

The Supposed Anarchism of Jean-Paul Sartre

Reflections directed to my pen pals in the United States

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I am well aware that my discourse on anarchism may be misunderstood by North American readers, for at least two reasons.

1. The anarchism to which I refer could be called specifically “Latin” in the sense that my cultural references in terms of anarchism are essentially French, Spanish, Italian and Latin American. Indeed, I was formed in my young days by militants who, in the twenties and thirties, had been active as revolutionary syndicalists in the French CGT, as anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish CNT. My early years of militancy were immersed in the company of veterans of the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War.

2. For this reason, my vision of anarchism must seem very obsolete, and perhaps very rigid, if not shocking to the North American reader, whose references and tradition of anarchism will probably be very different from mine.

This paper was originally intended only as a commentary on W.L. Remley’s book¹, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anarchist Philosophy*, but it has gone beyond this intention and taken on an unexpected dimension. I apologise to readers for the digressions that are scattered throughout this text and which may not have much to do with the substance of the subject.

¹ Remley, William L., *Jean-Paul Sartre’s Anarchist Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, 2018.

Introduction

I recently discovered from an exchange of emails with a friend in the United States that some English-language scholars recognise Jean-Paul Sartre as an anarchist thinker. At first sight this seemed totally incongruous to me: indeed, I have been a libertarian activist for over 50 years and I had never heard such a thing¹. So I asked a lot of comrades - old timers like me or academics - about Sartre's alleged "anarchism". "The collective memory of the movement has retained no trace of a rapprochement between Sartre and anarchism². In the French anarchist movement, he has always been considered as a "crapule stalinienne" ("Stalinist scoundrel"). It is true that when he no longer was in favour with the Communist Party, his Stalinist ex-comrades also called him a "jackal with a pen" and a "typewriting hyena"... In France we say: "One lends only to the rich". French anarchists did not digest the article Sartre wrote in 1954 on his return from the Soviet Union, entitled "freedom of criticism is total in the USSR", not only for the factual error it asserts, but also for the revelation of its author's ideological blindness and his disconnection from reality.

There is, however, a certain injustice on the part of French anarchists in reducing Sartre to a "Stalinist scoundrel". While it is true that he was once associated with the defence of any dictatorship waving a red flag, it is also true that he was later associated with the anti-Stalinist left that Ian Birchall describes in *Sartre against Stalinism*³. No doubt French anarchists have not been able to grasp the tactical subtleties that led Sartre to break away from the Stalinist Communist Party and move towards Stalinist Maoist groups...

It seems that it never occurred to anyone in France that Sartre might have been an anarchist, unless one recognises that his was a non-committal anarchism, which had no connection with political anarchism and which only referred to a rebellious temperament. Before I recently read Alfred Betschart⁴ the most recent reference (to my knowledge) to an "anarchist" Sartre dated from 2006 in an article entitled "Sartre an-

¹ I use the word "libertarian" as a synonym for "anarchist", as is the case in the French anarchist movement, and not as signifying a kind of watered-down anarchism, as seems to be the case in English-speaking countries. Thus, phrases like "all anarchists are libertarians, but not all libertarians are anarchists" are meaningless.

² In fact, *Le Monde Libertaire*, the journal of the Federation Anarchiste, had published an article on the question in 1975 entitled "No! Jean-Paul Sartre, you are not yet an anarchist", of which I was only recently made aware. See my translation: <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article902>

³ Bergham books, 2004.

⁴ Betschart, Alfred, "From Marxist to Anarchist. Sartre 1972-1980", http://monde-nouveau.net/ecrire/?exec=stats_visites&objet=article&id_objet=908#contenu

archiste ou démocrate en prose”⁵ (Sartre anarchist, or democrat in prose) in which the author tells us that Sartre has moved from “an elitist anarchism to an egalitarian anarchism via his association with the communists and his criticism of indirect democracy”. The author concludes by saying that “the basis of Sartre’s political thought or feeling is anarchist”, which does not prevent him from saying a few pages later that in order to realise his political project, “Sartre relies on *La cause du peuple*”, the newspaper of a Maoist group viscerally anti-anarchist. All this is not very consistent and actually remains within the limits of a “non-committal anarchism, which had no connection with political anarchism”.

The French anarchists were unaware that Sartre’s thought could be interpreted as libertarian. Among the great French authors of that time who had the stature of Sartre, the one who was at the top of the anarchists’ hit parade, and by far, was Albert Camus. While we find in Sartre only superficial and never argued allusions of his sympathy for libertarian ideas, Camus’ relationship with the anarchist movement was real. He was connected with the Anarchist federation, in whose newspaper, *Le Monde Libertaire*, he published articles. He also published in *La Revolution proletarienne*, a revolutionary syndicalist journal founded in 1925 by Pierre Monatte, and in *Solidaridad Obrera*, a journal of the Spanish CNT.⁶

There is an extensive literature on Camus’s links with anarchism, particularly Spanish anarchism, although *he never explicitly declared himself an anarchist*⁷. So if the attribution of the term “anarchist” to Sartre is open to question (and questionable, in my opinion), Albert Camus’ proximity (but not explicit membership), to the libertarian movement is not in doubt⁸.

⁵ Jean-Francois Louette, “Sartre anarchiste ou démocrate en prose?”, *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, vol. 106, no. 2, 2006, pp. 285-306. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23013433>

⁶ The National Confederation of Labour (Confederation Nacional del Trabajo or CNT) is an anarcho-syndicalist organization founded in 1910 in Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). In 1936, it was the most important trade union confederation when the civil war broke out, with 1,557,000 members.

⁷ “Through his long-standing and well-known opposition to Franco’s regime in Spain he maintained close links with republican exiles, many of whom belonged to anarchist groups”, p. 84. Dunwoodie, P., “Albert Camus and the Anarchist Alternative”, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, Australia, Clayton, Vic., 1993, 30-1.

⁸ In *L’Homme revolte* (The Rebel) Camus devotes several pages to Bakunin in which he shows a very sketchy knowledge of the Russian revolutionary. Gaston Leval, a French anarcho-syndicalist militant with a Spanish background, wrote a long and well argued critique of Camus’ errors in a series of four articles published by *Le Libertaire*. Leval enumerates the elements that prove the constructive dimension of Bakunin’s political and social thought, notably reviewing his various revolutionary programmes. On 5 June 1952, *Le Libertaire* published Albert Camus’s reply to Gaston Leval, and what strikes first of all in this reply is the friendly and modest tone that characterises it, and which contrasts so much with the polemics that, around the same work, durably separated Camus from the Surrealists and Sartre. Camus, noting the absence of hostility that animates Leval, begins by declaring about the latter’s articles: “They have, in short, instructed me more than contradicted me.” (See: *Ecrits libertaires, 1948-1960*, Albert Camus, collected by Lou Marin, Indigenes Editions).

More information, see:

Lou Marin, *Albert Camus et les libertaires, éditions Egregores, 2008*.

The paradox is that if the French anarchist movement has always expressed sympathy for Camus, it could have leaned towards Sartre if he had not chosen to express his convictions in a way that anarchists could not accept. Indeed, Sartre's (legitimate) anti-imperialism led him, under the pretext of efficiency, to become a fellow traveller with the communists⁹. From 1952 to 1956 he praised the Soviet regime in the press, he denounced the execution of the Rosenbergs but said not a word about the repression of the workers' insurrection in Berlin in June 1953, he supported the exclusion of Pierre Herve who had dared to call for more democracy in the Communist party. In short, he had abdicated his mission as a critical intellectual to become the leader of an intellectual movement that had submitted to the imperatives of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. No anarchist could admit that.

Camus, for his part, had positioned himself at the head of the anticommunist left, but not for the good reasons. He rejected the justifications for the revolutionary violence of national independence movements and never took a stand for Algerian independence, although many French anarchists had clandestinely supported this cause. Furthermore, he ignored the effects of the systemic violence of the capitalist system that Sartre condemned, the insidious violence of everyday life imposed by bourgeois society - points that the anarchists were sensitive to.

Why was Sartre not recognised as an anarchist? The first reason is probably that the image of Sartre as a Marxist thinker suited both the pro- and anti- Sartrians. The other reason, put forward by Alfred Betschart, is that Sartre became blind from the spring of 1973 onwards and was "unable to read or write coherent texts":

"The only possibility left for him to express himself was the interview. However, this medium does not allow for a systematic development of his own ideas. The core of Sartre's late political philosophy is generally only weakly expressed in the interviews and only reveals itself to the reader when he or she interprets and understands the statements in the interviews against the

and <http://atelierdecreationlibertaire.com/blogs/bakounine/camus-et-bakounine-1042/>

⁹ Alfred Betschart questions the label of "fellow-traveller" attributed to Sartre. According to him, "Sartre forged tactical political alliances with the Communists because their ideology was the only politically relevant one with whom he could share, if only in part, his core values." "Sartre remained very lucid with regard to Communist regimes in his privately made remarks. To call Sartre a fellow traveller, as Aronson does, is misleading. It was rather a case of limited collaboration for certain purposes. It is remarkable how quickly Sartre terminated his cooperation with them. As soon as the Communists violated Sartre's core values, he broke with them." (Alfred Betschart, "Sartre was not a Marxist".)

I would be tempted to say that it does not matter whether one shares the project of the movement for which one is a "fellow traveller" or not. The fact that a prominent person "accompanies" a totalitarian regime, whether out of naivety or with full knowledge of the facts, inevitably contributes to mystify people. Sartre unquestionably contributed to this work of mystification.

See: David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers*. "Macmillan, 1973.

background of *Being and Nothingness*, the *Critique*, but also the *Cahiers pour une morale*.¹⁰

In addition, according to Betschart, there was sometimes a long delay between the interview and its publication, up to six years. Moreover, these interviews were published in several languages; out of 24 significant interviews conducted between 1972 and 1980, only 14 were published in French. Interesting detail: “the importance of the other languages tended to increase over time, as interest in Sartre and his philosophy steadily declined in France in the 1970s.” Finally, even Sartre’s close circle - Beauvoir, Aron - were not aware of Sartre’s evolution in his last years: “This lack of awareness is probably also the main reason for the rejection of Sartre’s last publication before his death”.

All the reasons offered by Betschart make it possible to understand, very trivially, why the idea of an anarchist Sartre never occurred to the French libertarian movement. More seriously, what Betschart says is coherent, but not very credible. If pro- and anti-Sartrians persisted with a Marxist Sartre, it is perhaps because appearances were seriously in their favour. Whether or not he was a Marxist may be a matter for in-depth research, which will lead to the conclusion that he was, or was not, or was in some way a Marxist, but the fact remains that we are dealing with an author who produced a considerable body of work which cannot be disputed to have been theoretically under the sign of Marxism, and practically in the immediate vicinity of communism. And while he was producing this considerable work, there was never any declaration of adherence to anarchism, even if, searching carefully, one can possibly find in the *Critique* a few passages that could lead one to believe in common views, if not in an adhesion, to anarchism.

Secondly, I don’t see how seeing well can explain why an author is a “Marxist” and becoming blind leads him to be an “anarchist”. Nor do I see how becoming blind could have led Sartre to break away from the hold of Marxism and encourage him to move towards anarchism. To say that becoming blind prevented him from writing “coherent texts” is not convincing when one considers the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Becoming blind does not prevent one from dictating one’s thoughts, although this is obviously not the same thing. After all Jorge Luis Borges also became blind and defined his progressive blindness as a “slow nightfall”.

Even if we admit that the core of an author’s thought can only be revealed imperfectly through interviews, we are entitled to ask ourselves why an author resolves to reveal the core of his thought in interviews at the end of his life, once he has become blind, and not before when he was in full possession of his means? Betschart says that Sartre reveals his thoughts only dimly in interviews, and suggests that to really grasp them one must interpret them through the prism of other works, which confirms in my opinion how “dim” Sartre’s anarchism is.

¹⁰ Alfred Betschart, “Sartre: From Marxist to Anarchist”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article908>.

Today's reader is supposed to "deduce" from a reading of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that Sartre develops anarchist themes in it, even though he writes in this work that Marxism is the only living philosophy of this time, but that it lacks an anthropology; that it cannot survive as it is, and that existentialism, by completing it, will transform it by being absorbed by it.

Sartre is right when he says that Marxism lacks an anthropology:

"There is a real contrast between anarchists and Marxists with respect to anthropology, for while anarchists have critically engaged themselves with ethnographic studies, Marxist attitudes to anthropology have usually been dismissive. (...) If one examines the writings of all the classical Marxists—Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Lukacs—they are distinguished by a wholly Eurocentric perspective, and a complete disregard for anthropology."¹¹

There is a point shared by all anarchist theorists: they are more sensitive to the scientific approach than to any dialectical approach. It is significant that most of the great anarchist thinkers after Proudhon and Bakunin, who forged the core of the doctrine, are not to be found among philosophers - who devote themselves to a speculative approach to the nature and origin of the state - but among geographers who take an anthropological approach to their discipline, sociologists, anthropologists, who focus on the observation, description and analysis of political systems. It is also significant that many anthropologists, without explicitly calling themselves anarchists, have a clearly anarchist approach to their work¹².

¹¹ Brian Morris, *Anthropology and Anarchism*, Learning from stateless societies, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/brian-morris-anthropology-and-anarchism>

¹² See: David Graeber, *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology (PDF) (2nd pr ed.)*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

What is anarchism?

The first thing that comes to mind when considering whether a person is anarchist is to define what anarchism is, and then to see how the person's words and actions are consistent with the definition. In particular, one must be very careful about self-proclamation of anarchism. Anyone can believe themselves to have been an anarchist at one time or another, and such proclamations Sartre made must be taken with caution: "I was always more of an anarchist than a Marxist" or "You have to understand that my anarchism, as you call it, was really an expression of freedom, the freedom I described earlier, the freedom of a writer".¹ In many interviews Sartre calls himself an anarchist and commentators have been careful not to contradict him, probably because it gave them copy to publish, but also because they had no competence to judge. Especially since, if one takes as a yardstick extremely eocumene and vague definitions found in dictionaries, one has no trouble fitting Sartre into the right boxes.

Most of these definitions see anarchism only as an opposition to power and the state, such as William Remley's definition of anarchism as "a system that both opposes such things as government, authority, the state or domination, but also positively advocates voluntarism, mutuality, decentralized authority, and, most significantly, human freedom".² In doing so, two absolutely essential principles of anarchism are abandoned: Proudhon very clearly stated that to be an anarchist was to be opposed to the economic exploitation of capital, the political oppression of the state and the religious alienation of God:

"I deny all at once, collectively, identically and synthetically, not only the exploitation of man by man, but also the government of man by man, and the adoration of man by man."³

By linking anarchism only to the problem of power, "enlightened" commentators obscure two fundamental aspects of anarchism: This is what Sartre does. The insistence on the harmfulness of power and government as opposed to "human freedom" is not enough to qualify anarchism. Sartre was more concerned with the denunciation of oppression than with that of exploitation.

¹ "Talking with Sartre Conversations and Debates", Edited and translated by John Gerassi, Yale University Press/New Haven & London, 2009, p 44."

² Remley, p. 16.

³ Proudhon, *La Voix du Peuple*, December 3, 1848, Melanges III, p. 29.

Peter Marshall writes that “Anarchy is usually defined as a society without government and anarchism as the social philosophy which aims at its realisation”⁴. To note that anarchism is opposed to the state and to say that there is a consensus among anarchists on this issue is of course correct, but it is not enough. Anarchism was not “born of a moral protest against oppression and injustice”, as P. Marshall puts it, it was born in the working class within the International Workers’ Association (IWA), created by militants who were fighting against both economic exploitation and political oppression.

The IWA was not an anarchist organisation, but it was within it that anarchism took shape. It should be remembered that whenever anarchism took the form of an active mass movement, it was among the working class and the peasantry, i.e. among the exploited workers, not among the petty bourgeois intellectuals of Boulevard Saint-Germain.

To trace anarchism back to Taoism, to the Greek philosophers of antiquity, or to the Christian sects of the Middle Ages, makes no sense. It is all very well to fight against oppression and to demand a strong power to secure oneself against it. One can fight against oppression in order to establish another form of oppression.

It is obvious that whenever men and women suffered oppression, they fought against it, but that is not enough to make them anarchists. However, among these fighters, there were undeniable precursors, such as William Godwin. To define anarchism, as Marshall does, “as one who rejects all forms of external government and the State and believes that society and individuals would function well without them” is quite inadequate. Marshall is wrong when he says that “anarchism did not suddenly appear in the nineteenth century only when someone decided to call himself an anarchist”: indeed, Proudhon once declared himself an “anarchist” (he wrote “an-archist”) and the word was later taken up by workers who identified with his thinking. That said, I don’t think it’s the best thing Proudhon did, because using the term “anarchist” to designate a political movement with a constructive project is a bit like shooting yourself in the foot. Gaston Leval said that in his time many young people unfortunately joined the anarchist movement not with reference to its political project but with the idea of “sowing anarchy” in its most vulgar sense.

Before dealing with the question of Sartre’s hypothetical membership of anarchism, I would like to state what I mean by anarchism. The following is of course a very short summary. Then I’ll try to find out what the anarchism that Remley attributes to Sartre is made of, which amounts in a way to determining what anarchism is for Remley⁵.

⁴ Peter H. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, 1993, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-h-marshaU-demanding-the-impossible>

⁵ There are a few small popular books on anarchism that have recently been published (in French):

- Guillaume Davranche, *Dix questions sur l’anarchisme*, éditions Libertalia, 120 pages.
- Rene Berthier, *Une breve histoire de l’anarchisme*, Editions du Monde libertaire, 105 pages.

Factually, the anarchist *movement* was born in the mid-19th century from the meeting of different causes:

- The immemorial tendency of humanity to struggle against political oppression and economic exploitation;
- The industrial revolution and the formation of the modern labour movement.

As a modern political *doctrine*, anarchism developed from three sources which enriched each other: Proudhon's critique of French doctrinaire and utopian communism; Bakunin's critique of German philosophy. But it is above all through the experience of social struggle and class solidarity within the International Worker's Association that the collectivist or revolutionary socialist movement (which would only later be called "anarchist") would appear as an organised mass movement.

The International Workers' Association

In 1864, the International Workers' Association, known as the "First International", was created in London on the initiative of English trade unionists and French Proudhonian militants.

Contrary to popular belief, Marx had no role in its foundation:

"It is not true that the International was the creation of Karl Marx.

He remained a complete stranger to the preparatory work which took place from 1862 to September 1864. He joined the International at the moment when the initiative of the English and French workers had just created it. Like the cuckoo, he came to lay his egg in a nest that was not his own."⁶

This organisation developed progressively and aroused fear within the capitalist class. The states of the European continent exercised an unflinching repression against the workers' sections of the continent, often sending the troops to shoot at the strikers, as was the case in Belgium against the miners of the Borinage, or in Spain. Far from discouraging the workers, the repression strengthened the International, whose function was above all to organise workers' solidarity across borders, thanks to relief funds, in particular.

We cannot yet speak of "anarchism" as a movement, but the ingredients are there: workers must fight for their complete emancipation by organising themselves without any interference from the state and capital. The legacy of Proudhon, who died in 1865,

⁶ James Guillaume, *Karl Marx pangermaniste et l'Association Internationale des travailleurs*.
http://www.antimythes.fr/individus/guiUaume_james/gj_mk_pangermaniste_O.pdf

was also there. When Bakunin joined the IWA in 1868, he took up this legacy and radicalised it.

Different currents coexisted within the International, but soon an opposition between the supporters of two “projects” became apparent:

- Those who wanted to maintain the trade union form in the International, i.e. an organisation which brought workers together on the basis of their role in the production process (Bakunin and his followers - the so-called “collectivists”);
- Those who wanted to encourage the working class to seize power through elections and to constitute themselves into national political parties (Marx and his followers).

One could summarize the situation by saying that there was a split between the supporters of a “counter-society” and the supporters of a “counter-state”.

The first option consisted in affirming that the International was the exclusive instrument through which the proletariat could overthrow the capitalist system and then organise the emancipated society. This role of organiser was possible thanks to the double structuring of the International Workers’ Association: vertically by the unions implanted in the firms, geographically by the “central sections” locally established.

The second option implied the transformation of the International Workers’ Association into a political instrument, the seizure of power by elections and its subordination to the party. The idea that the IWA was a political party was so firmly established in the minds of communists after Marx that the Bolshevik historian Iuri Steklov was convinced that the International operated on the principle of democratic centralism!⁷

To Marx’s centralism, Bakunin and his comrades opposed federalism, i.e. a system of organisation based on both the autonomy of the sections and their coordination - a principle which was applied by the Paris Commune in 1871.

The conflict between the two currents led to the exclusion of two militants of the Jura Federation, Bakunin and James Guillaume, by a rigged congress held in The Hague in 1872 under the orders of Marx and his entourage.⁸ This produced a chain reaction: denunciation of the exclusions by the Jura Federation, then by all the federations of the International. In response, Marx and Engels had the entire organized labour movement of the time excluded from the IWA. This event, through the trauma it caused, was to have a decisive impact on the subsequent orientations of the anarchist movement.⁹

⁷ G. M. Stekloff, *History of the First International*. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (trans.). New York: International Publishers, 1928.

⁸ 1872-1873. — Bref rappel des mesures par lesquelles Marx, Engels et quelques-uns de leurs amis exclurent de l’AIT la totalité des organisations adhérentes (1872-1873), et réactions de ces dernières [http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article601\(1872-1873\)](http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article601(1872-1873)). - A brief reminder of the measures by which Marx, Engels and some of their friends excluded the entire membership of the IWA.)

⁹ On the First International, see:

Again, we cannot yet speak of anarchism, but just as the theoretical ingredients were found in Proudhon, the practical ingredients are found in Bakunin's descriptions of the workers' movement of his time.

While the "authoritarian" wing of the International immediately collapsed, the excluded federations reconstituted a so-called "anti-authoritarian" IWA, which remained alive for a few years, but which in turn disappeared in 1878. The legacy of this experience was the formation of two currents:

1. A current of "syndicalist" type, which twenty years later became revolutionary syndicalism and later on anarcho-syndicalism;
2. An "anarchist" current properly speaking which will take with time different names: anarchist communist, communist anarchist, libertarian communist.¹⁰

On individualism

From the readings I have done of Sartre, it never occurred to me that he could have been anything like an anarchist. On the other hand, his thought is very clearly influenced by individualism, an individualism tinged with social preoccupations. The point is that in my opinion the concept of individualistic anarchism is a contradiction in terms. It is customary to regard Stirner as an anarchist, which seems to me quite impossible.

Bakunin met Stirner only once, or more precisely they were once in the same room without speaking to each other, during the 1848 revolution, before the former went to try to revolutionise Central Europe and the latter disappeared into oblivion. Bakunin mentions his name only once, in a very negative way, calling him a "nihilist", which was not at all flattering under his pen. While Stirner was a contemporary of Proudhon, and hated Proudhon, he was never considered an anarchist during his lifetime, because nobody knew him, no one in the anarchist movement had ever thought of claiming Stirner as a reference author.

