reversing the proposition. If the dominant ideology must crush particular cultures in order to reduce the individual to the stage of an atomized element, cut off from any autonomous community and any divergent tradition, the reactivation of a refractory culture can be a very effective leaven of resistance. Without doubt, it will be influenced by established ways of thinking and imposed living conditions. But it will suffer them all the less to the extent that it is supported by a clearer consciousness of its difference.

## social life

The return of an anarchist cultural dynamism should stimulate the counter-currents, which would feed it in return. We come back to the earlier question: is this not a participation in global cultural life, and therefore indirectly participation in the renewal of the dominant culture?

We cannot simply reduce the cultural life of a society to its dominant culture. One of the essential ideas of libertarian soci-

So the existence of a libertarian culture, with its own values, with its accumulated ideas and experiences, with its particular sensibility and way of life, does not seem to me to be contestable. I would even add that, like every culture, it has an integrative function. It imbues individuals with the convictions and aspirations of the anarchist collectivity, leads them to assimilate the means of understanding, of communication and of specific intervention, and it inserts them into the community.

There is no reason to refuse this natural and necessary process, if the culture in question expresses and puts to work these essential resources of anarchism which are questioning, insubordination, a critical spirit and the will to personal achievement. What is really problematic is the form taken by libertarian culture: its gaps, its losses of substance, its weakening and its aging. It is precisely because it is not in a position to fulfill its function of integration that we are reduced to dispersion.

## **a dominated culture**

One could ask if the integration process does not insidiously go beyond the purpose that I attribute to it. The insertion of a momentum of revolt in the forms of an anarchist culture could well constitute a first step, a mediation, in a process of recuperation for the benefit of (dominant) Culture.

The first point to consider — and I have already touched on this in passing — is the fact of dominated cultures. To extend its hegemony, the state system must abolish the distinctive characteristics, the non-institutionalized collective links that prevent it from having a direct hold on the “citizen”: historical communities (voluntarily or forcibly melted into the “nation”), regional languages, class consciousness. The mold of compulsory education, the control of the media, not to mention the sacrosanct military service, aim to create a normalized individual, cut off from their concrete attachments.

slogans. They bypass the discussion and deny the problems instead of tackling them head on.

We must avoid, at the outset, too restrictive a definition of culture. To stick to a very general and common sense, I would say that it consists of the set of representations, symbols and works that express the moral, intellectual and aesthetic values that guide the relationships of men with the world and the relationships between men in a collectivity. Culture codifies and transmits the beliefs of the collectivity, its conception of the world, its impression of life. It inscribes itself in behavior, at best in a lifestyle.

Defined in this way, culture cannot escape the critique of ideology as developed, in particular, by Marxism. In fact, any culture is determined not only by the state of technology and knowledge at a given time, but by all the conditions of life (forces and relations of production, social and political divisions, systems of domination, etc.) It will therefore mobilize in the first place the conceptions of the classes that own and control the means of expression and dissemination. It will celebrate the values invoked to justify and preserve the established hierarchy.

## **toward a one-dimensional culture**

A first restriction imposes itself. No culture can be considered the simple “reflection” of the economic and social infrastructure. It develops in a sphere of activity that has its own logic — often stubborn — and contains too many elements borrowed from previous forms of existence, elements that remain tightly interwoven in the more recent representations. Witness how slowly the repercussions of new scientific and technical conditions are assimilated by the collective mentality.

Furthermore, great cultural works do not constitute a simple demarcation of the given reality, or an interpretation totally

structured by the dominant ideology. The work of art is an attempt at reinterpretation, often critical. Far from being limited to a justification of the forms of existence imposed by contemporary society, it generally denounces the suffering caused by these forms of existence: loneliness, failure, nostalgia for a life where the values proclaimed would actually be achieved. Even “the demand for happiness takes on dangerous accents in a system that brings distress, deprivation and pain to the majority” (Marcuse).

Culture is thus shaped by two opposing tendencies. One aims to justify the existing order, to shape collective life according to its standards, to disseminate beliefs, myths and an image of life that integrate the individual into the whole and ensure the survival of the system. The other, on the contrary, encourages criticism of what is in the name of what could be: in the name of the unrealized values, repressed desires, denied fulfillment and new possibilities opened up by the revolution of knowledge and means of action.