He was exhumed forty years later in the 1890s thanks to a total stranger named John Henry Mackay (Prussian despite his name), who somehow "established" Stirner as an anarchist individualist theorist, which in fact he was not - neither anarchist nor individualist. His concern was not with the individual, but with individuality. His book, *The Ego and its Own*, was written in a language that was difficult to follow because

• Robert Graham, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy-We Invoke it: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement*, AK Press, 2015.

• Wolfgang Eckhardt, *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association*, <https://files.libcom.org/files/The%20First%20Socialist%20Schism,%20Bakunin%20vs.%20Marx%20m%20the%20International%20Workmg%20Men%20Association%20-%20Wolfgang%20Eckhardt.pdf>

¹⁰ See Rene Berthier, *Social-democracy and Anarchism in the International Workers' Association, 1864-1877*, Merlin Press, 2016.

it used the codes of the leftwing Hegelian current of the 1840s and remained difficult to understand if one was not used to his rather abstruse language. At the time of its publication, books that exceeded a certain number of pages were subject to censorship in Prussia, and Stirner's book passed because the censors didn't understand it. Stirner came out of oblivion also thanks to Engels, strangely. Engels was determined to make Bakunin a disciple of Stirner in order to discredit the anarchists who persisted in taking part in the international socialist congresses organised by German social democracy. The social-democratic leaders, led by Engels, wanted to expel the anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists who promoted the idea of a general strike. They wanted to avoid at all costs that this idea should spread. Any socialist activist in favour of the general strike was labelled an anarchist, including Rosa Luxembour, which made her desperate because she hated anarchists.

In Proudhon and Bakunin there is an extremely elaborate reflection on the individual, on individual freedom, on the individual in society, but it is a reflection linked to their global doctrine: the theory of the individual is for them an element that is integrated into a global reflection.¹¹ There is no ground for an "individualist anarchism". For the great thinkers of anarchism, the human being is a social being who can only develop and flourish in society. If this development is hindered by obstacles created by political power or by society, men and women have the possibility and the duty to revolt, but individual revolt is doomed to failure. Some anarchists thought it appropriate to create a separate anarchist-individualism as an exclusive path to emancipation. In reality, the current known as "anarchism-individualism" appeared only recently: it was the result of a series of cascading causes.

When Marx and Engels excluded Bakunin and James Guillaume from the First International, followed by the exclusion of practically all the organised labour movement of the time, it created a trauma. The defeat of the federalist current in the International was thus blamed on the very principle of organisation. In reaction to the bureaucratisation and centralisation introduced by Marx, an opposition to all forms

¹¹ For more precisions, see: Eric Vilain [Rene Berthier], *Lire Stirner* (http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/lire_stirner_-_23-07-2011.pdf).

The fact that I deny Stirner the quality of anarchist does not mean that I deny any value to his thought, quite the contrary. *The Ego and Its Own* helps us to understand the mechanism of submission, how in the name of abstractions one manages to abandon everything of oneself for the sake of God, the Fatherland, Truth, Revolution, freedom. Here is what I write in conclusion to *Lire Stirner*: "Stirner warned his contemporaries against the veneration of idols, even where they are least expected; he showed that institutions become fixed, enslaving us to codes. By saying that he did not base his cause on anything, perhaps he is showing us that no cause is worth losing oneself for, and that the reasons for doing so may not be the ones we think... [...] By suggesting that there is no society except for and through the individual - whereas Proudhon and Bakunin assert that there is no individual except in society - Stirner offers a theme for reflection that should be pondered by all the proponents of supposedly altruistic ideologies that have led to the horror of concentration camps. But the zealots of the doctrine of the man [Marx] who devoted 300 pages to refuting Stirner will fall into all the traps denounced by *The Ego*: the cult of personality, the raison d'état, the cult of the Party, the transformation of doctrine into religion."

of organisation developed. But by advocating maximum decentralisation, federalism, which is the organisational principle of anarchism, was emptied of its content. The “anti-authoritarian” activists withdrew first to the small group of affinities supposed to be the guarantor of the absence of bureaucratisation (of “authority”), then to the individual, after which there was nothing left to decentralise, only the sacralisation of the ego. This is the process, briefly outlined, of the formation of individualism in the anarchist movement, but it is a process that leads to the negation of anarchism.

Anarchism as a doctrine is based on the idea that society pre-exists the individual and that it is society that allows the individual, under certain conditions, to develop and flourish. individualist anarchism, on the other hand, asserts that the individual can only develop against society. Obviously, the same doctrine cannot be based on two antagonistic postulates.

The sovereignty of the individual?

This is what Remley writes about Sartre's view of the sovereignty of the individual:

“All of these essays from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s help to define the parameters of Sartre's political position, and they give us an insight into his developing anarchistic attitude. In these essays, we see Sartre expressing several aspects that align him more closely to anarchist thought, especially to Proudhon and Bakunin. His concern for the sovereignty of the individual at the expense of state sovereignty, as well as his notion of function, was first enunciated in his ‘Theory of the State in Modern French Thought’. His ‘anarchist attitude’, as Michel Contat so aptly puts it, is readily apparent in his description of the individualistic, stoic ‘solitary man’.” (p. 138)

I am afraid I must contradict Remley. The description of Proudhon or of Bakunin as an “individualistic, stoic ‘solitary man’” does not correspond at all to reality. Bakunin, following Proudhon, never was an individualist and never was solitary. He believed that individualism was the foundation of bourgeois ideology. According to him, man is a product of society: there can be no immutable human nature, an intimate metaphysical being which would in reality be a “Non-being”.¹ As for “loneliness”, he was never lonely, neither concretely nor metaphorically - except, of course, during the eight years he spent isolated and chained in the Peter and Paul fortress for his participation in the German revolution in 1848-1849.

Bakunin considers that outside of society, man would not have ceased to be an animal without speech or reason. If the individual can develop today, it is thanks to the cumulative efforts of countless generations. The concepts of individual freedom and reason are the products of society. Society is not simply the product of the individuals who make it up, it is a historical creation. The more developed the individual is, the freer he is, and the more he is the product of society. The more he receives from society, the more he owes it. Created by society, man is also its creator: man's individual life and his social life cannot be separated.

Pursuant to this viewpoint, it does not matter whether individuals really live in isolation or in highly integrated groups; a point completely at odds with Sartre's position not only in the *Critique*, but also in all of his philosophical works. This is an ongoing discussion for Sartre and one that underlies the *Critique's* foundation: Human history is essentially the story of human development in all its phases, contradictions,

¹ Bakounine, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, Champ libre, VIII, 278.

ramifications, successes and failures, and Sartre's unfettered concern is for the human individual, which not only sets him apart from French liberalism and Marxism, but "brings him closer to anarchism", Remley writes (p.143) The anarchists will not dispute that "Human history is essentially the story of human development in all its phases, contradictions", etc. but it is wrong to say that their "unfettered concern is for the human individual". If the "human individual" is far from being indifferent to the anarchists, it is a social individual, integrated in a society, in interaction with it.

Responsibility

To pose the problem of the individual is also to pose the problem of man's responsibility in history, the question of historical determinism, and consequently that of human emancipation.

If the individual, his thoughts, his actions are conditioned by the environment and by education, if, in short, he is entirely a social product, does he cease to be an individual? What then is his degree of independence and responsibility in his actions? There is, says Bakunin, an initial error in the way this problem is posed. It consists in "the absolute sense which our human vanity, supported by a theological and metaphysical aberration, gives to human responsibility. The whole error is in this word: *absolute*. Man is not absolutely responsible and the animal is not absolutely irresponsible. The responsibility of both is relative to the degree of reflection of which they are capable."¹

freedom is "dominion over external things, founded on the respectful observation of the laws of nature; it is independence from the despotic pretensions and acts of men; it is science, work, political revolt, it is finally the organization, both thoughtful and free, of the social milieu, in accordance with the natural laws that are inherent in every human society." There lies the responsibility of Man. But, asks Bakunin, "why then do we declare man absolutely responsible"? (*a question that he asks by anticipation to Sartre, one could say ...*)

Proudhon (whose ideas Bakunin is merely developing) and Bakunin are not so much interested in restoring the sovereignty of the individual in relation to that of the state: they know very well that the state will always be the winner until it is brought down. They are especially interested in the question of the independence of the individual from society.

Revolt against society is much more difficult than revolt against the state. What Bakunin calls "social tyranny", crushing and fatal, does not have the character of imperative violence, of legalized and formal despotism, which distinguishes the authority of the state.² It is insidious: "it dominates men by customs, by manners, by the mass of feelings, prejudices and habits". "It envelops man from birth (...) and forms the very basis of his own individual existence; so that each one is in some way its accomplice against himself." (Emphasis added.) "It follows that, in order to revolt against this influence which society naturally exerts upon him, man must at least in part revolt against himself."³

¹ Bakounine, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, Champ libre, VIII, p. 209.

² *Ibid.* VIII, 174.

³ *Ibid.*

*This revolt requires both will and intelligence, and it can be developed through education - or self-education. The habit of thinking and wanting, received from outside through education or experience, can lead to a revolt against social determinisms. It constitutes in the individual an inner force "henceforth identified with his being" and allows him to continue to develop himself through a gymnastics, so to speak, of his thought and will. It is in this sense, says Bakunin, that man can become to a certain extent his own educator, his own instructor, the "producer of himself".*⁴

According to Bakunin, man obeys the laws of nature, of which society itself is only a production. Man is a product of the "external world"; he cannot do without it, but at the same time he must preserve himself from it. Each man at his birth and during all his life, is only "the result of an innumerable quantity of actions, of circumstances, and of innumerable conditions, material and social". Man's freedom is limited to his ability, "through knowledge and the thoughtful application of the laws of nature", to free himself from the pressure exerted on him by the external world, "material and social". "As for the arbitrary yoke of men, he overthrows it by revolutions."⁵

For Sartre, the choices we make define our identity. But they also engage the others, which weighs down our responsibility. In other words, Man is responsible for himself, but also for others. In Sartre's philosophy Man is always free to choose, he cannot *not* choose: "there is no determinism, Man is free, Man is freedom" (*Existentialism is a humanism*). Bakunin would undoubtedly understand Sartre's desire to make man assume his choices, but he was too respectful of the freedom of others to deprive them of the privilege of assuming their own choices. He would also find that there is something absolute, deeply religious in Sartre's attitude, like Christ taking upon himself all the sins of men.

"What Sartre devoted himself to with astonishing fervour was nothing less than the salvation of man on earth (for there is a Christian - and even an early Christian - in this radical atheist)."⁶

We are far from Bakunin's point of view: indeed, if I affirm myself as the product of my childhood, of the social conditions in which I lived, etc. that implies, from the point of view of Sartre, that I deny this fundamental freedom that I have to choose what I am. By saying that my responsibility is relative to the degree of reflection of which I am capable, Bakunin intends to say that the heart of the problem lies in my *reflection*; and precisely, by my reflection I am capable of revolting against what hinders my freedom. According to Bakunin, revolt is only a stage in the process of development of man's will to freedom; this process finds its consecration in the consciousness acquired by the exploited class, of the necessity of collective action. What frees man from social

⁴ *Ibid.* 211.

⁵ Bakounine, *The Knuto-German Empire*, Champ Libre Editions, VIII, 208.

⁶ Pierre de Boisdeffre, "Regards sur l'oeuvre, la morale et la pensee de Jean-Paul Sartre", *La Nouvelle Revue des Deux Mondes* (aout 1980), III, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44200535>

determinisms is the use of this “instrument of intellectual emancipation called criticism, without which there can be no complete moral and social revolution”.⁷

For Sartre, man must assume his choices and actions, without transferring responsibility to others. This is a somewhat proud attitude which forces him to contest any influence of determinism, social or otherwise, since in this case his responsibility would be attenuated. This is what separates Sartre from Bakunin: the former *denies* social determinisms - which corresponds to a kind of flight - while the latter affirms the necessity to *confront* them. This confrontation is not limited to the responsibility of the individual: indeed, Bakunin recognises the existence of collective responsibility: each people, he says, is “more or less in solidarity with and responsible for the acts committed by its state, in its name and by its arm, until it has overthrown and destroyed that state.”⁸ It is the responsibility of the victim to revolt against his persecutor; it is the responsibility of the exploited to revolt against their exploiters. Without this responsibility, no revolution is possible.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Bakunin, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, Oeuvres, Champ libre, p. 59.

Anarchism according to Sartre

In his review of Remley's book¹, Stephen Hendley writes that Remley's argument could be that "Sartre's political philosophy is best thought of as a form of anarchism". This suggests that regardless of Sartre's intention, the reader could speculatively approach his work from a libertarian point of view, but this remains an assumption. Hendley adds that "throughout Parts Three and Four [*of Remley's book*], there are numerous asides in which Remley draws attention to *parallels* and *affinities* [my emphasis] between Sartre's thought and that of Proudhon (especially) and Bakunin". Showing parallels and affinities between two works is an analogical method that does not prove any organic relationship between them: *Sartre never explicitly quotes neither Proudhon nor Bakunin*. Hendley adds that "Some of these [asides] are frustratingly short", which suggests that there is not much substance to support the argument.

To emphasize the libertarian character of Sartre's thought Remley refers to the four conditions defined by John Clark which "provide the 'boundaries' of the nature of anarchism".

"I have endeavoured to show that Sartre meets the full meaning of Clarks' four-pronged approach to understanding anarchism, and his political philosophy is in a general lineage with Proudhon and Bakunin." (p. 288)

But these four conditions, even if they have a sympathetic anti-authoritarian aspect, are very vague and are extremely reductive in defining "the nature of anarchism". In particular, they don't mention class struggle, which, in my opinion, is essential. The choosing of John Clark as a reference for the criterion defining anarchism is probably not accidental: although his work is of extreme interest, he is the representative of a "mild" current of anarchism, qualified by some as "reformist".² Most of my anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist comrades (two currents that represent the *overwhelming* majority of the anarchist movement in France) would consider the conditions put forward by John Clark as necessary, but certainly not sufficient.

Sartre's vision of anarchism is anything but clear. He refers to "traditional anarchism" in the persons of Proudhon and Bakunin but at the same time takes a distance

¹ *Jean-Paul Sartre's Anarchist Philosophy*, Reviewed by Steven Hendley, Birmingham-Southern College, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/jean-paul-sartres-anarchist-philosophy/>

² See Brian Morris; "The Reformist Anarchism Of John Clark", <https://anarchiststudies.noblogs.org/revierticle-the-reformist-anarchism-of-john-clark/>

from them because they are “*too individualistic*” - which they are not. To blame Proudhon and Bakunin for being “individualists” is simply incredible. We have here a very reductive - or caricatured - vision of anarchism whose *individualist* current has always been extremely marginal compared to the communist (or anarchist-communist) and syndicalist (or anarcho-syndicalist) currents. And individualism is certainly not what defines Proudhon and Bakunin... so we are entitled to ask ourselves what knowledge Sartre really has of anarchism.

Anarchism seen as “*individualism*”, or as essentially *individualistic*, is very much in line with most people’s view of the movement, as it has taken hold not only with the uninformed public, but also with most academics including Sartre, so it seems. In *The Words*, an autobiographical account, Sartre confides: “I was a right-wing anarchist”.³ In *The Wall*, Paul Hilbert, the hero of “Erostrate”, declares, “I was an anarchist, I had placed myself in the path of the Tsar and I carried with me an infernal machine.”⁴ This is the image of anarchism that Sartre conveyed from 1939 to 1964. One wonders why Sartre’s various visits to Spain, where he could not fail to see the hegemony of anarcho-syndicalism in the labour movement, did not inspire him with more positive characters than a “right-wing anarchist” and a terrorist.

Most academics who insist obsessively on the question of the individual and the opposition to all forms of “authority” tend to obliterate the fact that anarchism advocates the socialisation of the means of production, federalism as the organising principle of society. They forget that Ukrainian anarchists organised an insurrectionary army (“authoritarian”, therefore) which successfully held out for several years against both the White Russians and the Bolsheviks; that during the civil war Spanish anarcho-syndicalists socialised factories and land over half the country before being militarily defeated by both fascism and Stalinism, and that all this was done despite the reluctance of some *individualists* to “authority”.

This leads me to believe that Sartre has only an extremely sketchy vision of anarchism, because in the 1970s no French intellectual could ignore the presence in Spain in the 1930s of an anarcho-syndicalist organization with more than one million members.

For Sartre, “anarchy” is a kind of *individualism*, which it is not. And when asked “how an anarchist should live today”, he answers “anarchy is for me a moral life” - obviously not a political doctrine -, and he adds in parentheses: “I would add that I have written nothing but moral books”⁵, as if to signify that he has always been anarchist and that anarchism was only a question of morals. While there is no doubt that an anarchist must follow a certain morality, it is equally certain that he or she must fight against the capitalist system, and *in an organised way*, a point that Sartre seems to ignore.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 99.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Erostrate”, *Le Mur*, 1939, p. 80.

⁵ “Jean-Paul Sartre, Anarquía y moral”, Topologik.net, numero 5/2009, https://www.topologik.net/Jean-Paul_Sartre.htm

Wondering about the kind of society that could be built without power, Sartre proposes to create communities - it is true that in the 70's we are at the very heart of the movement. These communities would be "based on love, and not necessarily sexual love: filial love, maternal love, love between comrades. It is in the perspective of love that people's relationships with each other should be established." Such communities already exist, in Germany, in France, "where people live, work and make love together". It is on this basis that an anarchist movement must be created, "in which the relations between power and action will be different from those that exist within the parties. Anarchist action has to conquer not parties but masses." "It would be necessary to build communities where it would be possible, as far as possible, to live freely, as anarchists would like to live" - communities of 25, 50 people, he says, "who would establish real relationships among themselves, without any authority of one over the other."

There is no indication of how Sartrean anarchism envisions the large-scale organization of industrial and agricultural production, transportation, production and distribution of electricity, gas, water, the organisation of a public health system, etc. We only know that it will be necessary "to create possibilities for people to live free with other people, because one cannot live free alone". All this is not serious.

One would hardly imagine a "Peace and Love" Jean-Paul Sartre with flowers in his hair. From all that Sartre tells us about anarchism, we can conclude that he has absolutely no idea what it really is. Today he would probably be said to be a "lifestyle anarchist".

Alfred Betschart considers that Sartre went through several periods, the last of which, following a Marxist period, was from 1972 until his death. It was only during this last period that Sartre freed himself from all obstacles to the constitution of an independent philosophical thought. *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique* would have expressed a methodological conflict between individualism and holism.

"Only in his anarchist period, in which he no longer felt compelled to make concessions to Marxism, did Sartre succeed in further developing his philosophy, which was based primarily on an ontological and epistemological core of psychology and anthropology, into an independent political philosophy. Only now did he manage to separate himself from the elements of a political philosophy that was committed to *methodical holism* and to build up an independent political philosophy that was consistently based on that *methodical individualism* that formed the basis of his two main works. At the centre of Sartre's political philosophy was the question of how people can live freely in groups according to their fundamental choice (also called project). Sartre increasingly saw the state as the main antagonist to such a life in freedom. In doing so, he took a position that he initially coyly described as *libertaire* and then increasingly uncoded as anarchist."⁶

⁶ Betschart, "Sartre: From Marxist to Anarchist".

If we follow Alfred Betschart, the fact that Sartre “no longer feels compelled to make concessions to Marxism” implies that at some point he felt compelled to do so. Why on earth did he feel compelled? And the fact that he made concessions to Marxism suggests that he never adhered to it. In other words, for a significant part of his life he lied to himself (and to his readers). And suddenly he frees himself from the weight of “methodical holism” [*methodological* holism?] to adhere to “methodical individualism”, which we understand to be the foundation of his anarchism. The problem is that “methodical [methodological] individualism” never founded anarchism.

If we follow Alfred Betschart, the fact that Sartre “no longer feels compelled to make concessions to Marxism” implies that at some point he felt compelled to do so. Why on earth did he feel *compelled*? And the fact that he made *concessions* to Marxism suggests that he never adhered to it. In other words, for a significant part of his life he lied to himself (and to his readers). And suddenly he frees himself from the weight of “methodical holism” [*methodological* holism?] and adheres to “methodical individualism”, which we understand to be the foundation of his anarchism. The problem is that “methodical [methodological] individualism” never founded anarchism.

Sartre does not seem to have understood that there is no contradiction in anarchism between methodological holism and methodological individualism. One does not have to choose, it is not one or the other:

“Man constitutes himself with respect to himself as an independent and free person only by the degree of consciousness he has of himself, by the development of his thought; but since his thought can only be born and developed in human society, it is obvious that man can only constitute and recognise himself as a free person, within society. It was not, therefore the freedom of men that created society at the beginning of history, but quite the contrary, it was society that successively created the freedom of its members, organically united within it by nature, independently of any contract, of any premeditation and of any will on their part.”⁷

For anarchist thinkers, human freedom is a product of society.

⁷ Bakunin, *The Knuto-German Empire*. Fragment J. ffivres, Champ libre, VIII, pp. 440-441.

Convergences

But in fact, the problem may not be to assert that Sartre was an anarchist strictly speaking, but to find out if his writings, or at least some of them, contain anarchist themes. I have noted certain convergences between Sartre and Bakunin, for example. But these are only convergences, not explicit references from the former to the latter.

William L. Remley's book, *Jean-Paul Sartre's Anarchist Philosophy*, is significant in this respect.

Remley outlines Sartre's project on page 220: "Sartre's political philosophy appears to align itself at least with an understanding of anarchism generally. As I have argued, his theoretical anarchism comes into better focus when judged against the anarchists of the nineteenth century, especially Proudhon and Bakunin." So Remley considers that Sartre's political philosophy "appears to align itself *at least* with an understanding of anarchism *generally*". [*my emphasis*] - a very vague formulation that suggests an obscure connection, to say the least. In particular, Sartre's thought "comes closest to Proudhon whose entire theory of history, with its heavy emphasis on state (as well as religious) hierarchies, only leads to one outcome - oppression - exactly the conclusion Sartre reaches in the *Critique*."

I don't know if there is much sense in detecting a "theory of history" in Proudhon. He was not a system-maker like Marx, he "could not compete with Marx as a founder of a school."¹ He was content to observe that the realities of an epoch are transitory and can evolve, while opposing the socialists who thought that the advent of an emancipated society would mark the end of history. History is made up of contradictions consisting of a plurality of irreducible elements, antagonistic and at the same time interdependent. These antinomies cannot be resolved in synthesis. *There is therefore no end to history*: "Terms are balanced either with each other or with other antinomic terms" but "a balance is not a synthesis" (*Justice*, "The Goods").

The resolution of the antinomy is "impossible" because it is from the opposition of antinomic elements, from their mutual confrontation, that movement and life are born. "The problem consists in finding not their fusion - "which would be death - but their equilibrium, an equilibrium that is constantly unstable, variable according to the very development of societies." (*Theory of Property*.) The idea behind this theory is that it is the permanent tensions within society that keep it alive, and these tensions will remain after the revolution, even in a noncontradictory way².

¹ D.W. Brogan, *Proudhon*, Hamish Hamilton Publisher, 1934, p. 84.

² Perhaps an echo of this theory can be found in Mao Tze Dong, who was once attracted to anarchism, in his text "On Contradiction", in which he develops the idea of principal contradiction and

According to the classical Marxist vision, the vulgar Marxism of the communist party training sessions, the contradiction that divides capitalist society is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and all other contradictions in society must be subordinated to it: gender, skin colour, religion, sex etc. These are secondary contradictions which will be resolved once the class contradictions have been overcome: “the representatives of the secondary contradictions could bring in their concerns, but that these had to merge with and be subordinated to the main contradiction, as if in a crucible.”³

Sartre’s point of view went beyond this scheme, as it appears in *On a raison de se revolter*, where the question of feminism and homosexuality are raised. But this is to forget that Sartre was not innovating at all. In 1866 Bakunin affirmed the absolute equality of women’s rights: “The woman, different from man, but not inferior to him, intelligent, hard-working and free like him, is the same as man, intelligent, hard-working and free like him, is declared his equal in rights as in all political and social functions and duties.”⁴

From the end of the 19th century the libertarian movement advocated for free unions, sex education, feminism and lesbian, gay and bisexual rights. For Emma Goldman, the fight against patriarchy had to be done in the same way as the fight against capitalism and the state. She was the first American to defend homosexual love in the public eye. For her there was no secondary contradiction, a view shared by most anarchists.⁵

Contrary to what Remley seems to think, Proudhon does not focus exclusively on the state (and religious) hierarchy leading to oppression. Some authors have suggested a curious division of labour between anarchism and Marxism, the former supposedly devoted to denouncing oppression and the latter to denouncing exploitation. Nothing could be further from the truth. If Proudhon wrote the *System of Economic Contradictions*, it was because he was aware that the capitalist regime was a regime of exploitation. He also wrote a *Handbook of the Stock Exchange Speculator*, which is a remarkable analysis of financial capitalism of the time. Moreover, it is often overlooked that Proudhon was far from ignorant in economic matters as he was an excellent accountant. “The exploitation of man by man, the government of man by man, under whatever name it is disguised, is oppression”, he writes in the *First Memorandum on Property*, and many other such quotations can be found throughout his works.⁶ Proudhon’s anarchism is based on three pillars which he says are inseparable: the condemnation of

non-antagonistic contradiction. Strictly speaking, this pamphlet has absolutely nothing Marxist about it.

³ Betschart, “Sartre: From Marxist to Anarchist”

⁴ Principes et organisation de la société internationale révolutionnaire, http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Catechisme_Revolutionnaire.pdf

⁵ The exception is Proudhon, whose misogyny is known and condemned by the anarchist movement. However, as is almost always the case with Proudhon, the problem is more complicated than it seems. See Herve Trinquier’s article “Jeanne Deroin et Proudhon”, http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/deroin_pour_monde_nouveau.pdf

⁶ Proudhon, *Premier Memoire*, ch. V, pp. 337-346, ed. Marcel Riviere.

the economic exploitation of the proletariat, of political oppression, to which he adds religious alienation in equal measure.

As for Bakunin, his “critique of science probably binds him to Sartre in a concrete manner.” I fear that Remley has a mistaken view of what Bakunin thought about science. He had nothing against science *per se*; he was, however, a strong critic of the power that scientists could hold. In *The Knuto-Germanic Empire* he writes thus:

“A scientific body entrusted with the government of society would soon end up not dealing with science at all, but with an entirely different business; and this business, the business of all established powers, would be to perpetuate itself by making the society entrusted to its care ever more stupid and consequently more needy of its government and direction. (...)

“What I preach, then, is, to a certain extent, the revolt of life against science, or rather against the government of science. Not to destroy science - God forbid! That would be a crime of lese humanite - but to put it back in its place, so that it can never leave it.”

Bakunin adds that “the government of the scientists would have as its first consequence to make science inaccessible to the people and would necessarily be an aristocratic government, because the present institution of science is an aristocratic institution. The aristocracy of intelligence!”

Despite his observation that Sartre’s readers have little interest in his “selfproclamations” of anarchism, Remley intends to “shed a different light on an important aspect of Sartre’s politics”, namely “to view his political philosophy through the lens of anarchism” (p. 288)

Remley proceeds by analogy. If, for example, I were studying Marx’s views on Bakunin, I would examine the texts in which the former expresses an opinion on the latter, or on anarchism in general, I would mention the passages where Marx quotes Bakunin or any other anarchist, and analyse the relevance of his remarks. There is no such thing with Sartre and anarchism. Remley mentions no passage where Sartre expresses an opinion on Bakunin or Proudhon. The only thing Remley clings to are passages in Sartre’s work that *might be similar to what Proudhon or Bakunin said*. Something like: “such a passage of Sartre’s fits well into the framework of anarchist thought”. Remley’s book is entirely constructed in this mode.

Remley seeks “convergences” between Proudhon and Bakunin on the one hand, and Sartre on the other, in order to “solidify his anarchist credentials”. Let us examine some of these convergences.

- If he evokes the point of view of Bakunin or Proudhon on a point, he adds that it is “*also the position Sartre adopts*”. (p. 13)
- Speaking of the notion of “groups”, he says that it is “at the very heart of Sartre’s *Critique*, and is a *fundamental aspect of anarchists political thought*”. (p. 126)

- On another question, “*Sartre aligns himself more with anarchist thought as opposed to Marx*”. (p. 126)
- “The revolutionary Sartre describes sees human relations from the viewpoint of work, *a concept espoused by Proudhon in his anarchist humanism*”. (p. 128)
- Praxis and action “share a significant role in the “ *Critique* ”, and *each is a component of anarchist thinking*”. (p. 129)
- Such other aspect of Sartre’s critique of authority “*comes within the meaning of anarchism*”.(p. 131)
- Such point Sartre develops is “*an essential element of anarchism.*” (p. 147)
- “Sartre is *no different* than the anarchists” (p. 134)
- And this other point of view is “*very much in tune with anarchist thought.*” (p. 173)
- “*mirrors anarchist positions we discussed previously*” (p. 177)
- “*not unlike Proudhon and the other anarchists before him*” (p. 183)
- Speaking of the critique of institutions in society, Remley tells us that it is “*all within the concept of anarchism.*” (p. 197)
- Remley tells us that “Proudhon and Bakunin viewed their political positions as radical and essentially socialistic, which is also the position Sartre adopts.” (p. 13) This is quite correct, but exactly the same could be said of Marx and Engels. So it is not on the question of socialism that Sartre could be defined as “anarchist”.
- The anarchists say that transforming society can only be the result of a common will, a common action. As Remley says: “individuals acting alone or as atomized organisms [...] are incapable of revolutionary activity”. (p. 126) But this observation is by no means limited to anarchism, it cannot be limited to a “fundamental aspect of anarchists political thought” (p. 126). It fits perfectly well with Marxism also.
- “Most anarchists, says Remley, including Proudhon and Bakunin, elevate the peasants to the level of true revolutionary, a position Sartre obviously agrees with.” I fear that Remley (and Sartre before him) has a distorted view of how Proudhon and Bakunin saw “the relationship of the proletariat to the peasantry - a view formed through the prism of Marx and Engels, as is the case for many academics.

It is true that the anarchists do not have the contempt shown by Marx and Engels and the Marxists as a whole towards the peasantry. But for the anarchists, the problem is not to “elevate the peasants to the level of true revolutionary”. The integration of the peasants into a revolutionary movement is a question of circumstances. In Ukraine, Makhno’s insurrectionary army was composed essentially of peasants and its programme consisted in inciting the peasants to socialise the land, which they actually did, but which the Bolsheviks totally failed to do! In Spain too, in areas where the anarchist movement was dominant, there was a huge movement to socialise the land. It can be said that the anarchists were the only ones who succeeded in such a project. But in both cases, this socialisation of land was only possible because the peasants realised that their situation would improve.⁷

It is not true that Proudhon and Bakunin “elevate the peasants to the level of true revolutionary”: the peasants may in certain circumstances become actors in the revolution, but the working class remains the driving element.

According to Marx’s view, Proudhon is the theorist of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is true that for a while he envisaged an alliance between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in the process of proletarianisation, but the idea passed him by. As for the peasantry, he simply noted that at his time 85% of the French population was rural, that it was difficult to talk to them about collectivisation of the land, and that *you can’t make a revolution against the peasantry*.

Contrary to Remley’s view, Proudhon despaired of the peasants’ attitude towards property - and therefore to revolution. The population’s attachment to property, *including the working class*, was so deeply rooted (and still is...) that it is necessary to find transitional measures to overcome this bias.⁸ The issue of ownership is in fact a false problem. If we look at things closely, it will be seen that Proudhon’s constant preoccupation has been to seek the best strategy to convince the population, and particularly the peasants, to accept the idea that production, society in general, should be organised in a non-state socialised manner. All of Proudhon’s variations on this theme are merely a reflection of his wanderings in search of a good solution.

Bakunin didn’t think otherwise.

Concerning the Russian peasantry, Bakunin certainly has glorified its regular revolts against oppression, but he considered that its traditional institutions, such as the *mir*, did not constitute an element on which the revolution could be based: The *mir* has never had any internal evolution, he says, the only process which emerged from it was disintegration. Sensing the development of a new class of kulaks, he writes that

⁷ On the socialisation of industry and land, see:

- Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish revolution*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gaston-leval-collectives-in-the-spanish-revolution>.
- Frank Mintz, *Anarchism and Workers’ Self-Management in Revolutionary Spain*, AK Press.

⁸ See Rene Berthier, “Proudhon’s theory of Property”, http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=article&id_article=822

“every muzhik who is a little well-to-do and a little stronger than the others is now striving with all his energy to free himself from the rural community that oppresses and suffocates him”.⁹ “Apathy” and “improductivity”, Bakunin says again, are the two main characteristics of the Russian rural community.

Bakunin’s reflections during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) are particularly interesting. When he tackles the crucial question of the collectivisation of land,¹⁰ Bakunin affirms that imposing this would be a mistake, because it would lead to an uprising in the countryside. To reduce the uprising, it would be necessary to have an immense armed force, with military discipline, with generals, and the whole machine would have to be rebuilt, with the machinist, the dictator. We have in mind the problem of the relationship between workers and peasants during the Russian revolution, the requisitions which exacerbated the antagonisms between town and country and which led to forced collectivisation.

According to Bakunin, collectivism in the countryside can only come about by force of circumstance, when the “conditions of privileged individualism, the political and legal institutions of the state, have disappeared of their own accord” - in other words a transition. The claim of the working class to impose a policy on the peasantry is a “political legacy of bourgeois revolutionaryism”. It inevitably leads to the reconstitution of a system of domination, this time based on the bureaucracy - the “state functionaries” - charged with the practical execution of this programme, thereby dispossessing the working class of all power. Here again we come back to the idea that the advent of the state bureaucracy is the price to pay for the failure of the proletarian revolution¹¹.

- I don’t know what “to see human relations from the point of view of work” means really. According to Proudhon, Labour is the source of the value of products; but there is also, beyond the simple hardship of work, a social servitude linked to work, which is a product of the relations between workers and employers. For human beings, work is above all a social institution and not a natural fact. But it is also a natural constraint that is aggravated by the servile social organisation. But all this also corresponds to the Marxist point of view, this observation is not specifically anarchist.¹²
- Violence and action “share a significant role in the *Critique*, and each is an element of anarchist thinking” (p. 129) But violence and action play an important role in Marxism too. Proudhon had been traumatised by the bloody repression of the revolution in 1848 and had hoped for a peaceful transition to socialism. But he was not naive: if no solution is found, he wrote, “it will no longer be the right to

⁹ Letter to Herzen and Ogarev, July 19, 1866.

¹⁰ Cf. Letters to a Frenchman, 6 September 1870.

¹¹ See Rene Berthier, “Elements d’une theorie bakouninienne de la bureaucratie”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?artide175>

¹² Voir: Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la revolution et dans l’Eglise*, Sixieme etude, “Le travail”.

work, nor the right to surplus value that the peasants and workers will invoke: it will be the right to war and reprisals¹³.” The threat is clear. Violence is not desired, but it will be used if necessary.

Bakunin does not see things very differently. Contrary to popular belief, this man, who is generally presented as a furious revolutionary rushing to the first barricade within reach, was very cautious. He was, let us remember, a former artillery officer. He participated in four insurrections, in Paris and Prague in 1848, Dresden in 1849 and Lyon in 1870¹⁴. On each occasion he had made a pessimistic prognosis of their outcome and had tried to dissuade the protagonists from embarking on the adventure, but having failed to do so, he had nevertheless participated in the movement.

On Dresden and Lyon there are the testimonies of Engels and Wagner. When the Dresden uprising was defeated, he organised a strategic retreat that was a model of its kind. In the military “art”, a strategic retreat is the removal of a maximum number of men and material from a battlefield, in good order, with a minimum of casualties. Bakunin’s skill was recognised by Engels, himself a military enthusiast:

“In Dresden, the struggle was kept on for four days in the “ “streets of the town. The shopkeepers of Dresden, the ‘communal guard,’ not only did not fight, but in many instances favoured the proceedings of the troops against the insurgents. These again consisted almost exclusively of working men from the surrounding manufacturing districts. They found an able and coolheaded commander in the Russian refugee Michael Bakunin, who afterwards was taken prisoner, and now is confined in the dungeons of Munkacs, Hungary. The intervention of numerous Prussian troops crushed this insurrection.”¹⁵

Richard Wagner evoked “the happy retreat from Dresden, which was made without any loss”.¹⁶ The Russian had had the trees of the Maximilian Alley cut down in order to “guarantee his left flank from an attack by the Prussian cavalry”, says Wagner, who adds that the lamentations of the inhabitants of the promenade had greatly amused Bakunin: “The tears of the Philistines are the nectar of the Gods”, the revolutionary had then declared.

Bakunin’s participation in the Lyon Commune in 1870, which Marx tried to ridicule from his seat in the British Museum, also earned the Russian revolutionary a laudatory

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁴ He also participated in an insurrection in Bologna in Italy, in 1874 but I don’t count it as a real participation. Ill, exhausted, depressed, Bakunin resolved, despite his scepticism, to go to Bologna, where his Italian friends were preparing an insurrection. The affair was so badly organised that it turned into a fiasco. Bakunin was forced to flee disguised as a priest and carrying a basket of eggs... (H.E. Kaminski, *Michel Bakounine, la vie d’un révolutionnaire*, Aubier, p. 331.)

¹⁵ Engels, *Marx Engels Collected Works*, vol. 11, p. 90.

¹⁶ Arthur Lehning, *Bakounine et les autres*, éditions 10/18, p. 170.

appraisal from the Bolshevik historian Yuri Steklov. Steklov states that Bakunin's intervention in Lyon was "a generous attempt to awaken the sleeping energy of the French proletariat and to direct it towards the struggle against the capitalist system and at the same time to repel the foreign invasion".¹⁷ Steklov adds that Bakunin's plan was not so ridiculous:

"In Bakunin's thinking, it was necessary to take advantage of the shocks caused by the war, of the incapacity of the bourgeoisie, of the patriotic protests of the masses, of their confused social tendencies, to attempt a decisive intervention of the workers in the great centres, to draw the peasantry behind it and thus begin the world social revolution. No one then proposed a better plan."

If Proudhon was very reserved on the use of violence, the image of a pandestroyer usually conveyed concerning Bakunin is very far from corresponding to the real character. He had warned his friends against unwise decisions: "it is not necessary that the revolution should disgrace itself by a senseless movement and that the idea of a revolutionary uprising should fall into ridicule."¹⁸ And when the Russian revolutionary states that "no one can want to destroy unless having at the least a distant vision, true or false, of the order of things that should to him follow that which currently exists"¹⁹, he stood in contrast to Marx who opposed all anticipation concerning the post-revolutionary society in the name of so-called "scientific" socialism, and who did not want to propose "the recipes for the casseroles of the future society"

¹⁷ Quoted by F Rude, *De la Guerre a la Commune*, Anthropos editions.

¹⁸ Letter to Ceretti, 17 March 1872.

¹⁹ *Protest of the Alliance*.

“Self-proclaimed anarchist”

Another point that I think needs to be raised about the possibility of labelling Sartre an anarchist is whether his self-proclamations as an anarchist should be taken seriously.

Remley tells us that “throughout his life Sartre often referred to himself as an anarchist”, but he seems surprised that “despite his self-proclamation, very few were interested”. One may well wonder why. Maybe people simply didn’t take his self-proclamations seriously. Indeed, the question is rather to know how seriously one can take the anarchist proclamations of an author whose written work contains nothing tangible to corroborate these proclamations - except a few occasional oral declarations - but whose action has shown that he systematically sided with communist organizations, first orthodox, then Marxist- Leninist, all fierce enemies of anarchism.

Alfred Betschart writes in “Sartre’s anarchist political philosophy - a draft for a diverse society?”:

“In a discussion between him, Benny Levy alias Pierre Victor and Philippe Gavi, which was published two years later under the title ‘On a reason de se revolter’, Sartre said that he considered himself a member of the antihierarchical-libertarian movement.”¹

So let’s look closer at what Sartre is *actually* saying in “On a reason de se revolter” (We are right to revolt). The interview published under this title was mainly with Pierre Victor (Benny Levy), a leader of a Maoist organisation, “La Gauche proletarienne” [Proletarian Left], which defined itself as antiauthoritarian, spontaneist and which many observers said adopted “libertarian” behaviour. It is true that at the time, just after May ‘68, the term “libertarian” was used for anything that challenged authority and hierarchy in any way. In the interview, the term “libertarian” is almost systematically associated with the term “anti-hierarchy” (pages 26, 63, 77, 78, 100, 188). Thus Sartre writes:

“In the aftermath of the Liberation [*from the German occupation*], the P.C. [*Communist Party*] changed its attitude towards me completely” ... “For my part, I had become a convinced socialist, but anti-hierarchical - and libertarian - that is to say, for direct democracy. I was well aware that my

¹ *On a raison de se revolter*, discussions / Ph. Gavi, J.-P. Sartre, P Victor, Paris : Gallimard, 1974.

aims were not those of the PC, but I thought we could have gone some way together. I was deeply disconcerted by this sudden break.”²

It should be pointed out that anti-hierarchy and direct democracy are by far not enough to define anarchism. The very Maoist Proletarian Left also proclaimed itself to be against hierarchy and in favour of direct democracy (though probably not *within* the organisation). In fact, fifty pages later, Sartre explains why he joined the Maoists (not the anarchists). In this he contrasts with Daniel Guerin who, speaking of Sartre, wrote: “I am among those who have not always approved of Sartre’s incursions into politics, and while I believe myself to be a leftist, I do not intend to serve as a paravent to the Maoists (quite simply because I am a libertarian communist)”.³

To Victor’s question (Victor was a Maoist leader): “You once said something that troubled me: that Revolution was possible, but that a slightly less ignoble society would probably emerge from it”, he replies:

“What I wanted to say now are the objective reasons why I go with the Maoists. I’m with you: that doesn’t mean I agree with everything you do. It’s your conception of direct democracy that seems to me to be the essential link between you and me. Because, in the end, it is to establish this democracy that a writer who understands something of the meaning of his profession must strive.” (p. 75)

So Sartre claims to be a “libertarian”, but instead of turning to the anarchists, he turns to the Marxist-Leninists. And he explains that the role of the writer is to “write for everyone”: one must write for a “collective reader”, which “is only possible in a socialist democracy”, “in a direct democracy” - to which he concludes: “It is perhaps in China that it has the best chance of existing one day.” One may conclude that Communist China was the model of antiauthoritarian and dare I say it, “libertarian” direct democracy... The least one could say is that there is a certain confusion and a great deal of naivety in Sartre’s mind...

Addressing Victor, Sartre lists the points he shares with him: “You only use legality to piss off the bourgeoisie”. “There is also, with you, the tendency - which I approve of - to give yourselves (...) unstable institutions, that is to say, institutions which include in themselves the possibility of being dissolved, when the situation changes.”

But the aim of anarchism has never been to give itself unstable institutions, despite the opposition of the state. Sartre concludes his list of points of satisfaction by saying: “I am happy with your relations with me.” By this he means that he appreciates that the Maoists consult him when they want to undertake an action: “you take great care

² Editions Gallimard, 1974, p. 26.

³ “Des moulins a vent?” *Le Monde*, 23 juillet 1971,

<https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1971/07/23/des-moulins-a-vent>
1819218.html

2453289

to always ask me, before involving me in an action, if I agree with it..." (...) "For these actions, I am happy to be consulted by you." (...) "For these various reasons, I believe I see in you, and not only in you but in the anti-hierarchical and libertarian movement, the announcement of a new politics, and the roots of the new men who will make it." (p. 77)

I would add that at the same time, in the mid-1970s, I and some comrades were discussing with Marxist-Leninists militants who told us, without laughing, that when the revolution broke out, we anarchists would be the first to be shot. (Probably with anti-authoritarian bullets and anti-hierarchical guns.)

Commenting on his political itinerary, Sartre writes:

"Before May '68, in France, there was another left, born in part from the JC [*Jeunesses communistes — Communist Youth*], with which I had already done some work. There were two attitudes in it: the Mao attitude, and the Italian attitude. For my part, I didn't bother to choose between the two. Since they both were against the P.C.F. [*French Communist Party*], I naively thought that they could be brought together. The pro-Italianism disappeared, by inefficiency. It is the other one that has triumphed. But, at the beginning, my friendship for the Italians troubled me. And then, I had known the attitude of the Maoists through the Base Committees. These were committees that wanted to help Vietnam.

I was connected with some of them, Puig [*Puig Antich*] was one of them. *At the time, they represented for me the first appearance of the anti-hierarchical and libertarian movement that was to break out in May.*" [My emphasis.]⁴

Salvador Puig Antich was a Catalan libertarian member of the MIL (Movimiento Iberico de Liberacion) who was executed by Franco in 1974. By saying that he was in contact with Puig Antich, who represented the "anti-hierarchical libertarian movement", Sartre is only making an observation; *he is absolutely not saying that he adheres to it.*

Sartre knows that he will not see the revolution, that he will at best only see the beginning of it. He comments:

"It is enough that I ally myself with you [*the Maoists*] to do as well as possible the part of the trip that falls to me. In another sense, it is my business to know what to expect from an action, since we are acting together. From this point of view, I don't think that the meeting with the Maos changed me much. What has changed me, on the other hand, is what I see reappearing under new aspects: old things that I believed in as a teenager - moralism, for example - that I renounced in the name of realism when I

⁴ "On a raison de se revolter", p. 62.

began to work a little with the communists, and which I now find again in the anti-hierarchical and libertarian movement.” (p. 78)

We understand that the “anti-hierarchical and libertarian movement” is a ready-made formula designating a shapeless aggregate of protesters against the established order which has not much to do with anarchism.