It is this contradiction that is in the process of eliminating what we have called “mass culture” and is, in the words of Marcuse, a one-dimensional culture. The products that they bring to the markets, intending them for mass consumption (films, television programs, records, “popular” novels, magazines) suppress contradiction and its critical ferment. The demand for happiness is reduced to the desire for well-being, the accomplishment called *standing*. There is no longer any question aspiring to the impossible: happiness is a matter of savings and payments.

The role of one-dimensional is to make the given reality appear *natural*, to show it capable of infinite progress. And if, most of the time, labor remains a matter of coercion and boredom, the margin of leisure offers compensation for that effort and that wear and tear: peace at home, vacation trips and machines that let us dream in our seats. To the passivity imposed by the conditions of labor is added the fascination with the

a present activity. A culture, to come back to the initial definition, only becomes reality if it permeates mentalities and behavior, if it is embodied in the lifestyle of a community. On this level, at least, libertarian culture has held up quite well. Anarchism was formed and developed in the struggle against all oppressions and all alienations. In the most diverse conditions, it has manifested consistent conduct: primacy granted to direct action, confidence in spontaneity (individual or collective), a refusal of means that contradict the aims and a desire to simultaneously change the world and life.

This consistency is not due solely to the permanence of a “revolutionary tradition.” It is above all the effect of a fundamental will to liberty that produces homologous reactions in a variety of situations.

What applies to collective struggles also applies to personal existence: rejection of domination and submission, attempts at a way of life freed from taboos, independence of judgment and decision. It was logical that anarchism was the revolutionary tendency whose attention was most immediately directed to everyday life. The presence of an individualist current, skeptical of the possibilities of a future social upheaval and all the more concerned with short-term liberations, strongly contributed to orient the anarchist milieu in this direction.

The struggle against repressive sexual morality, birth control, the search for a non-authoritarian pedagogy thus inscribed anarchist values in the forms of practical life. These were not just propaganda themes; they were also more than hypotheses to be experimented with: a way of life developed, education was spontaneously carried out in daily contacts. The meeting between the libertarian culture and the new counter-culture takes place in the most natural way on this level. We find this overlap even in attempts at communitarian life (which had already encountered the same difficulties in the days of *milieux libres...*)



ours... But what certainly remains, what deserves examination and discussion, is the spirit in which the critiques and the proposals were formulated.

If there exists (at least virtually) an anarchist theory, studying its genesis and its transformations is a way of grasping it.

To deny is amount to the same thing as rejecting the history of the revolutionary movement under the pretext that only the present interests us.

There is more. Behind each book stands an individual, who fought to change the world they lived in, to find other forms of life and of relations. To condemn those individuals to oblivion or to pious dismissal, is to agree with those who sought to reduce them to silence during their lifetimes; with those who, after their deaths, have distorted their thoughts or actions in order to eliminate their influence. Regarding Proudhon, Stirner and Bakunin himself, many — among us too — settle for the considerations of Marx and his followers. Giving a fair and credible image of anarchism also means showing that anarchists have said and done something else, and that what they have said still provides us with the means to understand our world and to act in it.

## **a lifestyle**

Through the reactivation of its past, anarchism can recover its culture. The diversified activity that this renaissance entails will in itself constitute an invigorating factor of cultural life. The aim of the operation, of course, is not to be able to bring a bookish knowledge into line with our antecedents. It is above all a matter of knowing ourselves better, of reintegrating into our field of consciousness the values, dreams and ideas that have made anarchism a historical reality.

Libertarian culture, however, has other sources and other manifestations. An active past is a past mobilized by and for

flood of images that transform the news of the world into a soap opera. And each, according to their means, seeks to give to each in spectacular form the achievement of their existence.

What place remains for “working-class culture” in this magma that drowns particularities and the sense of reality, that veils the real conflicts? Material access to cultural in no way means effective appropriation. Works of critical culture may be sold as paperbacks, but they are only read by those who are prepared to read them. The same goes for television, where late artistic or intellectual broadcasts are seen only by “the elite.”

In the end, it is no longer even necessary for the State to intervene to channel production (even if it does not hesitate to do so, on occasion, to eliminate a product that is insufficiently compliant.) The “cultural” industry itself ensures the promotion of entertaining and anesthetic goods that meet the needs of the dominant ideology.

## **the counter-currents**

These observations, and more simply the gloomy prostration of sanitized imagery or “cultural” rites, can lead quite naturally to the rejection of anything that pertains to culture. But the sterilization cannot reach the desired degree. Against the homogenizing current of “mass culture” are opposed counter-currents, ceaselessly turned back, but which for some time at least resist the general mingling. Through books, films (often low budget), theatrical shows (often marginal), through cartoons and comics, they express what the euphoric ideology seeks to camouflage: that violence is not the privilege of a wicked few, but is inscribed in the whole of relations of domination and exploitation; that daily life, with its exhaustion and its illusory compensations, constantly reinforces isolation, aggression and fear of liberty.