On page 100 of the debate, Sartre returns to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, of which he says it was above all a challenge which said: “incorporate me into Marxism, and there will be a first beginning of an attempt to fill the original void of Marxism”. This clearly shows that he places himself in a perspective of revision of Marxism. To accomplish this goal, Sartre believed he “discovered the possibility in the works of Mao: not in the Little Red Book, but in the complete works.” This is a far cry from anarchism.

Sartre contrasts the method of Soviet Marxism, based on determinism, with that of Mao, which would be “dialectical”. If you believe in determinism, he says, “you have no way of explaining the anti-hierarchical and libertarian current that we have observed in various sectors of the French population.” (p. 100) If you are a determinist, you have no reason to claim freedom, he adds: you are necessarily conditioned. Clearly Sartre is unaware that this question was raised by Bakunin a hundred years earlier.

For the Russian revolutionary, freedom and determinism are not opposed: “freedom is the knowledge of necessity, says Bakunin”⁵. freedom and Will can only be understood within the limits of nature and its laws:

“Man’s freedom consists solely in this, that he obeys natural laws because he has recognised them as such himself, and not because they have been externally imposed on him by any foreign will, divine or human, collective or individual.”⁶

Neither Proudhon nor Bakunin evacuate a reflection on the individual: but it is a reflection which situates it in society. This society can be oppressive and the individual can then legitimately determine his methods of resistance. Bakunin says that it is much more difficult to resist society than to resist the state. Proudhon and Bakunin say that society is a condition of freedom - a freedom that must certainly be conquered. For Bakunin, freedom is the consciousness of necessity; Hegel says that “freedom has necessity as its presupposition”. With Bakunin, we always come back to Hegel.

To evaluate Sartre’s presumed anarchism, we would have to note all the passages in which he evokes it (under the heading of “libertarian”) and then synthesise them - a very tedious task. Let us content ourselves with “On a raison de se revolter”: towards the end of the text, Victor asks him if there is not “a danger in confusing under the

⁵ An idea which can already be found in Hegel. “freedom has necessity as its presupposition”, Hegel, *Encyclopedie des sciences philosophiques - la Science de la logique*, Vrin, p. 589.

⁶ Bakunin, *The Knuto-German Empire and the Social Revolution*.

same word 'liberty', the utopian notion of liberty linked to revolt, and then another notion which, in turn, refers to power and to power such as it is in oppressive societies". (p. 352) Sartre replies:

"I think that the two notions cannot be confused. There is the libertarian movement which manifests itself in revolt and then what it leads to, which is precisely the new form of power envisaged; it is only today that we can conceive of a new form of power which would really be freedom."

So the libertarian movement is essentially defined by revolt, not revolution, and this revolt leads to a new form of power.

In "On a raison de se revolter", the word "libertarian" is almost systematically associated, like a litany, with "anti-hierarchy" without any precision ever being given on the political content of this current. We remain in the most complete obscurity. On the other hand, we find many passages where Sartre clearly displays his closeness to Maoism, to the point of declaring himself "very happy" with it.

We have some reasons to conclude that his inclination is unambiguously towards Maoism, not anarchism.

About dialectics

In the anarchist movement, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, published in 1960, is clearly a promotion of Marxist ideas, and this is how Sartre and most people saw it: it is nothing but a Marxist critique of soviet Marxism. The *Critique*, Sartre said in 1975, “is a work written against the communists, while being Marxist.” “It is not a question of rejecting Marxism in the name of a third way or an idealist humanism, but of reclaiming man within Marxism”, writes Sartre in “Questions of Method”, in the introduction to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The reader of the *Critique* sees in it nothing more than a questioning of the relationship between Sartre and Marxism. So why question what Sartre himself says?

“Before 1968, the communist movement represented, it seemed, the whole of the left, so that breaking with the Party created a kind of exile. When you were cut off from that left, you either went to the right, as those who went to the socialists did, or you remained in a kind of waiting game, and the only thing left to do was to try to think to the end what the communists refused to let us think.

“Writing the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was for me a way of settling accounts with my own thinking outside the action on thinking exercised by the Communist Party. The *Critique* is a work written against the communists, while being Marxist. I considered that true Marxism was completely twisted, distorted by the communists.”¹

“My criticisms are not directed at [Marx] but at the Marxist scholasticism of 1949. Or, if you like, at Marx, through Stalinist neo-Marxism” says Sartre again.² Finally, when Sartre writes in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: “Everything we have established in ‘Questions of Method’ derives from our agreement in principle with historical materialism”, it is hard to doubt his (albeit critical) adherence to Marxism.

There is a certain contradiction in claiming that the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is an anarchist work, or one with an anarchist flavour, even though its author clearly declares himself a Marxist. It is not surprising, therefore, that anarchists did not show enthusiasm for Sartre’s book: because of their distrust of dialectics, they did

¹ Quoted by Louis Pinto, “Un heritage devenu projet: la philosophie sociale de Sartre”, in *Revue d’Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 2008/1 (n° 18). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-histoire-des-sciences-humaines-2008-1-page-115.htm>

² J.-P. Sartre, *Materialisme et revolution*, p. 135.

not embrace Sartre's project, expressed in *Materialism and Revolution* and continued in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, to remedy the sclerosis of Marxism. As Bertell Ollman says, "dialectics as such explains nothing, proves nothing, predicts nothing and is the cause of nothing."³ Anarchists were not enthusiastic about revising Marxism,

Critique of Dialectical Reason contains, as a preface, an article published in 1957, entitled "Questions de methode" (Questions of Method), originally intended for a Polish journal, in which he affirms his Marxism - one can easily imagine that at that time a Polish journal would never have published an article showing even a hint of sympathy for anarchism. Significantly, the original title of "Questions of Method" was "Marxism and Existentialism".

In this article, Sartre considers that historical materialism provides the only relevant interpretation of history, but that existentialism represents the only concrete approach to reality. This is a major contradiction, due to the fact that, according to Sartre, "Marxism has stopped" (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*).

Vincent Charbonnier comments on this "stoppage" of Marxism:

"As a consequent Marxist, Sartre insists on the historical and historically determined character of the sclerosis of Marxism, which, he specifies, does not correspond 'to a normal ageing' and is 'produced by a particular type of world situation' which does not exhaust it.

"This sclerosis results in particular from the fact that the 'war of position(s)', which followed the ebb of the revolutionary wave in Europe from the mid-1920s onwards, concomitantly with the end of counter-revolution in the USSR, was crystallised in the practical slogan of 'building socialism in one country' and, on the theoretical level, by the codification of a doctrine, the Dia-Mat, unifying nature and history with a series of 'dialectical laws'.

"Marxism came to a halt precisely because this philosophy 'wants to change the world', because it 'is and wants to be practical', but a real split took place within it, between theory on one side and praxis on the other. Its most disastrous consequence lies in the transformation of the latter into 'empiricism without principles' and of the former into 'pure and fixed knowledge': the 'open' concepts of Marxism have become 'closed' and 'are no longer keys, interpretative schemes' but are posited 'for themselves as already totalised knowledge'."⁴

But it is not a question for Sartre of fundamentally questioning Marxism: the responsibility for this sclerosis lies with the Soviet regime and with some Marxist intel-

³ Bertell Ollman, *La dialectique mise en œuvre. Le processus d'abstraction dans la méthode de Marx*, tr. fr. Paule Ollman, Paris, Syllepses, 2005, p. 23.

⁴ Vincent Charbonnier, "Sartre et Lukacs: des marxismes contradictoires?", in *Sartre et le marxisme*, Emmanuel Barot (Ed.) La Dispute (2011).

lectuals (Engels, Lukacs⁵, Roger Garaudy [another “crapule stalinienne” who ended up as a negationist]), who tend to take the results of Marxism for truths. Engels imagines that there is a “dialectic of nature” which Sartre finds aberrant. Sartre criticised Engels for not starting with nature in order to discover a possible “dialectic” but for starting with presuppositions in the belief that he would discover a “dialectic” in nature. On this point anarchists are in *complete agreement* with Sartre, but this does not make him an anarchist.

In his conclusion to “Questions of Method”, Sartre clearly formulates that existentialism “does not question anything, except a mechanistic determinism which is precisely not Marxist and which has been introduced from outside into this total philosophy.” Here again, anarchists would totally agree with him.

Bakunin had expressed the same reservations about Marx’s theory of history, without ever questioning the materialist conception: he simply criticised the mechanistic character of this conception. Unfortunately, he based his opinion on what he could have known about Marx’s thought during his lifetime, most of whose writings were not published. In reality Marx agreed with him. An anecdote illustrates this perfectly.

The Marxism to which many of Marx’s readers clung like a lifeline was a caricature of Marxism, a *Reader’s Digest* Marxism. His son-in-law, Lafargue, had written a book, *Karl Marx’s Economic* determinism, in which one finds statements such as: “Morality, as well as the other phenomena of human activity, falls under the law of economic determinism formulated by Marx”, etc. It was in connection with this book that Marx said, “If this is Marxism, I, Karl Marx, am not a Marxist.”

This anecdote was echoed twenty years later by Engels, who complained about people who read his friend’s work superficially: “What is called ‘Marxism’ in France is certainly a very special article, so much so that Marx said to Lafargue: ‘What is certain is that I am not a Marxist’”.⁶

The meaning of Marx’s sentence has often been distorted. It has been said that he did not want to give credence to the idea that he was a dogmatist or sectarian. This is not exactly the case: he wanted to distance himself from interpretations that reduced his thought to a kind of well-oiled machine. Marx did not say that he was not a “Marxist”, he said that the mechanistic Marxism popularised during his lifetime was not Marxism. This is not the same thing... In fact, Marxism had “stopped” long before Sartre had noticed it.

⁵ For Georg Lukacs, existentialism is a bourgeois philosophy in disguise. Between idealism and materialism, the bourgeoisie has invented a third path, existentialism, which nevertheless remains idealism. Existentialism represents the discourse of the petty bourgeoisie or bourgeoisie.

⁶ Engels to Bernstein 2-3 November 1882. Marxism remained unknown in France until about 1900. See a letter written by Engels to his friend C. Schmidt, 5 August 1890 : “...Moritzchen is a dangerous friend. The materialist conception of history now also has many such friends, who use it as an excuse not to study history. Thus Marx said of the French ‘Marxists’ of the late 1870s: ‘All I know is that I am not a Marxist.’”

Already in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's individual is a social being, but limited to interpersonal relations. In *Critique of the dialectical reason* he goes further: groups, classes, organizations, institutions, and the rest of what we might call "society" are the main concerns of the text. Does this make Sartre more in line with the thinking of Proudhon, Bakunin and other anarchists? In my opinion, the fact that Sartre wants to situate man in his social environment - his class⁷ - and in the conflicts generated by the mode of production and the relations of production places him both within the framework of Marxism *and* anarchism. It places him within the framework of *socialism*, generically speaking.

Convergences between Sartre's thought and anarchism can also be found on their opposition to "dialectical materialism" - a concept totally rejected by anarchism⁸: The concept of "dialectical materialism" has no more sense than "dialectical spiritualism". As for "historical materialism", it is worth pointing out that Marx never uses this expression. There is thus within the Marxist current a kind of obsessive fixation on this term which ends up paralysing all critical reflection⁹. Marx advocates a "materialist conception of history", which anarchists advocate just as well, an expression which in no way contradicts anarchist thought, subject to certain reservations formulated by Bakunin, with which Marx and Engels would eventually agree.

The fetishism of the "dialectic" is absent in Marx. In fact, when we reduce to the essentials the whole post-Marxist rigmarole on the question, the term "dialectic" is used simply to designate a process which evolves and transforms, or phenomena which interact. And they add "materialist" to make it sound more "scientific".

Henri Lefebvre writes that "In the 1844 *Manuscript*, the *German Ideology* and all the other writings of this period, Hegel's *Logic* is treated with the utmost contempt. Marx and Engels are unsparing in their attacks on this 'esoteric history of the abstract mind', alien to living men, whose elect is the philosopher and whose organ is philosophy." The *Poverty of Philosophy* is full of passages hostile towards Hegel's method, but in actual fact it is not Hegel that Marx is attacking but Proudhon. In 1846, Proudhon published his *System of Economic Contradictions*, the subtitle of which was "Philosophy of Misery". When he undertook this work, Proudhon was faced with a problem: how to explain the mechanisms of the capitalist system. Naturally, he began by attempting a historical method, but this was not appropriate: to make a chronology is not to expose a mode of operation. So he began to use categories whose logical series would consti-

⁷ In *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre maintains his initial concerns expressed in *Being and Nothingness*: "the object of existentialism (...) is the singular man in the social field, in his class, in the midst of collective objects and other singular men".

⁸ A scientist with a solid training in mathematics, Kropotkin was not inclined to enjoy the delights of dialectics, Hegelian or Marxist, and totally rejected the "dialectical method" in the name of "the inductive-deductive method of natural sciences". The "dialectic" is simply assimilated to the metaphysics. (*Modern science and anarchism*.)

⁹ The same thing could be said with the notion of "dictatorship of the proletariat", which Marx practically never uses and which, besides, never appears as a programmatic demand.

tute a “scaffolding”, in his own words - today we would say he made a simulation of the system. He began with what he considered the fundamental category, value, and then, by a kind of deduction, he worked out the chain of categories which constitute the capitalist system: the division of labour, machinismo, competition, monopoly, etc. At that time, Marx was aiming at the same project, but, insisting on using a historical method, he found himself in a dead end and was somewhat incensed that Proudhon had anticipated him.

Marx then made a misunderstanding: obviously unable to recognise the interest of Proudhon’s work, he had persuaded himself that Proudhon had resorted to Hegelian dialectics, which he therefore began to attack furiously. He accused Proudhon of crimes of which he was perfectly innocent. In fact, *Proudhon’s originality had consisted in applying the experimental method to political economy*, and not at all in any “dialectical” method.

It is interesting to see how Lefebvre will transform the use of the experimental method - a perfectly scientific method - into a “dialectical” muddle. He writes that at the time of publication of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, “dialectical materialism did not exist, one of its essential elements, the dialectic, having been explicitly rejected.” Marx will waste years trying to find a way to expose the mechanisms of the capitalist system, without success. It was at that point that he wrote to Engels on 14 January 1858 that he had finally found the right method:

“I have been greatly helped in working out my method because, purely by chance (Freiligrath found some volumes of Hegel which had belonged to Bakunin and sent them to me as a present) I have been browsing through Hegel’s *Logic* again. When the time comes to resume this sort of work, I shall very much want to publish two or three papers which will render the rational element of the method which Hegel both discovered and turned into a mystery accessible to common sense.”¹⁰

Lefebvre comments: “From this correspondence it follows that the dialectical method was rediscovered and rehabilitated by Marx at the time when he was beginning work on the *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital*. In fact, in the 1873 afterword to *Capital* Marx explains in detail the method he employs, and what he explains is exactly what he had furiously criticised in Proudhon twenty-seven years earlier - without ever mentioning Proudhon, naturally.”¹¹

Henri Lefebvre, like all Marxist authors, presents *Capital* as a production of dialectical materialism, whereas it is a scientific work in which the experimental method is applied!

Marx had sent Bakunin a copy of Book I of *Capital*. Here is the Russian revolutionary’s account of it:

¹⁰ Quoted by Henri Lefebvre, *op. cit.* p. 70.

¹¹ Berthier, Rene, “Proudhon and the Problem of Method”, https://www.academia.edu/39264248/Proudhon_and_the_Problem_of_Method

“This work should have been translated into French long ago, for none, as far as I know, contains such a profound, such a luminous, such a scientific, such a decisive, and, if I may say so, such a mercilessly unmasking analysis of the formation of bourgeois capital and of the systematic and cruel exploitation which capital continues to exert on the labour of the proletariat. The only fault of this work, perfectly positivist, notwithstanding *La Liberte* of Brussels, - positivist in the sense that, based on a thorough study of economic facts, it admits of no other logic than the logic of facts - its only fault, I say, is to have been written, in part, but only in part, in a style that is too metaphysical and abstract, which has undoubtedly misled *La Liberte* of Brussels, and which makes it difficult to read and almost unapproachable for the majority of workers. And it is the workers in particular who should read it, however. The bourgeois will never read it, or if they do, they will not want to understand it, and if they do understand it, they will never speak of it; this work being nothing other than a death sentence, scientifically motivated and irrevocably pronounced, not against them as individuals, but against their class.”¹²

So *Capital* is, according to Bakunin, the death sentence of the bourgeoisie, “scientifically motivated”.

Indeed, it should be remembered that the term “scientific socialism” was first used by Proudhon in 1840 in his *First Memoir on Property* [What is Property?]. It is not certain that Marx first used the expression in the same sense. Indeed, at the same time, the word “science” was being used again and again in German universities. Didn’t the philosopher Hegel write the *Science of Logic*? But in German universities the word “science” did not have the same meaning as it has today. Thus, at the end of his first year of law school¹³, Marx wrote to his father about a philosophy of law that he had attempted: “...I was able to realise, once again, that I would not get by without philosophy. I could therefore throw myself into the arms of this science in complete peace, and I wrote a new fundamental metaphysical system”.¹⁴ This is not a misuse of the word by Marx. In another passage of the quoted letter he says: “What drives Democritus away is on the one hand the desire to learn, which leaves him neither cease nor desist, and on the other hand the fact that he does not find satisfaction in true, i.e. philosophical, science.” So true science is philosophy. Conversely, when the young

¹² Bakounine, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, ffivres, Champ libre, VIII, 357.

¹³ Marx did not study philosophy at university but law, from which he obtained his PhD *in absentia*, i.e. without defending his thesis. He acquired notions of philosophy (Hegelian in particular) only because at that time one could not study anything in German universities without being immersed in philosophy. Bakunin, on the other hand, did study philosophy at the same time, particularly under the aegis of a disciple of Hegel, Werder. His mastery of the Hegelian dialectic was recognised by everyone around him. When he became an anarchist in 1868, he never spoke of dialectics, but evoked Hegel with respect and a certain affection.

¹⁴ Letter, 10 November 1837.

Marx wants to designate science, in the sense that we understand it today, he uses another expression: We thus learn that, since philosophy did not satisfy Democritus, he “threw himself into the arms of *positive knowledge*”

These details no doubt shed new light on the notion of “scientific socialism” employed by Marx and Engels. It is a notion directly inherited from German philosophy, and not from scientific conceptions understood in the sense of “positive knowledge”. The “scientific socialism” of Marx and Engels is the application, to the study of the social sphere, of philosophical methods much more than a scientific approach in the sense that it can have today. Thus, when Marx or Engels criticise a book on economics, they give a disproportionate place to the criticism of the author’s philosophy (Duhring or Proudhon). This is because if there is a flaw in the philosophical system (and one always finds one, if one looks hard enough) the work is no longer “scientific”.

In general, Marx’s scientific knowledge was highly questionable. In describing the evils of excessive labour, he explains in *Capital* (i.e. in 1867) that continuous and uniform labour weakens the momentum and “tension of animal spirits” (*die Spann und Schwungkraft der Lebensgeister*). To speak of “animal spirits” in 1867 is to be far behind the knowledge of his time, and is shocking in a work that claims to be scientific. Indeed, Claude Bernard had published his *Introduction to the Study of the Experimental Method* two years earlier, and his *Researches* fourteen years earlier, and since then it has been said that the body’s energy works through the combustion of sugar, in the same way that the steam engine works through the combustion of coal. No doubt, if Marx had known this, he would not have failed to note the analogy.

The question of dialectics did not have, during Bakunin’s and Marx’s lifetime, the importance that it took on later. Besides, Marx used the term “dialectic” only belatedly in a positive sense. In *German Ideology*, written in 1846, the book in which Marx and Engels are said to have developed the foundations of their thought for the first time, we find neither the expression “historical materialism”, nor the word “dialectic” - except, of course, in the innumerable introductions, commentaries, prefaces and notes by the editors intended to enlighten the reader on concepts that Marx would have invented but which they he never named.

There is a curious debate among scholars about the influence of the Hegelian dialectic on Marx. In *Dialectical Materialism*, Henri Lefebvre points out that “We have to wait until the year 1858 to find the Hegelian dialectic being mentioned for the first time non-pejoratively.”¹⁵

It is not without a certain perverse satisfaction that anarchists learn that it is thanks to Bakunin that Marx has worked out his method...

Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, states that “Marx begins with dialectical thought: it is all in this famous principle that one cannot destroy philosophy without realizing

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 70. Franz Jakubowski also noted that “In his [Marx’s] world, we only find a multitude of scattered remarks about Hegel.” (*Les superstructures ideologiques dans la conception materialiste de l’histoire*, EDI, p. 77.)

it”¹⁶. We can therefore only note the extreme confusion that exists on the question of Marx’s method, due in large part to the fact that Marx himself never clearly explained himself on this matter. The authors who have dealt with this question seem unable to agree on the question, a fact that constitutes a serious handicap in terms of credibility for a method that claims to be scientific.

One naturally concludes that the only way to resolve this contradiction is to consider that the solutions offered by the various authors who have examined this question are only a mere reflect of the political stakes that their own interpretation of the Marxist method represents for them.

It is only in 1873, in the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, that Marx mentions the dialectical content of his method.¹⁷ As for Engels, “historical materialism” does not appear in significant works such as the *Anti-Duhring*, of which *Utopian Socialism and Scientific Socialism* is an extract. It does, however, appear in the 1892 preface to the English edition of the text. By this time, Marx was dead.

The expressions “dialectical materialism” and “materialist dialectic” never appear in Marx’s writings. Engels uses the term only in 1886 in his *Ludwig Feuerbach...* and the expression is taken up by Dietzgen in 1887.¹⁸ It is not my purpose to trace the genesis of the use of these terms, but it is clear that they are apocryphal creations attributed without examination to Marx, and it is not known what his opinion on the matter would have been. In any case, he would probably have been opposed to the use of the expressions “materialist dialectic”, or “dialectical materialism”, which is a contradiction in terms that makes no more sense than the expression “materialist spiritualism” or “spiritualist materialism”. On this point Lucio Colletti comments: “what Engels and all of ‘dialectical materialism’ after him present as the highest and most developed form of materialism is none other than absolute idealism”¹⁹: “‘dialectical materialism’ is simply an idealism unaware of its own nature.”²⁰

“The ‘dialectic of matter’, by which the finite becomes ideal and cancels itself out, is confused with the observation and ‘scientific verification’ of processes and changes that take place under their own force and at the level of simple matter of fact. There is no need to describe the extent to which this ‘mistake’ has affected and weighed upon the development of theoretical Marxism.”²¹

Colletti concludes by saying that the philosophical critique of dialectical materialism “has been rendered useless by the critique of time and events”: “‘Dialectical materialism’,

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, Gallimard, 1955, p. 84.

¹⁷ On the divergences between Marx and Proudhon regarding “method”, see: Rene Berthier, “Proudhon and the Problem of Method”,

https://www.academia.edu/39264248/Proudhon_and_the_Problem_of_Method

¹⁸ Pascal Charbonnat, *Histoire des philosophies materialistes*, Paris, Syllepse, 2007, p. 462-463.

¹⁹ Lucio Colletti, *Hegel and Marx*, NLB 1973, p. 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²¹ Lucio Colletti, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

after surviving for many decades only as a ‘state philosophy’, is by now so far gone in decline that every day it becomes more difficult to recognize its adherents.”²²

The real instigator of the transformation of Marx’s doctrine into a vast deterministic mechanics is Engels, especially in his *Anti-Duhring* where he tries to convert Marxism into a natural science. Kautsky, in turn, relied on Engels’ work to interpret Marxism as biological and naturalistic evolutionism. The sociologist Pierre Ansart writes about this in *Marx et l’anarchisme* (Marx and Anarchism): “Engels’ attempt to reduce Marx’s historical method to a naturalist model cannot therefore be accepted. The historical event is not the result of a ‘parallelogram of forces’ and the elements of a conjuncture are not reducible to the physical forces at work.”²³ The “parallelogram of forces” is mentioned by Engels in a letter to J. Bloch of 21 September 1890.

Anarchist thought is not exempt from mechanistic temptations either, as in the case of Kropotkin, who was criticised for this by Errico Malatesta. Kropotkin said: “Anarchism is a conception of the universe based on the mechanical interpenetration of phenomena embracing the whole of nature, including life in society”.²⁴ For Kropotkin, nature, of which society is only an expression, is subject to a general determinism and everything that was, is and will be “had to, must and will have to happen by a fatal chain of causes and effects of a mechanical nature, which leave no possibility of variation”.²⁵ Malatesta, who disputes Kropotkin’s view, comments: “Kropotkin professed the materialist philosophy that prevailed among the scholars of the second half of the nineteenth century: Moleschott, Buchner, Vogt, and consequently his conception of the universe was rigorously mechanical.” “He had a systematic temperament that urged him to explain everything by the same principle,” says Malatesta, “and he often did so at the expense of logic.” “This is why he based all his social aspirations on science; aspirations which were, according to him, only rigorously scientific deductions.” “Since, according to his philosophy, everything that happens must necessarily happen, so even the anarchist communism he desired must inevitably triumph as if it were a law of nature.”²⁶

Malatesta explains that the deterministic turn that Kropotkin gave to anarchist thought led many militants to abandon all revolutionary aspirations: “The revolution, they said, is not being made; it will happen when the time comes, and it is useless, anti-scientific and sometimes ridiculous to want to make it.” It is significant that this temptation in the libertarian movement was shared at the same time by German social democracy. Pushing to the extreme the historical determinism expounded in the

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Pierre Ansart, *Marx et l’anarchisme*, PUF, p. 520. The “parallelogram of forces » is mentioned by Engels in a letter to J. Bloch of 21 September 1890.

²⁴ Quoted by Malatesta, “Sur Kropotkine, Souvenirs et critiques d’un de ses vieux amis”, 1931.

²⁵ Rene Berthier, “Kropotkine: une tentative d’approche scientifique de l’anarchisme” [Kropotkin: an attempt at a scientific approach to anarchism], <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article179>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

theoretical part of the *Communist Manifesto*²⁷, which seems to make history escape from the will of men, the German socialists had developed the idea that socialism was an ineluctable process. Of course, they too were shielding themselves behind a “scientific” vision of history. However, the real culprit in the transformation of Marx’s doctrine into a vast deterministic mechanics is Engels, especially in his *Anti-Duhring* where he tries to convert Marxism into a natural science. Kautsky, in turn, relied on Engels’ work to interpret Marxism as biological and naturalistic evolutionism.

Although Marx’s texts on questions of method are few, the fetishism of method is one of the characteristics of the movement that claims to be his. This fetishism reaches its zenith in the kind of argumentation Lucaks develops when he asserts that historical materialism has “a value far higher than that of a mere method of scientific research”. It is one of the most important means of struggle of the proletariat, which “receives its sharpest weapon from the hands of true science, from the clear vision of reality in view of action”²⁸. Especially since dialectic is not only established as a method of knowledge, but as an expression of reality itself.

There is undoubtedly a convergence between the great anarchist thinkers who are all in favour of the experimental method, and Sartre on the rejection of “dialectical materialism”²⁹.

Proudhon, who had not completely digested the lessons of Hegelian dialectics given to him by Karl Marx, Karl Grun and Bakunin, developed a rather confused “serial dialectic”: but when it comes to serious matters, the great anarchist authors, *including Proudhon*, stick very explicitly to the experimental method. Bakunin, whose Hegelian training was far superior to Marx’s, never referred to dialectics after he had abandoned philosophy in 1842, but to “scientific materialism”, i.e. to the experimental method, as does Kropotkin, who was a genuine scientist. No major scientific discovery was ever made through any “dialectic”.³⁰

There is, however, a surprising correlation between Sartre and Bakunin on one point. Sartre considers that human history is determined by the social conditions of the time, but he also says that man by his actions determines himself and history. Now Bakunin, one century earlier, in 1874, had said exactly the same thing. He says indeed that he agrees with Marx that the economic factor, the material conditions, determine the existence of men. But he adds a restriction: the primacy of the economic determinations in the explanation of historical phenomena, as real as it is, is only

²⁷ Mais que, curieusement, on ne retrouve pas dans la seconde partie...

²⁸ Georg Lukacs, *Histoire et conscience de classe*. Les classiques des sciences sociales, Quebec, p. 282.

²⁹ On the debate concerning Bakunin’s “method”, see: Rene Berthier. “Teoria Polftica e Metodo de Analise no Pensamento de Bakunin — Entrevista a Felipe Correa”, <https://ithanarquista.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/rene-berthier-teoria-politica-e-metodo-de-analise-no-pensamento-de-bakunin-entrevista/> (Political Theory and Analytical Method in Bakunin’s Thought - Interview with Felipe Correa)

³⁰ See: Rene Berthier, “On Dialectics”, transl. Jesse Cohn, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article868>

relative and the political, juridical, ideological facts, once given, can “in their turn become causes productive of new facts.”³¹

This reservation is not found in the corpus of Marxism as it has survived, but it is found in the correspondence of Marx and Engels. In a letter to Joseph Bloch of September 21, 1890, Engels tells us that “the economic situation is the basis, but the various factors of the superstructure - political forms (...), constitutions (...), political, philosophical and legal theories, religious views”, etc., “also have a bearing on the course of the historical struggles of which, in many cases, they largely determine the *form*.”³² This does not sound like the Marxism taught in communist training schools.

Marx himself had spoken out against deterministic interpretations of his thought, but always in his correspondence: He thus comes to recognize that the action of the masses contains a share of contingency and irrationality. History, he says in a letter to Kugelmann, “would be of a very mystical nature if ‘accidents’ played no part.”³³

The idea that material determinations - not strictly *economic* - are preponderant but not unique, defended by anarchist thinkers, has nothing specifically “anarchist” about it, it is *simple common sense*. The fact that Sartre subscribes to this idea does not make him an anarchist, it proves that he had much more common sense than most Parisian armchair Marxists of his time.

Sartre was even less recognized as an “anarchist” by the French anarchists of the time when, after having flirted with the communists in Moscow, he rallied to those in Beijing - which is not particularly consistent with libertarian behaviour. Although he declared that this support was only circumstantial, the anarchists did not make the difference. Sartre was even the editor of no less than three Maoist publications, *La Cause du Peuple*, *J’Accuse and Tout!* Sartre’s Maoist episode was undoubtedly a stage and a rite of passage that allowed him to escape the political structures of orthodox Marxism, but it was by no means a rejection of Marxism as such.

To get into the mood of the post-68 period, the Gallimard publishing house, which had been publishing Sartre since the 1930s, commissioned him to direct a new collection, “La France sauvage” [Savage France]. The collection opened with a volume of political conversations between Sartre, Pierre Victor and Philippe Gavi, a journalist from the daily newspaper *Liberation* (of which Sartre was one of the founders), published under the title, “On a raison de se revolté” (We are right to revolt). Sartre begins by recapitulating his political itinerary: his student apolitism in the 1930s, his short-lived resistance activities during the German occupation³⁴, his status as a fellow

³¹ Bakunin, *L’Empire Knouto-germanique*, ffivres, editions Champ libre, t. VIII, p. 206.

³² MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 49, pp. 34-35.

³³ MECW Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 44 Letter to Kugelmann, April 17, 1871, p. 138.

³⁴ Sartre’s action of resistance under the German occupation is strongly questioned. See: Ingrid Galster “Resistance intellectuelle et soutien passif de Vichy? Reflexions sur un paradoxe dans l’itineraire de Jean-Paul Sartre.’ In “Les intellectuels et l’Occupation, 1940-1944’ (2004), (“Intellectual resistance and passive support of Vichy? Reflections on a paradox in the itinerary of Jean-Paul Sartre.’ In “Intellectuals and the Occupation, 1940-1944’)

traveller in the Communist Party in the early 1950s, and his gradual disillusionment with orthodox Marxism in the 1960s. But he does not speak about anarchism, which never appears in the text. The word “libertarian” comes once under the pen of Sartre in the introduction, in an extremely general sense: he says that it is necessary “to pass from a kind of necessity of the struggle to the idea of libertarian form in connection with the present struggles”. And that’s all. I don’t think that this is enough to make Sartre an “anarchist”.

According to the philosopher Michel Onfray, Gilbert Joseph, a former Resistance fighter, had contacted Henri Nogueres, a historian who had published a five-volume history of the Resistance. Nogueres told him that “in twenty years of work and research on the history of the Resistance in France, I have never met Sartre or Beauvoir”.³⁵

Here is what Marc Lebiez writes of Sartre’s attitude during the war:

“Locked perhaps in a fundamentally apolitical philosophy, Sartre understood Husserl early on but remained blind to the Nazi peril. Prisoner of war - like Althusser and Levinas, who remained in the Stalag for the duration of the war - he found a way to return to Paris to teach quietly while publishing works which, if they had nothing collaborationist about them, did little harm to the occupier and his henchmen. Meanwhile, Aron was in London, which was obviously more noble. Aware, no doubt, of his less than glorious attitude during the Occupation, Sartre became involved in a political action after the Liberation that could be considered frenetic and confused.”³⁶

It must be understood that all French political life after the war was determined by the attitude that the players in the political game had adopted during the war. The qualification of “veteran of the resistance” was a major advantage for success in politics. Many of them acquired this qualification because after the Allied landing in Normandy they had “come to the rescue of the victory” as we say in French, that is, after declaring themselves against the Germans when the Allied victory was assured. Many of them had remained inactive during the war, or had actively devoted themselves to the black market. The leader of the resistance in the area of Sainte-Mere-Eglise, who was the dean of my college in Normandy, told me that at the end of the war he saw men coming to him with suitcases full of banknotes in order to obtain a document attesting that they had been in the resistance. No need to say they were vigorously kicked out, but

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³⁵ Michel Onfray, “Sartre, une resistance fictive et une collaboration réelle”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQtVLHczws4>

³⁶ Marc Lebiez, “Momifier sartre”,

<https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2019/01/01/momifier-sartre/>

how many did obtain this document? This impregnation of the “spirit of resistance” lasted a long time, because even in the early 2000s, strike movements in the press demanded the respect of commitments taken by the State and the employers after the Liberation.³⁷

Therefore, we can assume that Sartre’s frenzy of commitments to all kinds of causes after the Liberation was perhaps a way of exorcising his attitude during the war, which in itself had not been condemnable but was anything but glorious.

By the early 1950s, Sartre had become a kind of guru of all-out contestation in the Western world. But from the 1960s onwards he seemed to have lost interest in his work. His concern was no longer to write books, but to protest: he allowed himself to be “positively consumed by this commitment”, as Pierre de Boisdeffre puts it.³⁸

³⁷ These agreements negotiated at the Liberation consisted not only of guaranteeing press freedom but also press plurality (which does not necessarily go together). It was above all about *political* plurality. A system of equalisation funded by the mainstream press owners was established to support newspapers of opinion that were not strong enough. Naturally, these agreements were mainly aimed at supporting the press of the Communist party, which had played a significant role after the German invasion of Russia in 1941, but not only. By the 2000s, the Communist Party no longer had the balance of power, and the enthusiasm of media owners to support the press publishing opinions other than their own had cooled considerably. This equalisation system also benefited the anarchist press, which was able to publish a weekly until the distribution rates of the press rose to such a level that this became impossible.

³⁸ *Loc. cit.*

Pragmatism

In a way, Sartre's political choices were guided by pragmatism. He approached the organisations likely to act most effectively. In the five-and-a-half hour interview he gave to Michel Contat in 1975, the interviewer, speaking of the aftermath of the war, commented: "There was in you a desire for a real efficiency that you could not find anywhere else but with the communists". Sartre replies: "Yes, there were no leftists". Let us note that he does not say that there were no anarchists. Sartre adds: "There was Socialisme ou Barbarie, for example, which was no big deal"¹.

Curiously, Sartre equates Socialisme ou Barbarie with a libertarian group, which it was not at all. This suggests that his knowledge of anarchism was very sketchy. Indeed, the group was formed in 1946 within the Internationalist Communist Party, a Trotskyist organisation. The group left the ICP in 1948 and from 1949 published the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which lasted until 1965. The group was joined in 1951 by one of the two tendencies of the French Fraction of the International Communist Left (FFGCI), including some members of the pre-war Communist Union. As we see, nothing anarchist in it. Sartre always refused to give any political or theoretical credit to Socialisme ou Barbarie.²

Let us continue. In "Sartre's anarchist political philosophy - a draft for a diverse society?", Alfred Betschart discusses two occasions when Sartre claimed to be an anarchist. These are statements made in interviews for Spanish- language publications, at a time when the Spanish anarcho-sindicalist movement was spectacularly expanding after Franco's death³.

The first was an interview by Juan Goytisolo for the Spanish daily paper *El Pais*.⁴ Goytisolo stresses the "revival of the libertarian movement" in Spain and asks Sartre:

¹ In French: "Mais ce n'était qu'un petit machin de rien du tout!". "Sartre auto-portrait a 70 ans. Entretien avec Michel Contat, 1975". This is around the 4 hour 50 minute mark of the recording. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjIrPX0JNlY>

"...that organization was only a little nothing!" translation from]]Alexandre Feron's "Sartre vs. Lefort: The meaning of proletarian experience" <https://www.caim-int.info/journal-of-the-ciph-2019-2-page-65.htm#no1>

² This group contributed to the theoretical training of a whole generation of baby boomers, including me.

³ This expansion did not last long; after a short period of exaltation the movement fell back, but it did not disappear: today there are two organisations claiming to be anarcho-sindicalists, with a total membership of almost 200,000.

⁴ "Conversacion con Jean-Paul Sartre", Juan Goytisolo, *El Pais. Arte y Pensamiento*, 11.6.1978, <https://sartre.ch/goytisolo>

“Where do you stand today with regard to anarchism and what do you see as its current prospects?” Sartre answers:

“I think anarchism is one of the forces that can build the socialism of tomorrow. Personally, I have always considered myself an anarchist; not exactly like anarchists who have a programme, a way of thinking and working out their ideas within the framework of an organisation. The reason I understand anarchism is because I have always rejected power and, in particular, the action of governmental power over myself. I don’t want a higher authority to force me to think or do certain things. I think it is for me to determine what I should do, why I should do it and when I should do it. So I consider myself to be a profound anarchist. If I try to summarise my political ideas on Power and freedom, they go in this direction. I have always been sympathetic to anarchist thinkers, even if I believe that they have not always dealt with the problems as they were exactly posed.”

All this looks an awful lot like what is called “individualist anarchism”.

I think that if all the people who have said “I’ve always been an anarchist” had really been anarchists, humanity would have made a great leap forward.

Another testimony of Sartre’s commitment to anarchism is an interview conducted by Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Mario Casanas and Alfredo Gomez- Muller on November 1, 1979⁵. The title of the interview is “Anarchy and Morality”. The interviewer starts from the idea that for Sartre anarchy is a conception of moral life. He asks:

“You have declared yourself an anarchist, i.e. a supporter of a ‘society without power’. However, it seems that the meaning of this statement has not been well understood. Could you clarify your thoughts on this matter?”

Sartre answers:

“I declare myself an anarchist because I have taken the word anarchy in its etymological sense, a society without power, without a state. Traditional anarchism has not tried to build such a society; the society that the anarchist movement has tried to build is too individualistic. But what is a society without power?”⁶

Sartre’s adhesion to anarchism is extremely vague, and it is an adhesion to an extremely vague anarchism. He says that he distances himself from anarchists who have a program or who militate in an organization - but then what kind of anarchism

⁵ The French original was published in *Concordia* 1 [1982] 7-10]

⁶ “Jean-Paul Sartre, Anarquía y moral”, Topologik.net, numero 5/2009, https://www.topologik.net/Jean-Paul_Sartre.htm

is left? Sartre is an “anarchist” who rejects “power”, “authority”, he does not want a higher authority which tells him what it is necessary to think or to make: it is in this way that he considers himself to be “deeply anarchist”. The anarchist for him is a person who rejects any authority exercised over him, he is not a militant who fights against the capitalist system.

Bakunin existentialist?

One of the main characteristics of Sartrean existentialism is the postulate formulated in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that “existence precedes essence”. This statement has been much talked about and has secured Sartre’s fame, but it is basically a reformulation of the usual materialist assertion that matter precedes idea, a theme that has occupied Western philosophy from Democritus in the third century BC to Feuerbach in the nineteenth, including Bakunin and Marx. It is therefore difficult to see how “existence precedes essence” can be considered particularly original. For Sartre, man arises in the world and then defines himself: there is no “constructor” that governs nature, which is in line with Bakunin’s statement that there is no “first cause”:

“Metaphysicians, as we know, are always looking for the First Cause, that is to say, for a God who creates the world. The materialists say that this cause has never existed.”¹

It is true that from this postulate Sartre developed a number of reflections on the meaning of existence: man is nothing, there is no human nature, man is only what he does, man is responsible for what he is, he is responsible for all men. All these questions have already been addressed, as we shall see. Therefore the statement “existence precedes essence” is not in itself strictly speaking constitutive of existentialism, it is an observation proper to materialist thought in a general way.

There are undoubtedly in existentialism common themes with the “traditional” anarchism to which Sartre seems to refer. I say “seems to refer” because in reality it is not clear what Sartrean anarchism, as Remley interprets it, consists of, since it refers to Proudhon and Bakunin, but at the same time it is strongly tinged with individualism, which these two authors were absolutely not. As I have said, it is not coherent to refer at the same time to authors for whom the individual cannot develop outside society and to an author for whom society is an obstacle to the development of the individual.

However the problem of the individual holds an important place in the thought of Proudhon and Bakunin because according to them social emancipation could not be achieved without the freedom and the rights of the individual being respected. For the anarchists, freedom cannot be an individual fact, it is a social question. Bakunin tells us that his freedom and that of others are linked:

¹ Bakunin, “Philosophical considerations on the Divine Phantom, the Real World and Man”. https://cras31.info/IMG/pdf/bakounine-considerations_philosophiques_sur_le_fantome_divin_le_monde_reel_et_l_homme.pdf

“I am only truly free when all the human beings around me, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of others, far from being a limit or negation of my freedom, is on the contrary the necessary condition and confirmation of it. I become truly free only through the freedom of others, so that the more free men there are around me, the deeper and wider their freedom becomes, and the wider, deeper and wider my freedom becomes.”²

This topic is also found in Sartre’s writings when he states that “I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim. Consequently, when I recognise, as entirely authentic, that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I realize that I cannot not will the freedom of others.”³

There exists in Proudhon and Bakunin a philosophy of the individual, that is to say a reflection on the place of the individual in the social world, on the genesis of human individuality, but also on its limits. The sources of the principal elements that constitute Bakunin’s philosophy of the individual must be sought first of all in certain French authors of the Enlightenment, in particular Rousseau, whose notion of social contract is perceived as the ideological foundation of the State. It is in Rousseau that Bakunin will take the elements to develop a virulent criticism of individualism, considered as a pillar of the society of exploitation, a foundation of bourgeois ideology.

The idea of the isolated individual, fought by Bakunin, could only be formed in an atomized society, or in the process of atomization. This idea, which is expressed in the Robinson Crusoe type of stories, suggests that the state of the isolated individual is natural, and appeals to a golden age located in the past, whereas it is only the product of the present history. The individual, according to Bakunin, can only develop in society, and to the “robinsonades”, he opposes the idea that men who voluntarily isolate themselves from society, like hermits, quickly become morons.

What preoccupies Bakunin from the beginning is the human individual, real, living, historical. Following Feuerbach, the left Hegelians had affirmed the materialist postulate that man is a parcel of nature. Feuerbach’s anthropology radically challenged the theocentric point of view that prevailed at the time. Bakunin recognized that the philosopher played a determining role in the criticism of Hegelian idealism, and preserved all his life a true affection for him, while considering him only as a stage in the process of overcoming Hegelianism. Like Marx, Bakunin declared that it is life that determines consciousness, not consciousness that determines life: “Life dominates thought and determines the will.”⁴ “There are, Bakunin says, no “spontaneous and pure creations of our mind.” All human representations are at the beginning only simple observations of natural or social facts. In that, Bakunin anticipates in a way on existentialism:

² Bakunin, *God and the State*.

³ *Existentialism is a humanism*.

⁴ *The Knutogermanic Empire*, Works, Champ Libre, VIII, 205-207.

“In the practical developments of humanity, as well as in science proper, the accomplished facts always precede the ideas, which proves once again that the very content of human thought, its real background, is not a spontaneous creation of the mind, but is always given to it by the reflected experience of real things.”⁵

In *Existentialism is a humanism* Sartre asks: “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.”

Man will make (produce) himself in contact with the world. But Bakunin believes that the potentiality of a given person is not the same as that of another, according to the social milieu, the environment in which that person develops. “Everything is only what it does”, says Bakunin: “its doing, its outward manifestation, its incessant and multiple action on all things which are outside of it, is the complete exposition of its nature, of its substance, or of what metaphysicians (...) call its intimate being. It can have nothing in its so-called interior which is not manifested in its exterior: in a word, its action and its being is one.”⁶ A viewpoint we also find in Sartre: “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism” (*Existentialism is a humanism*) but all this is not really original since it can already be found in Feuerbach, and before him in Hegel: “... the individual is at the same time only what he has done,” writes Hegel in the *Phenomenology*.⁷ So, the existentialist postulate that man is what he makes of himself is only a reiteration of Hegel.

For Sartre man is only an individual: “A man engages in his life, draws his figure, and outside this figure, there is nothing.”⁸ To take man as an end is then to take oneself as one’s own end!!! There is no more Marxism there than anarchism.

Bakunin was led to question the extent to which human knowledge is capable of truly grasping “human individuality” - an approach also found in Sartre. When a naturalist dissects a rabbit, the latter is a real being, it was until recently a living individuality. It has been a particular and precise rabbit. But the rabbit that emerges from the naturalist’s description is a rabbit in general, deprived of all individuality, an “inert and non-living being, not even corporeal, but an abstraction, the fixed shadow of a living being.”⁹

Certainly, says Bakunin, we are usually little interested in the individuality of rabbits. But what about human individuality (or human nature)? It is, he believes, elusive,

⁵ *The Knutogermanic Empire*, Works, Champ Libre, VIII, 206.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenologie de l’Esprit*, editions Aubier, I, p. 257.