These negative currents innervate what is now called a “counter-culture”. For a long time, this has also remained reserved for a minority. It becomes a collective phenomenon and takes a more radical orientation: a global refusal of cultural production (except for records...), a craze for raw information, a systematic preference given to the spoken word over the written word (except when it takes the form of the *parole brute*).

Against the fetishism of the product, against the passivity of the consumer, the counter-culture affirms play, improvisation, and celebration. Against isolation, it calls for encounters at the mercy of chance and wandering, community life. Against the “moral order” (work, family, country), it extols vagabondage, sexual freedom, spontaneous cosmopolitanism, respect for life and nature, non-violence. We could go on, but this is not an inventory. What I would like to make clear is that the counter-culture acts like a culture. By rejecting the values of the dominant culture, it affirms its own values, which are not only proclaimed, but embodied in the beginnings of a way of life.

The strength of the counter-culture is that it proceeds from a collective sensitivity and is realized in behavior. This is the sign of a living culture. Its weakness, on the other hand, lies in the scarcity of the works, in the absence of the coherent thought essential to overcoming the stammering and the vague humanitarian considerations. It thus easily becomes prey for confused mystics. Ecology itself becomes mystical, with quite a wave to the soul of returning to the earth always put back and tours of the world never undertaken.

We find the dispersion, haziness and incompetence of expression which also paralyze the anarchist movement. An additional point of convergence between anarchism and the counter-culture... It is still to be feared that their weaknesses are added more easily than their creative potential.

ideas formulated by the men and groups involved in the events that we study. That goes without saying. It is also necessary to address the theories developed in a certain of works presenting themselves as libertarian or claimed as their own by libertarians. It is, quite simply, a question of making a history of anarchist philosophy.

In this regard, we find ourselves almost totally destitute. Doubtless, there are useful works on Proudhon, Stirner and Bakunin. We owe them, almost always, to authors foreign to the libertarian movement ... and in general we do not take them into account. (What attention have we shown to Gurvitch's, Ansart's or Bancal's books on Proudhon, or to Arvon's book on Stirner?)

Even more than in the domain of social history, the reconstruction must here be a reconstruction, if not simply a construction. The relations to be identified are multiple. It will be necessary to study the influences of social movements on the works, and vice versa; to situate each work among the intellectual productions of its time. Truth be told, two types of history of anarchist philosophy are possible — and necessary. The first would describe the “systems,” their intellectual and sociological circumstances. The second — a more subjective and, properly speaking, a more philosophical work — would start from current thought to reread (in the sense of reinterpreting) the founding texts. Such a rereading could lead, to give one simple example, to rejecting Stirner in the name of Bakunin, or Bakunin in the name of Stirner; it could also assimilate both in the name of a single existential revolt against the System. We have to rewrite anarchism.

The interest, for us, to unearth old tomes? First of all, they are not all to be unearthed, as some are carefully arranged in publishers' stocks (Rivière's Proudhon, for example.) These old books are first of all testimonies, attempts to draw from consciousness and give form to proposals for transforming the real. That reality, we can agree, is no longer ours. Or no longer quite

terferences. It is indeed a question of reconstruction and not partial descriptions.

I believe, moreover, that such a work can only be carried out in a truly fruitful manner by libertarian historians. I do not doubt the honesty of researchers who are not “committed.” We can often even recognize in them more than honesty: a real passion for their subject. But I expect more from anarchist historians. Let them go beyond the reconstruction of the facts, to see what sort of anarchism is at work in the events they are studying, what it brings that is new or particular compared to the anarchisms that preceded it, and what identity persists beneath the variations.

I do not wish to open a debate here on objectivity in history. But I hope that the history of the anarchist movement will be for us more than “historiography”, that it will really be a past questioned in the light of our present. A past that, at the limit — and this limit is inevitable — changes with our present, according to the lights and shadows that our concerns, our intuitions and our projects throw on it.

Let us go farther. The facts are nothing in themselves. They do not “speak” until they are illuminated by the meaning of a coherent whole. It is precisely through their sensibility and libertarian consciousness that a historian can establish new links between facts, give a common sense — or just a sense — to events that have thus far remained disparate and “silent”. Must we specify that such an understanding has nothing to do with a manipulation of history according to the needs of a *line* to be defended or revised?