⁸ Sartre, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*.

⁹ *The Knutogermanic Empire*, Works, Champ libre, VIII, 279.

even non-existent for science, because science can only sacrifice living and fleeting realities to their “constant shadows”:

“Science may well apply itself to life, but never embody itself in life. Because life is the immediate and living action, the movement at the same time spontaneous and fatal of the living individualities. Science is only the abstraction, always incomplete and imperfect, of this movement (...) Science is as little capable of grasping the real and living individuality of a man as that of a rabbit; consequently it can have no more interest in it than in that of a rabbit; that is to say, it is as indifferent to one as to the other.”¹⁰

Remley is right to say that according to Bakunin “science only grasps the general significance of real facts and not their material, individual elements that are rich with reality and life” (p. 221) Bakunin tells us that “science cannot escape from the sphere of abstractions”, it is “the perpetual immolation of the fleeting, transient, but real life, on the altar of eternal abstractions”. Science considers real beings only as “flesh to intellectual and social development. What does it care about the particular conditions and the fortuitous fate of Peter and James?” Precisely, since science’s own nature forces it “to ignore the existence and fate of Peter and James, it must never be allowed, either to itself or to anyone in its name, to govern Peter and James.”

Science does not ignore the principle of individuality, but they are only abstract individualities: it cannot apprehend the real and living individuals, who suffer, love, think, act. However, says Bakunin, “it is the transient, real and living individuals who make history. Abstractions have no legs to walk on, says Bakunin: they walk only when they are carried by living men.

Existentialism, as a current of thought which gives primacy to the lived and individual existence, to the freedom of Man and to his vocation to decide himself of his own existence, has thus incontestable affinities with anarchism. However, the great anarchist thinkers consider that individual freedom has limits.

Bakunin thinks that the development of the human individual is conditioned by the material circumstances that allow him to live. His theory of the individual will consist in showing that it can live and develop only in society, that there is no pure individual as an abstract category, such as the metaphysicians conceive it who place an empty concept in the place of the concrete man. It is not enough, however, to affirm that Man is at the same time part of nature and of society. Bakunin says that Society itself is a part of Nature, and that since Man modifies Nature by his work, it is Nature that modifies itself.

If individualism is one of the main targets of Bakunin’s attack against bourgeois ideology, the individual on the other hand constitutes one of the foundations of his theory of socialism. The individuality of Man can be manifested only “in the total sum

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, 280.

of his external relations or of his actions on the external world”¹¹. One cannot thus limit the definition of the individual to its physiological and psychological structure, to its description as a biological species. To obtain a representation which is not a juxtaposition of definitions but a coherent whole, it is necessary to analyse Man in his social relations, because if he is a political animal, he is also a social animal, a product of Society. There cannot be an immutable human nature, a metaphysical inner being that would be in reality a “Non-being”, as well as the inner being of the universe, God, is a Non-being too.¹²

This joins somewhat the point of view of Sartre who thinks that it is “impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature”,— a refusal which is nevertheless tempered by the admission that there is a “human universality of condition”, which is, whatever one thinks of it, a circumvented way to admit that there is in the human being something permanent. (*Existentialism is a Humanism*). As T. Storm Heter says, “Remley thinks the existential distinction between human nature and the human condition is semantic”.¹³

Bakunin, who has a solid scientific background¹⁴, tells us that “when in any order of facts, we observe that the same manner or the same process is repeated often or almost always, we call it a law of nature.¹⁵ The law of a phenomenon can be established when the repetition of the elements constituting this phenomenon systematically produce the same effect, that is when the effect never varies. Now Sartre observes that in man “what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labour and to die there”. This could well be considered as a constitutive element of “human nature”, i.e. everything that is common to mankind: “every one of us makes the absolute by breath-

¹¹ Bakounine, “*L’Empire knouto-germanique*, Champ libre, VIII, 277.

¹² *Ibid.*, 278. On the question of “human nature” anarchists are not unanimous, which Tomas Ibanez sums up neatly:

“In order to know how anarchism stands in relation to the various positions on human nature, it is probably useful to begin by mapping them in broad strokes. Even if it is true that these positions are distributed along a continuum that goes from the dogmatic affirmation of its existence to its total negation, we can nevertheless divide it into two large groups. One includes all those who defend the reality of human nature, the other includes those who deny any material existence to the referent of this concept.”

Tomas Ibanez, “La nature humaine, un concept excedentaire dans l’anarchisme” [Human nature, an excess concept in anarchism], <https://refractions.pluslom.org/spip.php?artide983>

See also: Renaud Garcia, “Nature humaine et anarchie : la pensee de Pierre Kropotkine”, These, <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00776417/document>

¹³ T. Storm Heter, “Sartre and Anarchism”, in *The Sartrean Mind*, Routledge Philosophical Minds, 2020, “p. 529.

¹⁴ When he was imprisoned after his arrest for his participation in the Dresden insurrection, Bakunin asked his friend Reichel to send him books on the following subjects: differential and integral calculus, algebraic analysis, elements of algebra, lessons on the calculation of functions, treatise on the solution of numerical equations, geometry for the use of the Polytechnic School, theory of analytical functions, treatise on analytical mechanics, treatise on mechanics, course in physics.

¹⁵ Bakounine, *Federalisme, socialisme, antitheologisme*.

ing, by eating, by sleeping or by behaving in any fashion whatsoever” (*Existentialism is a humanism*).

Man is born into a given society, into a given social environment, which is the result of the activity of previous generations who have created a socially given system of values and institutions. “Each new generation, says Bakunin, finds in its cradle a world of ideas, imaginations and feelings which is transmitted to it as a common heritage by the intellectual and moral work of all the past generations.” However, Bakunin adds, these ideas, these representations “acquire later, after they have become well established, in the manner I have just explained, in the collective consciousness of any society, this power to become in their turn producing causes of new facts.”¹⁶

Like Marx, Bakunin believes that social relations determine the prevailing social consciousness and shape the individual. Man does not bring with him any ideas when he is born; what he brings is a “natural and formal faculty, more or less important, of conceiving ideas which he finds established either in his own social milieu or in a foreign milieu, but which in one way or another puts itself in communication with him.”¹⁷ “He can then give this world of ideas a new form and extension according to his own capacities. It is in this way that man constructs himself.

“This means that no man, not even the most powerful genius, has properly any treasure of his own; but all those which he distributes with great profusion have been first borrowed by him from that same society to which he seems to give later. It may even be said that, in this respect, men of genius are precisely those who take more from society, and who, therefore, owe it more.”(*Ibid.*)

Thus, social relationships determine the prevailing social consciousness and form the individual.

Bakunin agrees with Sartre that Man does not come into the world with innate ideas, he only has potentialities of development. Man is born in society, he does not choose it. He is the product of it. He is thus subject to the natural laws which govern the social development. If for Sartre the existence of Man pre-exists to his essence, for Bakunin and the anarchists in general Society preexists to the individual. Society is in a way the last creation of nature.

Outside of society, Man would not have ceased to be an animal without word nor reason. If the individual today can develop, it is thanks to the cumulative efforts of innumerable generations. The concepts of individual, of freedom, of reason, are the products of the society. The latter is not the simple product of the individuals who compose it, it is a historical creation. The freedom of “man is conditioned by the knowledge of necessity; society pre-exists the individual, it is the condition of its

¹⁶ Bakounine, *L'Empire knouto-germanique*, Champ libre, VIII, 206.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

“development; but the revolt of the individual against society is also a condition of its
“development.

Sartre and Spain

While Sartre declares his adhesion to anarchism in interviews - statements that I consider opportunistic - it seems interesting to examine what image of anarchism he conveys in his writings. Spain was not unknown to Sartre, as he had visited it in 1931, 1932 and later in July and August 1967. There are elements in Sartre's work that could have definitively contributed to clarifying Sartre's position on anarchism; unfortunately these elements are completely absent from Remley's book.

In December 1936 a "Declaration of Republican Intellectuals on the Events in Spain" appeared in the journal *Commune*, which Sartre did not sign. The petition was clearly communist in origin, and at that time he was boasting of being an "anarchist", which is probably why he was not contacted. Sartre (and Beauvoir) soon realised that their proximity, real or superficial, to anarchism would isolate them from the milieu of Parisian left-wing intellectuals, which is of strictly no importance if you are an anarchist or syndicalist activist, but of great importance if you want to make a career and get published.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the couple immersed themselves in the drama "which for two and a half years dominated our whole life: the Spanish war".¹ In the same book, Beauvoir underlines their "political impotence", which distressed them: "We were isolated, we were nobody: nothing we could say or write in favour of the intervention would carry the slightest weight. Leaving for Spain was out of the question; nothing in our lives disposed us to this headlong rush"² The fact is that it is not clear what these *Germano-Pratin*³ intellectuals could have done in Spain during the Civil War.

Realistically, Beauvoir adds that "unless one had definite technical or political capacities, one risked playing the fly on the wall". She recalls the fate of Simone Weill, who had left asking for a rifle and was assigned to the kitchens.

It was by proxy that Sartre went to Spain: in *L'Age de raison*, "published in 1945, Mathieu, "Sartre's fictional double, meets a militant of the National Confederation of Labour, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist centre, begging in the street. The anarcho-syndicalist is not presented in the best light: "He had closeset eyes and thick lips, he smelled of alcohol", he spoke "in a wet voice" says the narrator. "Give me something,

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'age* (1960), Gallimard, Folio, 1980, p. 315.

² *Ibid.*, 322

³ Terme derive du latin *germanus* (Germain) et *pratium* (le pre), designant ce qui se rapporte milieu intellectuel parisien frequentant le quartier de Saint-Germain des pres, a Paris. Dans les annees qui suivirent la Liberation, on parla des "milieux germanopratin" lies a l'"existentialisme" (le mot ayant fini par designer une mode et un mode de vie.

boss; I'm hungry" says the beggar. Mathieu gives him a penny. In return, the beggar wishes Mathieu happiness and adds: "I have found what I am going to give you. I will give you a stamp from Madrid." Mathieu walks away with vague regret, says the narrator, who adds, "he felt like going to fight in Spain."

Daniel, at the end of the novel, asks Mathieu: "Did you feel like going to Spain?" "To which Mathieu replies: "Yes. Not enough." Which perfectly reflects the attitude of the faint-hearted (*velleitaire*). (Gallimard, *le Livre de poche*)

The meeting between Sartre's literary double and the Spanish anarchosyndicalist sounds wrong. No doubt that in an organization with a million members, one can always find a drunkard in spite of the fact that the Spanish anarchists were often opposed to drinking alcohol. But it is precisely *this* drunkard that Mathieu meets in the street. Then the Spanish anarchists had both a great pride and the cult of work, and to see one of them begging is not credible. But then again, out of a million members, it is always possible to imagine that there was one beggar. "

But above all, the refugees of the Spanish CNT - several hundreds of thousands in France - had reconstituted in the cities where they had settled the structures of the organization as it was in Spain, in particular their "uniones locales", that is to say, "associations in which the militants of the CNT met, whatever their profession and the union to which they belonged. The "union local" of Paris was located in rue Saint-Denis and every Sunday the militants and their families could be seen gathered there. These local unions were structures of solidarity and it is unlikely that they would have let any of their members beg in the street. But here again, out of a million members...

Now let us admit the existence of a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist drunken beggar: Why on earth is the "anarchist" Sartre presenting such a negative image?

At a time when Simone de Beauvoir was lamenting their powerlessness in the face of events in Spain, Sartre's only investment was a short story published in July 1937, *Le Mur* [The Wall]. This wall is the one against which Spanish republicans waiting to be shot will lean.

The protagonists of the story are the republican camp and the nationalist camp, the latter being defined by its dictatorial character, cruelty and summary justice.

The Republican camp is represented by Tom Steinbock, an Irishman and member of the International Brigades; Juan Mirbal, whose brother is an anarchist; and Pablo Ibbieta, an anarchist and narrator of the story. We should also add Ramon Gris, a friend of Pablo's who was also an anarchist.

Curiously, the story does not feature any political discussion between the anarchist and the communist of the international brigades, while the tensions between the two currents in Spain were to lead to the tragic days of May 1937 in Barcelona, when the communist-controlled government attacked the anarchists and the POUM on the other.

There is no call in "The Wall" to continue the fight; reading the story one gets a feeling of predicted failure, the announcement of the end of anarchism. It is perhaps

Simone de Beauvoir who sums up most clearly, in *La Force de l'Age* (1960), the couple's position at the time:

“The anarchists refused to understand that before making the revolution one had to win the war [...]. The anarchist columns hindered government action by untimely coups de main; they did not obey orders from the central power. This lack of unity constituted a terrible danger.”

This is the typical communist argument, which Beauvoir repeats uncritically. It was the anarchists who provided the bulk of the manpower to fight fascism, and it was the communists who did everything to limit their access to weapons. It was the collectivization of industry, agriculture and transport that allowed production to continue in order to support the war effort, and it was the communists who did everything to sabotage this effort, which they did not control. Let us recall the case of General Lister, a Spanish communist known as the “Butcher of Albacete”, whose brigade scoured the countryside of Aragon to destroy the agrarian communities created by the libertarians.

The anarchists were not so bad, militarily speaking, since towards the end of the civil war the communists attempted a coup d'état which failed because the IV Army Corps commanded by the anarchist Ciprano Mera crushed three communist corps - something the communists do not like to be reminded of⁴.

Mera was a very impressive man; he could be seen at the “union local” of rue Saint-Denis in Paris. While many Spanish libertarian activists joined the French unions and fought side by side with their French comrades, Mera was one of those who never learned French, had a disdainful attitude towards the lack of revolutionary zeal of the French workers, and whose face remained turned towards the South for forty years in the hope of resuming the fight against fascism. He lost his last fight against Franco for he died in October 1975, one month before the dictator.

After the Second World War, Sartre was held up as an example of the committed intellectual. If Spain remained a preoccupation of his afterwards, it can be said that he completely missed the civil war and especially the social revolution that was massively engaged by the anarchists and finally crushed by the combined forces of the fascists, the Stalinists and the republicans.

Of course Sartre cannot be blamed for not joining the International Brigades - whose function was symbolic but militarily negligible⁵ -, but it is regrettable that he portrayed a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist as a drunken beggar - a hardly credible occurrence for anyone familiar with the Iberian libertarian movement.

⁴ Cf. Cesar M. Lorenzo, *Les anarchistes espagnols et le pouvoir, 1868-1969*, Editions du Seuil, p. 326.

⁵ In the late 1970s I attended a debate organised by a Trotskyist group on the international brigades, whose speakers tended to exaggerate their importance. A CNT militant who was there shouted angrily: “We didn't need the international brigades, we had more than enough men, what we needed was weapons! WEAPONS!”

Sartre & anarcho-syndicalism

Sartre mentions anarcho-syndicalism fourteen times in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In a 800-page book, it is not much, but it is a lot for an author whom you wouldn't expect he should talk about it.

“How can [Sartre] write on the history of French unions and anarchosyndicalism? He's no labour historian!”, writes Fredrick Jameson, ironically, in his preface to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Naturally Jameson, nor I, dispute Sartre's right to do so. But it is significant that Jameson grants this right to *philosophers*, not to anarcho-syndicalists.

It is obviously out of “question to deny a philosopher the right to speak about any subject, but the reader has the right to point out the errors he makes. And I can understand why a historian would be irritated to see a philosopher building a system on factual errors. But in Sartre's case, his references to anarcho-syndicalism are incomprehensible because one gets the impression that he doesn't even know what he is talking about.

Sartre's relationship to anarchism, and more particularly to anarchosyndicalism, is troubling: he describes it, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, “as only the “product of the free efforts of skilled workers” whose (anarchosyndicalist) organizations reproduce “the structures which had been established through the mediation of the universal machine in different enterprises”. In other *words*, *anarcho-syndicalism = skilled workers + universal machines*.¹

Sartre's use of the terms “anarcho-syndicalist” and “anarcho-syndicalism” does not correspond to anything that is generally understood by them, they are never specified other than by linking them to the “skilled” workers. It is all the more curious that he made several stays in Spain, where there was a mass anarcho-syndicalist movement: Sartre could easily have observed that it was not only constituted by skilled workers.

Sartre situates “anarcho-syndicalism” at two different periods: in *Critique...* he situates it in 1900, in *What is Subjectivity?* written two years later he puts forward the date of 1880. In reality, one will begin to speak about anarchosyndicalism only towards the beginning of the 1920s. Why then does Sartre speak of anarcho-syndicalism? How is it that he commits such anachronisms?²

¹ It is true that in England until the end of the 1880s, the trade-unions were reserved for the working class elites who sought to improve their material situation. From the end of the 1880s, the unions opened up to unskilled workers (gas workers, dockers) who paid modest dues. But this was still far from revolutionary syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism.

² Research I made revealed that the expression “anarcho-syndicalist” already existed in the mainstream and anarchist press in France at the end of the 19th century, as well as the expressions “anarchist-

In these two texts he analyses the relations between skilled and unskilled workers, and the relation they each have with the “universal machine”. What he says about these relationships, about the antagonism between skilled and unskilled workers at the beginning of the history of the Labour “movement, is not disputable, but not particularly original³: however, one does not see what it has to do with anarcho-syndicalism, insofar as it did not exist, neither in 1880, nor in 1900. Sartre describes the situation of skilled workers, who had a real professional training, whose social status and salary were superior to those of the unskilled worker. It follows that the relations of the former towards the latter develop into relations of domination. Such a situation, perfectly commonplace, existed as soon as the introduction of somewhat complex machines was made in the workshops: the unskilled workers having then for function to serve the skilled workers at their machines, to clean, to look for raw material etc. This type of relationship was modified with the introduction of production lines which, without eliminating the need for skilled workers, reduced their number. But such skilled/unskilled relations have not fundamentally changed: they persist, in one form or another, still today: they existed long before anarchosyndicalism appeared, and continue today long after anarcho-syndicalism has practically disappeared, in France at least. I would add that this kind of relationship existed during the fifty years in which the Communist Party dominated the French workers’ movement and the CGT: during this period skilled workers constituted the backbone of the Communist Party.

There is one thing that Sartre does not seem to see. The antagonisms between skilled and unskilled workers, when they existed, were not only at the level of the firm itself but at the level of the union in the firm: indeed, industrial rationalization led between the two wars to a situation where unskilled workers represented 65% of the workers, a mass of workers who were *very reluctant to join a union*. After the one-month general strike in 1936, a large mass of these workers joined the CGT and the problem of their supervision arose:

“When in 1936, the stream of O.S. [*unskilled workers*] entered the CGT, the problem of the supervision of this mass arose. But unlike what had happened in England when the labourers joined the Trade Unions, the cadres were not borrowed from the old trade unionists, but from the political parties. Hence the profound transformation of trade unionism. This explains why, because of their size and their lack of trade union tradition, these

syndicalist” and “syndicalo-anarchist”, the three expressions being perfectly synonymous. They designated anarchist individuals dedicated to trade unionism, never a *movement*. Anarcho-syndicalism appeared as a movement in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, under the impulse of an anarchist militant named Daniil Novomirsky, who wanted to develop in the country revolutionary syndicalism on the model of the French CGT. Anarcho-syndicalism as a *movement* appeared in France after the Russian revolution. See: “Where (and when) does anarcho-syndicalism come from?” <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article778>

³ Concerning the workers’ aristocracy, see: https://www.persee.fr/doc/hes_07525702_1987_num_6_1_1440

masses needed a cadre of functionaries, hence the growing importance of the bureaucracy and particularly of the Communist bureaucracy.”⁴

At that time, the mass of the skilled workers who were unionised were members or close to the Communist Party.

Now, concerning the unskilled workers and strikes. When the one-month general strike broke out in May 1936 it was voted both by skilled and unskilled workers and they all benefited indiscriminately from the two weeks of paid vacations that were obtained after a month of occupation of the factories, and there was no question of “suzerainty”⁵ of some over others, to use Sartre’s word in *Critique...*

Sartre draws curious consequences from his remarks: by the very fact that they are qualified, “the elite of specialists deprived themselves, unwittingly, of the means of protesting against the exploitation of the unskilled workers” (*Critique...*) which is a perfectly fallacious argument. Nobody prevented skilled workers from supporting their unskilled comrades. And if they did not support them, it was not because the skilled workers were “anarcho-syndicalists”. It is obvious that in the history of the labour movement one will find examples of contempt of certain categories of workers towards others, but this type of reaction goes completely against the habits of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, no anarcho-syndicalist (when he is himself a qualified worker, which is not necessarily the case, far from it) will consider as “sub-humans” their less qualified comrades. This complacency, this condescension towards unskilled workers who are considered “sub-humans” by their qualified comrades, who are in a state of “suzerainty” in relation to them, etc., is pure demagoguery.

At the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam in 1907 - at the time we were talking about revolutionary syndicalism, not anarcho-syndicalism - Christian Cornelissen, a well-known Dutch militant, made an address that settled the question raised by Sartre: “We must support syndicalism and direct action,” he said, “but only on condition that they are ‘revolutionary in purpose’.” For trade unionism and direct action “are not always and necessarily revolutionary. They can also be used for conservative or even reactionary purposes.” Cornelissen cites the case of the diamond merchants of Amsterdam and Antwerp who “made of their corporation a kind of closed caste, around which they raised a real Chinese wall”. These practices “are not special to Holland. In England and the United States, the trade unions also practised direct action. By direct action, they have created a privileged condition for their members; they prevent foreign workers from working even when these workers are union members; composed of ‘skilled’ workers finally, they have sometimes been seen to oppose movements attempted by the labourers, the ‘unskilled’. We cannot approve of this.” “Similarly, when the typos in France and Switzerland refuse to work with women, we cannot approve of them.” “Finally, there are certain forms of direct action that we must not cease to fight:

⁴ Michel Collinet, *L’ouvrier français. Essai sur la condition ouvrière 1900-1950*. Collection “Masses et Militants”, Editions ouvrières, avant-propos d’Edouard Dolleans, pp. 10-11.

⁵ Sartre mentions also “the skilled worker as an overlord to his labourers” *Critique...*, p. 756.

for example, those that oppose the introduction of machinism “(linotype, elevators), that is, the perfection of production by the perfection of tooling.”

This statement, which is perfectly consistent with revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, shows that this movement is opposed to discrimination between skilled and unskilled workers, between nationals and foreigners, to professional discrimination against women, and that it is in no way opposed to the introduction of machines.

The following statement by Sartre is absolutely shocking:

“As soon as machine labour required that the worker should have a sort of suzerainty over his assistants⁶, the fundamental stances called the paternalism of the labour elite: unskilled workers must be educated, trained, inspired by example, etc. Thus the organization against exploitation recreated, rigorously but freely, all the conditions which materiality imposes on alienated man.” (*Critique...*, p. 243)

There is nothing shocking, nor surprising, in the fact that the most qualified workers, in other words the most educated, have a developed class consciousness, but no particular conclusion can be taken from this observation: this heightened class consciousness has been able to sway them indifferently towards reformism as well as towards revolution. It is a question of circumstance. When the anarchist movement began to grow in the labour and trade union movement, around the 1890s, to become revolutionary syndicalism, this latter, far from showing “paternalism”, endeavoured to set up educational structures allowing workers to have access to a general culture but also to a professional training in the “Bourses du travail” (Labour exchanges). Far from recreating “rigorously but freely, all the conditions which materiality imposes on alienated man”, the revolutionary syndicalists, and later the anarchosyndicalists, created, on the contrary, organizations that would anticipate the emancipated society. In Spain, every time the anarcho-syndicalist CNT established unions in a location, it created at the same time a library, a school. What Sartre says is simply gross ignorance or the most deeply rooted prejudice.

I don’t know what Sartre means when he says that “anarcho-syndicalist humanism was unable to transcend itself”. I don’t know what “anarchosyndicalist humanism” is: anarcho-syndicalists are less concerned with deliberating on humanism than with acting for human emancipation. However, it is perfectly contrary to the facts that “the skilled workers, with their superior education” could not “merge themselves in practice with mass organizations in which the less educated and less militant would have been in a majority”. It was even one of the foundations of the syndicalist movement, once it had abandoned the craft union form and adopted industrial unionism, to “merge” skilled and unskilled workers; indeed, the industrial union does not organize workers

⁶ Sartre mentions also the skilled worker (working-class elite) who, “as a member of the sovereign group, gathered around him the unskilled labourers who helped him in his work.” *Critique...*, p. 680.

according to their trade, it organizes in the same union *all the workers of the same industry*, skilled or unskilled, whatever their category. In a given firm in the textile sector, for example, all workers, whatever their qualification, are in the same union. It is true that from the beginning of the trade union movement the most conscious workers, often the most qualified, have been the driving force in unionisation, but this is a general fact due to different reasons, among which the frequent reluctance of unskilled workers to unionise. But all this, once again, has strictly nothing to do with anarcho-syndicalism.

Sartre is absurdly Manichean when he says that “a strike could succeed without the support of unskilled workers” and that “unskilled workers on their own could not win a strike at all. (*Critique...* p. 243) In the system of industrial unionism, which the anarcho-syndicalists advocated, skilled and unskilled workers were generally united, since everyone has something to gain from the strike, as was the case in the 1936 general strike⁷. It often happens, moreover, that in the trade union struggle, the more skilled workers “pull up” the less skilled, both in terms of wage demands and working conditions and in terms of professional training. This is not called “paternalism” but class solidarity.

In the French newspaper industry, in which workers were considered part of the “worker aristocracy,” there were by far not only skilled or highly skilled workers. Numerically, the majority were in fact unskilled. But insofar as the union organization was very powerful, with the overwhelming majority of wage earners being unionized, the wages of low-skilled workers were “pulled up” by the “union umbrella”. The wages of these workers were far higher than they would have been, with equivalent qualifications, in other sectors of industry. There is therefore no fatality, as Sartre seems to think, in the relations between skilled and unskilled workers: it is a simple matter of class consciousness.

Worker aristocracy

Sartre absolutely wants to show that anarcho-syndicalism is the product of the most qualified category of the working class, the so-called “worker aristocracy”. I don’t know

⁷ French workers, whether skilled or unskilled, did not hesitate to go on strike when necessary: The historian Rene Garmy (*Histoire du mouvement syndical en France, I, Des origines a 1914*, Bureau d’editions, 1932) estimates the number of working days lost to strikes at 500,000 between 1870 and 1880, 1,500,000 between 1890 and 1895, and 9,500,000 for the year 1906 alone. There are obviously no statistics on the share of skilled and unskilled workers among the strikers. During this period the hardest strikes often turned into confrontations with the police and the army. 17 strikers were killed in Martinique in 1900, 3 in Chalons-sur-Saone, 1 dead in Nantes in 1907, 5 dead and many wounded in Narbonne, 1 dead in Raon-l’Etape, 9 dead and 200 wounded in Draveil and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges in 1908 (these were not skilled workers, but earthworkers), and hundreds of civil servants were dismissed and disciplined. The historian Edouard Dolleans gives the record of the Clemenceau ministry alone (1906-1909): 667 injured workers, 20 deaths, 391 dismissals, 104 years of prison distributed.

where he got this kind of prejudice from. He begins by evoking the 1880s when “one type of worker was defined in the clearest possible way by the universal lathe”,⁸ a qualified worker “who had done two years’ apprenticeship, took pride in his work and was surrounded by unskilled labourers.” *But in 1880 anarcho-syndicalism did not exist, no more than revolutionary syndicalism.*

According to my investigations, the first occurrence of the term “revolutionary syndicalist” dates from the Limoges congress of the CGT in 1902. But it is clear that the fact preceded the word. The practice of *revolutionary syndicalism dates back to the last decade of the 19th century,*

without it being possible to fix a precise date; there is no doubt, however, that the foundation of the National Federation of Labour Exchanges in 1892 is an important landmark in the formation of this movement.⁹ The first explicit formulation of the revolutionary syndicalist doctrine dates from 1905 when Victor Griffuelhes, leader of the CGT, published an article entitled “Le syndicalisme revolutionnaire” in the newspaper *Le Mouvement socialiste*.¹⁰

Sartre is quite right to emphasize the antagonisms that can exist between skilled and unskilled workers, antagonisms that have persisted to the present day, without the anarcho-syndicalists having anything to do with it. Peter Scholliers, studying the identity of Ghent’s mechanical workers in the 19th century, shows in a 1987 study that the Ghent metalworkers represented an elite amongst the mass of factory workers. Technological changes occurred towards the end of the 19th century. Until the 1880s, the Ghent metalworker was a highly skilled worker, earning a high salary. He was distinguished from other Ghent workers by his social contacts, his origins (social and geographical), his place of residence and his ideology. With the introduction of the mechanical tools, highly skilled work regressed. The distinctions between metalworkers and other workers tended to reduce. Also, the Ghent metalworkers took the lead in the Ghent and even Belgian labour movement.¹¹

This is consistent with the observation that skilled workers have a stronger class consciousness and are used to taking the initiative for action - “from which the less skilled benefit when a strike succeeds. The conclusions of this study could be extended to all industrial sectors and to all industrial countries. But *in 1880 there were no anarcho-syndicalists or revolutionary syndicalists.* If the skilled/unskilled antagonism

⁸ Sartre, *What is Subjectivity?*

⁹ Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses du travail*, Alfred Costes editeur, “1921, electronic version: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k23555r>

David Rapp, *La Bourse du travail de Lyon*, ed. Atelier de creation libertaire.

¹⁰ 1905 : L’acte de naissance du syndicalisme revolutionnaire : GRIFFUELHES. - « Le syndicalisme revolutionnaire », <http://monde-nouveau.net/sprp.php?artide576>

¹¹ Scholliers Peter. “L’identite des ouvriers-mecaniciens gantois au XIX^e siecle - Une contribution au debut sur le role social de l’elite ouvriere”. In: *Histoire, economie et societe*, 1987, 6^e annee, n°1. pp. 83-111; doi: <https://doi.org/10.3406/hes.1987.1440>https://www.persee.fr/doc/hes_0752-5702_1987_num_6_1_1440

is not disputable, Sartre makes a big mistake in identifying the skilled workers with the “anarcho-syndicalists”.

There is no doubt that within the anarcho-syndicalist movement there may have been skilled workers, but the million members of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist CNT in 1930 were not all skilled workers.

“Specialised” and “professional worker”

Another study, dating from 2017 and devoted to the Renault factories, provides interesting insights. The split is between unskilled workers (in French: “ouvriers specialises”) and immigrants, influenced by the extreme left, on the one hand, and skilled workers (in French: “ouvriers professionnels”), the social base of the Communist Party.¹²

The study shows that until the 1970s, there was a kind of brotherhood between the veterans and the new comers, the former helping to train the latter in the equipment but also in teaching them the values of the workshop, and helping them to integrate. (p. 288-289)

“A newly hired may not be qualified for the job to which he is assigned. In this case, he finds the professional support of a companion that allows him to do it. Jean-Pierre Graziani, hired as a miller at RMO, was put on a GSP planer. An elder worker, working on a similar machine, showed him how to use it and introduced him to the other workers in the workshop. His initiation is also political, because he shares with this worker, called Tatave, of Italian origin, anarchist convictions”. (p. 289)

Jean-Pierre Graziani was a militant of the Federation Anarchiste and a militant of the Renault Anarchist Group, “most of whose militants were unionised within the CFDT and some were affiliated with the Alliance Syndicaliste.”¹³

From the 1970s onwards, this mode of exchange no longer worked in the workshops of OS [“ouvriers specialises”, specialized, unskilled workers]:

“The replacement of the French by immigrants, has condemned any possibility of transmission of an acquired worker culture, a possibility that still existed in previous decades when their workshops brought together French

¹² Alain Viguier. *Renault Billancourt, 1950-1992 : le parti communiste et les ouvriers. Identites ouvrieres et identite de parti : identites ouvrieres et identite de parti*. Histoire. Universite Pantheon-Sorbonne - Paris I, 2017. Frangais. (NNT :2017PA01H106).[^]tel-01769540[^]

¹³ Jean-Pierre Graziani, in *Dictionnaire biographique Maitron du mouvement ouvrier*, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article154159>

Concerning the “Alliance syndicaliste”, see <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article900>

and foreign workers¹⁴. This rupture is part of the distance that can exist between professionals and unskilled workers, made up of incomprehension, real prejudices and corporatist reflexes which, although prevalent, can be overcome by activists, who are generally careful to combat them.” (p. 289-290)

The author of the thesis describes relationships between skilled and unskilled workers that fit Sartre’s descriptions perfectly, but he points out that prejudices and corporate reflexes *can be fought by activists*. Thus, there existed at Renault- Billancourt an active anarchist group which had set up a “Groupe culturel Renault” (p. 112) which intended to develop community life, which published a bulletin, which had set up a bookshop service to allow the workers to benefit from a 30% reduction on books, etc. One finds there, but on a much more modest level, the ambition of the Labour exchanges of the heroic period of revolutionary syndicalism: to allow the working class to educate itself and to go beyond the categorical cleavages. There is *no fatality* in the antagonisms between skilled and unskilled workers: it is the role of conscious activists to fight them. We see that not only does anarcho-syndicalism have nothing to do with skilled/unskilled worker antagonisms, but also that these militants strive to reduce these antagonisms. Sartre is completely off the mark. He simply does not know what he is talking about.

“Around the skilled worker, says Sartre, gravitated ‘a certain number of beings’, unskilled, who served the skilled worker on the machine”. He adds that these “are denied any kind of qualification”, a formulation which suggests that this denial was deliberate (a subjective explanation), whereas it would have been enough to state the objective fact that they did not possess any qualification. Why some workers acquire a qualification and not others is another matter which here again, has *nothing to do with anarcho-syndicalism*.

It is perfectly natural for the skilled worker to “accord particular value to his work”: any trade unionist will say that the only capital the worker possesses is his professional competence, and that it is on their competence that the workers rely to negotiate their wages and conditions of work. The capitalist has understood this perfectly well, since the race for profits leads him to implement a system in which qualification will have less and less importance.

Sartre is right to say in *What is Subjectivity?* that “there was a time when value was conferred by work - real, intelligent, skilful work”, but he is wrong to say that “at that time there were anarcho-syndicalist writings that seemed to say that it was less unjust to pay unskilled workers poverty wages than to pay skilled workers badly”: as I said, around 1880 there were no anarcho-syndicalists and no revolutionary syndicalists. I am not aware of any writings saying that “it was less unjust to pay unskilled workers

¹⁴ What the author probably means by “foreign workers” is “European workers” - Poles, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese...- as opposed to the later immigration of workers from Northern Africa and Africa.

poverty wages than to pay skilled workers badly”. Sartre himself does not seem to be sure of himself because he simply says that these writings “seemed to say”, which suggests that he is not certain of what he is saying. Unfortunately he quotes no sources. Sartre is the kind of author who considers that his readers need not doubt what he says.

In any case, such writings cannot emanate from anarcho-syndicalist militants who did not exist, and besides, they are absolutely not coherent with the ethics of this movement. Following the example of the Paris Commune, and inspired by Proudhon¹⁵, revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists were in favour of equal pay for all:

“The division of the workers into two classes, that of the labourers and that of the engineers, that of the led and that of the leaders, is both irrational and unjust. The inequality of wages between the various social functions is unjust, since these functions are equally useful, and by their division we are all associated in production.”¹⁶

Union and non-union members

When the revolutionary syndicalist movement appeared, the fracture within the labour movement was not between skilled and unskilled workers, but between union members and non-union members. The revolutionary syndicalists elaborated a real workers’ ethic based on class consciousness. Emile Pouget, an anarchist and deputy secretary of the CGT, even said that the nonunionised were “human zeros”, but not at all in the same way as Sartre talks about sub-humans. The statement may seem cynical, but it was true: a nonunionised worker was totally powerless before his boss and suffered his arbitrariness, whereas unionised workers, presenting themselves in numbers, had a negotiating capacity. Similarly, in terms of worker ethics, breaking a strike was considered a major fault. We saw this ethic spectacularly applied during the British miners’ strike, which lasted almost a year from 1984 to 1985. I was told by the miners I then met that the union member who abandoned the strike and returned to work after 10 months on strike was considered a scab on an equal footing with the one who returned to work after one month. The idea behind this attitude was that the longer the strike lasted, the more likely the boss was to give in; therefore, the more likely it was that dropping the strike would weaken the chances of winning.

It is obvious that many skilled workers might not identify with the working class to which they belong, but in the same way, there are also many skilled workers among

¹⁵ There is an abundant literature in French showing the proximity of revolutionary syndicalism to Proudhon.

¹⁶ Proudhon, *Theorie de la Propriete*, A. Lacroix, Verboeckhover et Cie., 1866, p. 21

the most militant members of the unions, “probably even in greater proportion than unskilled workers.” So what?

When the trade union movement began to organise in France, one of the forms it adopted was the labour exchanges. A labour exchange was originally a placement office for workers provided by the unions. It later became a place, present in the majority of large cities, where the different trade unions met. This shared space allowed the unions to have premises to carry out their activities: organising support for sick or unemployed workers and for those in struggle (notably by organising strike funds or public meetings). The labour exchanges were also involved in the popular education movement through vocational or general courses and the development of libraries. At the end of the 19th century, these structures were used to help trade unions to organise themselves, to draw up workers’ statistics and to organise professional courses.

In 1892, all the country’s labour exchanges formed a federation - the CGT did not yet exist. The anarchist (and revolutionary syndicalist) Fernand Pelloutier took over the leadership. He was an excellent organiser and the federation became a powerful trade union structure. Thus, some years after the time Sartre talks about (1880), an organisation was being set up in the French labour movement which not only prepared the workers for the struggle but devoted enormous efforts to their education through evening classes, vocational courses, conferences, etc. In other words, in spite of what Sartre thinks, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists worked to *reduce* the cleavage between skilled and unskilled workers: it was a major concern of the revolutionary syndicalist current.

Sartre is right to say that the “skilled workers were devoted to selfeducation; they read a lot in that epoch, despite the long working hours; they regarded themselves as the ones who would make the revolution, giving a lead to the unskilled and educating them.” Skilled workers cannot be blamed for having a higher class consciousness than their unskilled comrades. But if they had to give a lead to the unskilled and educate them, it was not in a paternalistic way but through the workers’ organisations they created: labour exchanges, trade unions, cooperatives and various associations. As for the strikes which penalised the low-skilled workers, let’s remember that the CGT very quickly set up strike funds to support the workers during the strikes. Besides, I think that the differences in wages between skilled and unskilled workers were not such that they made a difference if the strike lasted a little while.

To say that skilled workers constituted “a kind of worker aristocracy”, and that “around them would gravitate the people who were to be helped and raised up but who, for the moment, really were inferiors within the context of the working class itself” is a distorted way of presenting things. In fact, Sartre acts as if there were only individual skilled workers and individual non-skilled workers. He does not situate them in the “institutional” framework in which they found themselves, namely a network of trade union-type organisations which offered workers reception and support structures. Although revolutionary syndicalism did not yet exist in 1880, the trade union movement at that time had begun to reconstitute itself after the terrible repression that

followed the crushing of the Paris Commune. As I have said, the number of working days lost to strikes was 500,000 between 1870 and 1880.

Mechanical determinism

To say that the “subjectivation” of the feeling of superiority of these skilled workers had “produced the whole phenomenon of anarcho-syndicalism” (even if one rectifies the anachronism by writing “revolutionary syndicalism”) is a totally meaningless statement. Sartre has a phantasmal vision of the working class, one that he constructs to fit his argument. By writing that “the union practice of the time, the kind of self-valuing, the type of struggle and form of organisation, corresponded strictly to what those workers were, to what the machine was”, that “they were all that the universal lathe allowed them to be”, Sartre establishes a mechanical determinism between the machine and the behaviour of its users that is surprising on his part.

Likewise, it makes no sense to attribute the existence of skilled workers to the creation of yellow unions. The first yellow union was created in 1899, in Le Creusot [Burgundy region] with the agreement of the government, at the height of the revolutionary syndicalist period, following a general strike at Schneider & Cie (coal, iron, steel) in which the qualified-unqualified distinction was not taken into account. These yellow unions, which never developed much in France, were created by the bosses, and their recruitment criterion was certainly not professional qualification. Here again, I don't know where Sartre gets his informations.

Here is what the prefect [government representative] of the region said:

“This new union, formed at the instigation of the factory administration, is composed only of workers favourable to the boss and has no other aim than to hinder the action of the first union, organised after the first strike with the aim of workers' emancipation”.¹⁷

This question does not enter at all into the skilled/unskilled debate.

Finally, Sartre gives us an interpretation of the formation of professional trade unions (craft unions) which demonstrates a serious error of timing. To the existence of a labour aristocracy corresponds, he says, a particular form of unionism, the craft union: “When the time came to raise the issue of forming industrial unions, the skilled workers opted for craft-based organisation, because that would exclude the unskilled.” This led to situations where the skilled workers could go on strike, shutting down the factory, “even if the unskilled majority wanted to go on working.”

In reality the early unions were all craft unions, or company unions. Skilled workers did not strictly speaking *choose* the professional form of unionism, it was the only

¹⁷ Quoted by Rene-Pierre Parize, *Le Creusot 1898-1900. La naissance du syndicalisme et les mouvements sociaux a l'aube du XXe siecle*, Les Nouvelles Editions du Creusot, 2009, p. 189.

possible form. It is true that afterwards, in certain limited sectors, this form of trade unionism lasted because it allowed for greater bargaining power.

In one locality, unions were created to bring together workers of the same trade: bronze workers, gilders, etc. These unions were not linked to a single company: this made no sense, as workers often changed bosses (unemployment, repression, search for better employment conditions, very easy dismissals). Solidarity existed within the same trade. Locally, several craft unions could wage open warfare to recruit in the same trades. Workers' solidarity stopped at the door of the trade. Once again, this has nothing to do with anarchosyndicalism.

At national level, these unions grouped together in trade federations. This allowed for real solidarity when workers moved to another region: help in finding work in their trade, financial aid during strikes. But this craft unionism had a major flaw: it reproduced the division of labour imposed by the bosses. It brought workers together, but only in part. The consequences were very harmful: in the same workplace, there were several unions, because there were several trades.

But quite quickly the question of the formation of industrial unions (and federations) arose in the revolutionary syndicalist movement, in France and in other countries. Revolutionary syndicalists led the struggle to go beyond corporatism, craft and company unionism, and create industrial unions and federations.

In the United States, it was also the revolutionary syndicalists who led the struggle against craft unionism, against the AFL, and in favour of industrial unionism. This struggle led to the constitution of the IWW, whose preamble says:

“The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

“These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all.”

At the end of the chapter “Subjectivity of Skill” of *What is subjectivity?*, Sartre recognises that the type of class consciousness of the “anarchosyndicalists” is not “empty”, that the “anarcho-syndicalists” were in a way a stage towards forms of struggle corresponding to the “specialised workers”, i.e. industrial workers. I think I've shown that Sartre's anachronisms render his argument inoperative and that historical reality totally contradicts what he says, since the revolutionary syndicalists (and not the anarcho-syndicalists), among whom the anarchists played a preponderant role, far from having encouraged the craft unions, militated for the formation of industrial unionism.

In any case, all this does not encourage us to accept the thesis of an “anarchist Sartre”, especially since at no time in *What is subjectivity?*, no more than in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, does he show the slightest commitment to anarchism.

Sartre & Guerin¹

Sartre's political activity contrasts greatly with that of Daniel Guerin: unlike Guerin, Sartre was "someone who only came to revolutionary politics and Marxism relatively late in life"². Guerin was actually involved as a militant in the Labour movement in the 1930s and during the war, and after. An anticolonialist like Sartre, he got involved in the struggle against colonialism in Indochina and Lebanon during a trip to Indochina. In the 1930s he was a militant with the revolutionary syndicalists of the journal *La révolution prolétarienne*.

"It is no coincidence that Guerin's first real political involvement was with trade unionists like Pierre Monatte and Christian Chambelland in the campaign for the reunification of the CGT³: indeed, his most passionate criticism of the CP was the role it had played in dividing the working class, an unforgivable crime in Guerin's eyes."⁴

¹ Sources:

☒ Ian Birchall, "Sartre's Encounter with Daniel Guerin", <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23510915#metadata-info-tab-contents>

☒ David Berry, Ian Birchall et Selim Nadi: "'La politique (et les mille vies) de Daniel Guerin'", <https://www.contretemps.eu/guerin-trotsky-sartre-marxisme-antiracisme/>

☒ Daniel Guerin, "Sartre et la chute de l'idole", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article903>

☒ David Berry, Guillaume Davranche, article "Guerin Daniel" in *Le dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier et social*, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article157370>

☒ David Berry., 2004. "Un contradicteur permanent: the ideological and political itinerary of Daniel Guerin." In: Bourg, J. (ed.). *After the Deluge. New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 120-154

² Arthur Hirsch, *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston: South End Press, 1981, 60-61.)

³ After the WWI, in 1921, in the wake of the Russian revolution, the French CGT had split: a very large minority (40%), including many revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists, had founded the CGTU ("U" for unitary) which supported the new organisation's membership in the Red International of Labour Unions, the union version of the Communist International. However, many anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists had remained in the "historic" CGT. This split demoralised the working class and paralysed the action of both organisations. An important movement arose militating for the reunification of the two organisations, which took place in March 1936. In the aftermath of the Popular Front's electoral victory in May 1936, a major strike movement developed. The general strike resulted in important social advances, including two weeks of paid holidays. (Today, French employees have 5 weeks of paid holidays.)

⁴ Marceau Pivert (1895-1958) was a French trade unionist teacher and socialist activist. During the 1930s he was the leader of the main revolutionary current within the Socialist Party, and then the founder of the Socialist Workers' and Peasants' Party in 1938.