## the history of ideas

The restructuring of our past will only be complete, will even only be possible on the condition of integrating the history of ideas into the history of events. I am not thinking only of the

## libertarian culture

The counter-culture is a potential culture. It can be, at least, — if it is not sooner or later recuperated by the dominant ideology — the breeding ground of a new culture.

One of the reasons for its fragility is the absence of a past. We can obviously consider that as an advantage and as an additional attraction. No constraining tradition, no stifling models, no knowledge to take in or respect. Invention can give itself free rein. Life rediscovers its spontaneity, invades forbidden playgrounds. But spontaneity is exhausted in repetition, thought ends when it is enclosed in a limited circle of ideas. Expression is frozen when it no longer finds form on which to base itself. So the counter-culture seeks a past, or pasts, by taking hold of fragments drawn from ancient cultures, preferably exotic (Buddhism, Hinduism) or from cultures crushed by white imperialism — (Africa, the Indians of the Americas) or else from marginal traditions (esotericism).

## the anarchist pasts

Because it has a past, anarchism can more easily refocus and thereby find a power of resistance against dissolution in the great one-dimensional magma. Paradoxically, its past is virtual: it is still to be established...

More precisely, anarchism has two pasts. A “manifest” past, which is that of the established anarchist movement, with its patchiness and its narrow tradition, but also—a positive point, which will be discussed further—its non-conformist way of life.

The defeats and disappointments, the constant internal struggles have left their legacies of mistrust and unavailability. Years of survival cut off from the world have prevented the irrigation of the milieu by modern ideas. The poverty of means and the waning of intellectual activity have dried up the resources of a tradition that was no longer mentioned except in hearsay to preserve the orthodoxy of reassessments and new inputs.

This sclerosing past has lost its grip after the recent development of a new libertarian milieu, which is very informal and still disparate. It owed little to the established “movement” and began to discover the past of anarchism as a social movement.

What we retained of it so far was too often legend embellished by nostalgia and self-justifications.

The renewed interest in anarchism and, more generally, the disruption of the stalinist and leninist hegemony draws new attention to the revolutionary movements and the socialist experiments that did not lead to the “proletarian” State. From the war in Spain (finally viewed other than through military deeds) we go back to the makhnovist movement, then to that Jurassian Federation that was the true crucible of anarchism. The centenary of the Commune has also allowed some things to be put in order.

Publications and translations multiply. New studies are published and others are in progress. Historians connected to the anarchist current take part in this work of rediscovery, with the obvious aim of identifying the original and positive aspects of the experiments that they describe, without piously leaving in the shadows what they consider to be weaknesses or errors. It would, however, be unjust to pretend that all anarchists have lacked interest in their history until recent years... Indeed, they hardly had the chance to publish their research, and that information blockade, which locked manuscripts and documents in desk drawers, was enough to stifle burgeoning careers. Even published books, like Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution*, do not escape the little circle of initiates.

## read, comrade

This past is still virtual: both because it is in large part still to be brought to light and because it is not yet active. It will be active from the moment that it exerts its influence on our thinking and our behavior. This implies an intermediate stage: moving from fragmentary rediscovery to the reconstruction of the whole. At the point where we are, the stages of our history which reappear are still too exclusively those of heroic periods. Publishing, even when it is somewhat marginal, does not escape the laws of the market. By force of circumstances, we publish what is most likely to sell. In the history of the Makhnovstchina or the Durruti column there is an epic, “western” side that can appeal to a large number of readers. And, a bit more seriously, the unknown aspects of the Russian Revolution or the achievements of self-management in Spain appeal to a relatively large fraction of the leftist public or simply the left. As for the exploits of the Bonnot gang or of Marius Jacob, they can boast of the suspense and the quaint elements so dear to detective novels.

We must note the thing without lamenting it too much. It is good that these books can appear and that they come to break the wall of silence (and of falsification) deliberately maintained by the Stalinist “historians.” Even the history of illegalism — not to mention the exceptional personality of a Jacob — sheds light on certain nihilist tendencies of anarchism, and therefore on anarchism itself.

What is in question is the still incomplete nature of the “disinterment,” first with regard to the periods chosen, but also at the level of the method of approach. By limiting ourselves to a particular series of events, we often give up on making comparisons between it and other anarchist interventions. What is important for us is a global view of libertarian social movements, with their lines of force, their constants and their in-