In 1933, he cycled through Hitler's Germany and wrote a document on the rise of Nazism which was published in two volumes in 1936: *La Peste brune* (The Brown Plague) and *Fascisme et grand capital* (Fascism and Big Business).

In the mid-1930s, Daniel Guerin joined Marceau Pivert's Gauche révolutionnaire.⁵ This current was excluded from the SFIO (French section of the Socialist International, the "official" "socialist party) and formed the Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan (PSOP, Socialist Workers' and Peasants' Party), of which Guerin became one of the leaders. Guerin positioned himself to the left of this group and was very close to Trotsky, with whom he corresponded.

In Oslo, in occupied Norway, Daniel Guerin was interned by the Germans on 23 April 1940 as a national of a belligerent country. He was released from the Wulzburg internment camp in Bavaria on 18 December 1940.

After the defeat of 1940, Guerin, with a few other militants, created the "Committee for the Fourth International" which distributed various publications: *The Voice of Lenin*, *The Spark*. They advocated "revolutionary defeatism".

From 1943 to 1945, he cooperated in France with the Trotskyist movement in the underground. He tried to maintain an internationalist position away from the prevailing chauvinism, multiplying appeals to German workers even in the ranks of the occupying army, an activity made all the more dangerous by the fact that his books on fascism were on the Nazi blacklist.

After the war, Daniel Guerin went to the United States where he was active on the side of the labour movement and black Americans. In January 1949 he returned to France but in July 1950, when he wanted to go back to the United States, his visa was refused: he was accused of being, or having been, a "Trotskyist" and "anarchist": we were in the middle of the witch-hunt of the McCarthy period. This visit to the United States, during which Guerin had numerous contacts with Trotskyists, helped to detach him from Trotskyism: "It was the American Trotskyists who, despite their undeniable militancy, made me stop believing, for ever, in the virtues of revolutionary parties of the authoritarian and Leninist type."⁶

It was on his return from the United States that Guerin studied the complete works of Bakunin, and gradually moved away from Marxism and towards anarchism. However, Marxism remained a strong influence as he tried to reconcile these two tendencies by envisaging the formation of a libertarian Marxist current. In *Jeunesse du socialisme libertaire* (Youth of Libertarian Socialism), *Pour un marxisme libertaire* (For a Libertarian Marxism) and *A la recherche d'un communisme libertaire* (In search of a libertarian communism), he sought a new path by attempting a synthesis of anarchism and Marxism, he tried to reconcile the best of anarchism and Marxism⁷, which did not

⁵ Quoted by David Berry: "La politique (et les mille vies) de Daniel Guerin", David Berry, Ian Birchall et Selim Nadi. ([https://www. contretemps. eu/guerin-trotsky-sartre-marxisme-antiracisme/](https://www.contretemps.eu/guerin-trotsky-sartre-marxisme-antiracisme/))

⁶ David Berry, <https://www.contretemps.eu>, "La politique (et les mille vies) de Daniel Guerin".

⁷ Ian Birchall: "As a Marxist, I don't think a 'synthesis' of Marxism and anarchism is possible, or even desirable. What I do find extremely relevant is that Guerin recognizes the value of certain anarchist

prevent him from joining, for a time, the Parti socialiste unifié (United Socialist Party), which was situated to the left of the “official” socialist party, which he only left in 1969.

Committed to supporting the Algerian revolution, he signed in 1960 the Manifesto of 121, signed also by Sartre: it was a declaration on the “right to insubordination” in the context of the Algerian war. He also fought hard for the difficult integration of the homosexual question by the labour movement.

* * * *

The relationship between the two men was not devoid of antagonisms and pettiness. While Guerin was a regular contributor to *Les Temps Modernes*, in 1954 Sartre refused to publish an article of his entitled “Quand le fascisme nous devan[^]ait” (When fascism got ahead of us). However, according to Ian Birchall, this article was similar to an article by Colette Aubry, which was published: “it is therefore difficult to understand why Guerin’s text was refused”. Birchall adds: “In *Question of Method*, Sartre criticised Guerin on the basis of a rather secondary argument. I suspect Sartre did not read the whole book - he was too busy writing to read assiduously.”

Guerin did not hold this against Sartre, since in a letter to Emmanuel Morniche of 28 March 1956, he wrote that his disagreements with Sartre would not prevent him from collaborating with him⁸. It seems that agreeing to work with Sartre was not contradictory with the public expression of disagreements, since he declared to Jean Le Bitoux⁹: “I have never agreed with Sartre politically”.

Ian Birchall writes in the quoted interview that “there were obviously great differences between Sartre and Guerin; they came from very different intellectual traditions. Sartre was never a militant like Guerin was.”

Guerin took his revenge on Sartre in a rather subtle way. The latter had just published a critique of Stalinism, “Le reformisme et les fetiches” (Reformism and Fetishes), to which Guerin responded with scathing irony in an article entitled “Sartre et la chute de l’idole” (Sartre and the Fall of the Idol), published in *Combat* on 5 April 1956.¹⁰ To sum up, Guerin enthusiastically compliments Sartre for having, as we say in French, “invented warm water”: “One would have to be blind or petty or in bad faith”, “not to

analyses and ideas.” (“La politique (et les mille vies) de Daniel Guerin”, David Berry, Ian Birchall et Selim Nadi. (<https://www.contretemps.eu/guerin-trotsky-sartre-marxisme-antiracisme/>))

In saying that Guerin “recognizes the value of certain anarchist ideas” Birchall places himself from the point of view of the Marxist who sees in Guerin another Marxist.

⁸ Contrary to what Selim Nadi writes, Morniche was not an anarcho-syndicalist at the time Guerin wrote to him. It was only in the early 1960s that he joined the Union anarcho-syndicaliste (see *Le dictionnaire biographique Maitron du mouvement ouvrier et social*, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article123231>)

⁹ Jean Le Bitoux, a figure in the homosexual movement, who died in 2010, was the creator in 1979 of *Gai Pied*, the first gay publication to be sold on a large scale in kiosks. “Gai pied” is a play on words with “Gay” and “prendre son pied” (literally: “to take one’s foot”) which is slang for having an orgasm.

¹⁰ “Sartre et la chute de l’idole”, Cf. <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article903>

The newspaper *Combat* was the organ of an eponymous resistance movement which was published from 1941 to 1974. Albert Camus participated in it from the autumn of 1943. It was Camus who recruited Sartre to join the network, but this was *after* the liberation of Paris.

recognise “the greatness” of Sartre’s article, writes Guerin, who slyly adds, “Of course, it would be easy, too easy, to throw his anti-Marxist writings of the past at him”.

“One could also deplore the fact that the author of *Dirty Hands* clings to the myth of the ‘objective’ infallibility of the CP at the very moment when it is so vigorously undermining the ground beneath its feet.”¹¹

If Sartre has “often been mistaken in the past”, if he “often lacks a compass”, if he has “wandered and groped for a long time”, today he is “a man who finally sees clearly”, “even belatedly, even incompletely”.

It is true, adds Guerin, that some of us might be tempted to “discreetly recall that others long before Sartre had brought the same lawsuit against Stalinist intellectuals, and that the Marxists, whose deficiency he ventures to denounce so vigorously today, are not *all* the Marxists, but only the ‘Marxists’ “subservient to Stalinism.”

“But the fact that we were right before Sartre does not deprive him of the merit of being right today and of demolishing certain ‘fetishes’ with a brilliance and resonance that those who had the painful privilege of being right before him never enjoyed.”¹²

Clearly Guerin is alluding to Trotsky when he denounces “the prophetic man” - the author of *The Armed Prophet* - “who had announced, before his death, this ‘revenge’”. Soviet hierarchy itself gave “the first blow of the pickaxe” to the edifice and “dared to strike a mortal blow to a taboo which had paralysed the international labour movement and the world revolution for thirty years”.

“Here again some of us are obliged to bite ur tongues in order not to let slip what is in our hearts. We could evoke the drama of a generation of anti-Stalinist Marxists, whose whole life was shattered by the appalling taboo of the now overthrown despot, who found themselves practically alone, with a gag on their mouths, squeezed between a bourgeoisie that rejected them and a ‘communist’ orthodoxy that showered them with insults, striving, with immense difficulty, to resolve this formidable contradiction: denouncing Stalinism without falling into the camp of the enemies of the October Revolution.”¹³

Guérin concludes his article by saying: “What counts above all, yes, Sartre, is to liberate Marxist thought and the labour’ movement from all the fetters that have stopped their rise.”

¹¹ D. Guerin, “Sartre et la chute de l’idole”

¹² D. Guerin, “Sartre et la chute de l’idole”

¹³ D. Guerin, “Sartre et la chute de l’idole”

* * * *

In the wake of the May-June 1968 general strike, Guerin became interested in Rosa Luxemburg and published *Rosa Luxemburg et la spontaneite revolutionnaire* (Rosa Luxemburg and revolutionary spontaneity) in which he analysed the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness in revolutionary movements. In 1973, he wrote in *Anarchism and Marxism* that “the only theoretician in German social democracy who remained faithful to original Marxism was Rosa Luxemburg”. And he adds: “There is no real difference between the anarcho-syndicalist general strike and what the cautious Rosa Luxemburg preferred to call ‘mass strike’.”

In fact Guerin omits to say that “the cautious Rosa Luxemburg” *hated* anarchists, that she made scandalous remarks about them, and in particular about Bakunin, which I will not dwell on. She was very much affected by the accusations of “anarchism” made against her by the German Social Democratic leaders. The German social democracy of the time labelled as “anarchists” all activists who advocated the general strike and who expressed reservations about parliamentary action. No distinction was made, for example, between revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists, although the general strike was at that time central to the doctrine of the revolutionary syndicalist CGT. In her pamphlet *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*, published in 1905, she accuses the anarchists of being “thieves” and “vulgar looters”. Anarchism in the Russian Revolution, she says, is “the ideological ensign of the counter-revolutionary *lumpenproletariat*”, etc. Guerin’s omission is not innocent. He never completely abandoned the idea of infusing Marxism into anarchism, and identifying Luxemburg as an author close to anarchism was one way of achieving this goal.

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Ian Birchall is right to say that in the post-war context, “while so many others drifted to the right, Guerin’s undying revolutionary integrity took him to the ultra-left. He

increasingly identified himself with the anarchist tradition".¹⁴ However, I don't think that his praise of Rosa Luxemburg is particularly relevant to his search for what is positive in Marxism. Worse, his praise of what Birchall calls "Lenin's libertarian moments" in *State and revolution* seems to me to be a political mistake because this work, which misled the European labour movement of the time about its author's project, was a perfectly opportunistic work (like *Marx's Civil War in France*).¹⁵ *State and the Revolution*, which passes for containing the pinnacle of Marxist theory of the decline of the state, is just a confused jumble which Lenin wrote in an attempt to conciliate the very active Russian libertarian movement at a time when the Bolshevik party was in trouble.

* * * *

Guerin's contacts with anarchist organisations seem to date from the early 1950s, according to David Berry and Guillaume Davranche:

"In the early 1950s, Daniel Guerin was already appreciated in the Federation anarchiste (FA), whose bookshop service gave an important place to his books. He used to come and sign them at the annual galas of the *Libertaire* and this was an opportunity for him to meet the libertarian militants. From time to time he would drop in on the FA premises at 145, quai de Valmy, where he was an active supporter, taking part in discussions."¹⁶

Daniel Guerin wrote in 1973: "In France the Libertarian Communist Organization (O.C.L.) finds itself positioned on the borders of anarchism and marxism. It has in common with classical anarchism their affiliation with the anti-authoritarian current which dates back to the First International. But it also has in common with the Marxists the fact that they both take their stand resolutely on the field of proletarian class struggle and of the fight to overthrow the bourgeois capitalist power."¹⁷

Guerin says also that "the libertarian communists did not reject those things in the heritage of Marx and Engels which seemed to them still valid and fruitful, and, in particular, relevant to the needs of the present day". He gives as an example the notion of alienation "contained in the young Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, which fits in well with the anarchists' concept of individual liberty", but he overlooks everything that Proudhon and Bakunin said on the subject.

¹⁴ Ian Birchall, "Death of a friend" (June 1988), From Socialist Worker Review, No.110, June 1988, pp.24-25.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/birchall/1988/06/guerm.htm>

¹⁵ R. Berthier, "A propos de 'L'Etat et la revolution'",

<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article303>

¹⁶ David Berry, Guillaume Davranche, article "Guerin Daniel" in *Le dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier et social*, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article157370>

¹⁷ Daniel Guerin, "Anarchism and Marxism", 1973, From a paper given in New York on 6 Nov. 1973 with an introduction by the author for the first English language edition, 1981. First published 1981 by Cienfuegos Press. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/guerin/1973/anarchism-and-marxism.html>

Guerin says again: “Similarly (...) the affirmation that the emancipation of the proletariat ought to be the work of the proletariat itself and not that of substitutes, an idea which is found as much in the *Communist manifesto* as in its later commentaries and in the resolutions of the congress of the First International.” But he omits the fact that this idea recurs obsessively in Proudhon and Bakunin.

Finally, “the famous method of materialist and historical dialectic which is still one of the threads connecting the understanding of past and present events”. Guerin disregards the fact that, as far as “method” is concerned, the great anarchist theoreticians, including Kropotkin, referred to the experimental method¹⁸, and not to any dialectic, to explain social phenomena - what Bakunin called “scientific materialism”¹⁹.

But afterwards, all the anarchist organisations Guerin was close to adopted Marxist language, sometimes in a caricatural way: dictatorship of the proletariat, historical materialism, dialectics etc. They aped the attitudes of the Trotskyist groups, to seek rapprochement with them at all costs, to the point that, when I asked a comrade in my union who was a member of the political bureau of the Communist League (the main Trotskyist organisation of the time) what he thought of a certain anarchist organisation, he replied: “Oh, well, it’s a tendency of the Communist League”. I don’t think Daniel Guerin would have been satisfied with such a situation.

If we were to take the trouble to analyse all the “shortcomings” of anarchist doctrine pointed out by Guerin, justifying according to him a “readjustment” of anarchism, we would see that these “shortcomings” are indicative of an underestimation of the anarchist doctrine.

* * * *

From 1969 until his death, Daniel Guerin participated in the constitution of the Mouvement Communiste Libertaire (MCL), and then in an uninterrupted succession of mergers and splits of half a dozen organisations.²⁰ However, a 1972 investigation by the Ministry of the Interior into the financing of French

Trotskyist organisations included Guerin on the list of possible generous benefactors. Moreover, in 1977, Guerin agreed to become a member of the editorial committee of the *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*. David Berry informs us that Daniel Guerin had “representatives of all the tendencies of French Trotskyism at his funeral - alongside anarchists,

¹⁸ See: “Theorie politique et methode d’analyse dans la pensee de Bakounine”,
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article402>

See also: Proudhon and the proble of method,
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?artide402>

¹⁹ See: “Philosophie, Science” in *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Revolution sociale*, Appendice,
<https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Bakounine/%C5%92uvres/TomeIII46>

²⁰ Mouvement Communiste Libertaire => *Federation communiste libertaire* => *Cahiers de Mai*
=> Organisation Communiste Libertaire => Organisation revolutionnaire anarchiste => Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires.

syndicalists and many others, as well as more or less young militants (as reported by a police informant)".²¹

In conclusion, I fully agree with what Ian Birchall says in his eulogy of Guerin: "more importantly than for any particular text, Guerin should be remembered for the totality of his life - theory and practice united by a commitment to fighting against racism, colonialism, fascism and war, and for the emancipation of the working class. Whatever specific disagreements there may have been, Guerin belongs to our tradition, and we mourn him as a comrade."²² And as says David Berry: "There seems little doubt that Guerin's contribution was exceptional and that he was one of the most innovative and interesting figures on the Left in postwar France."²³

If I have dwelt at some length on Daniel Guerin in a text devoted to Jean- Paul Sartre, it is because the former seems to me to be the antithesis of the latter. Both have, roughly speaking, campaigned for the same causes, but the reminder of Guerin's activity shows how different the two men were.

²¹ David Berry in "Entretien avec Ian Birchall et David Berry, realise par Selim Nadi" (<https://www.contretemps.eu> "La politique (et les mille vies) de Daniel Guerin").

²² Ian Birchall, "Death of a friend" (June 1988), From *Socialist Worker Review*, No.110, June 1988, pp.24-25.

²³ David Berry., 2004. "Un contradicteur permanent: the ideological and political itinerary of Daniel Guerin." In: Bourg, J. (ed.). *After the Deluge. New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 120-154.

Claude Lefort

In 1952 Sartre published a long article entitled *Les Communistes et la paix* [The Communists and Peace] in which he imposed a change in the editorial line of *Les Temps modernes*: he abandoned any idea of autonomy from the Communist Party and assumed the role of “fellow traveller”. This shift was justified by the arrest on 28 May 1952 of Jacques Duclos, a Communist leader. The car in which Duclos and his wife were travelling was intercepted by the police, who found a pistol, a radio and... two pigeons in a basket. The police deduced that the pigeons were used to send messages to the Soviets... Duclos claimed that dead pigeons don’t send messages and that they were meant for his dinner. The pigeons were nevertheless autopsied with the idea of finding microfilms in them. Duclos was released after a one-month campaign by the Communist Party. This affair took place in an atmosphere of repression against the anti-Ridgway demonstrations organised by the Party.¹

In the bitter debate which opposed Claude Lefort to Sartre at the time of the publication of *Les Communistes et la paix*, Lefort had strongly criticized Sartre during an editorial committee of the *Temps modernes*. Sartre invited him to express himself in the newspaper. Lefort wrote a text² in which he suggested that Sartre understood absolutely nothing with Marxism. Actually, it would be interesting to study what Sartre really knew about Marxism.

While Sartre concretely commits himself against the risk of regression of public liberties, the long theoretical development that accompanies his commitment rests on the idea of the identity of the class and the party, a question that will be at the heart of the controversy with Claude Lefort who challenged the necessity of a party and relied on the “experience of the workers’ movement”, i.e. spontaneity, to bring about revolutionary change - a point that would be at the heart of the opposition between the two men. Yet this assimilation of party and class should not in itself have shocked Lefort, who had been trained by Trotskyism, but in the context of 1953 he considered that the communists were nothing more than Stalinists. For him, confusing the working class with the communist party on the one hand made it impossible to criticise Stalinism, but on the other hand it also made it impossible to envisage other paths to socialism.

¹ The demonstration against General Ridgway was organized in Paris on May 28, 1952 in the international context of the Korean War, in protest against the visit to France of the American General Matthew Ridgway, accused by the communists of using bacteriological weapons in Korea.

² C. Lefort, “Sartre et le marxisme,” *Les Temps Modernes* 89 (April 1953).

In his debate with Lefort in 1953, Sartre argued that a revolution cannot be made by the class alone: it is never the working class itself that makes the revolution, it needs a party, that is to say a grouping of organised members, an institutionalised grouping. The only organisation of any importance which met these criteria at the end of the war and for the next thirty years or so was the Communist Party. It should be added that during this same period Marxism permeated the entire French left, the entire progressive movement: It was impossible to disengage from it, which explains books such as *Materialism and Revolution*, *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* written in 1947, 1957 and 1960 respectively, and occasional alliances with all the leftwing, nationalist-anticolonialist and anti-imperialist organisations of the time: communists, Algerians, Castroists, Maoists, the homosexual cause, feminism, etc.

Lefort's response to *Les Communistes et la paix* was violent and Sartre replied with a dismissal that was also a notice of termination of collaboration: in other words, there was no room for debate. For Sartre, one was either in one camp or the other, and in a correspondence with Merleau-Ponty, who broke away from *Les Temps Modernes* at the same time, he declared: "you play into the hands of the reactionaries and anti-communism, full stop." Any possibility of envisaging a third way was excluded, while this was precisely what Lefort - and Merleau-Ponty, but not for the same reasons - were seeking. The latter would end up a little later accusing Sartre of "ultra-Bolshevism"³ and eventually committed himself to reformism.

Sartre's behaviour towards Merleau-Ponty was anything but "libertarian": he categorically refused to allow Merleau-Ponty to express his disagreements with him in *Les Temps Modernes*, thus revealing a quarrelsome attitude, the attitude of a mandarin who gradually eliminates all opposition to his own views. As for Lefort, Sartre probably considered him as a small fry and granted him the right to criticise him, even if it meant answering Lefort's critics. Naturally, this situation could not last.

Sartre was a philosopher whose mastery of Marxism was highly questionable; he was not very interested in political ideologies and more concerned with defending causes by allying himself with the grouping most likely to influence events, even if he did not share its politics and ideology. "This was the case with the Communist Party, and later with the Maoists. Thus, theoretically a supporter of democratic socialism (and therefore theoretically anti-Stalinist), he remained for a long time closer to the Stalinist organisations - the Communist Party or the Maoists - than to the anti-Stalinist groups that criticised the Soviet Union but which had no real militant grounding. Sartre aimed at efficiency.

So on the one hand we had a militant Sartre, driven by political pragmatism (or even opportunism), who was devoted to practical causes⁴ - "which he defended with

³ Maurice Merleau-ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, Gallimard, 1955.

⁴ Henri Martin affair: a sailor arrested for distributing leaflets against the Indochina war; support for the independence of Algeria; signature of the Manifesto of 121; support for the independence of Tunisia and Morocco; support for the Cuban revolution in 1960 (but break with the Cuban government in 1970); 1967 copresidency of the Russel tribunal; participation in the events of May 1968; opposition to

his writings, to the point of being called a “guerillero of the pen”;⁵ on the other hand, we had a Claude Lefort who tried to formulate an explanatory theory of the Soviet regime but who had no actual intervention in the field.

The group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was itself divided between the views of Castoriadis, who saw it as a party in the making, and Lefort, who did not believe in the necessity of a party. Sartre could have found in Lefort theoretical elements on which to base his “anti-Stalinism”, but naturally Lefort’s opposition to the idea of party did not encourage rapprochement. Lefort was an intellectual with a very solid Marxist training and a sociologist, he was a high-flying theorist. Whatever one might think of the analyses of “*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, to which Lefort belonged, they developed arguments to justify their anti-Stalinism that could not be dismissed out of hand.

Sartre was all the less concerned with doctrine as, if he had adhered to a theoretically argued position on the nature of the Soviet (or Chinese) regime, he would inevitably have cut himself off from his Stalinist allies - a decision he finally was forced to take after the crushing of the Budapest uprising in 1956, which put the romance between Sartre and the Communist Party on hold, followed at the beginning of May 1968 by a definitive break. As for Maoism, while he gave it almost unwavering practical support, this support was far from total on the theoretical level. “Sartre found the ideological dogmatism of the GP [Proletarian Left] repelling - reminiscent precisely of certain aspects of communism that he had previously found difficult to tolerate.”⁶

If Beauvoir took at face value the assertions that there were no political prisoners in China and that “no citizen in China is bothered for his opinions” (*The Long March*), Beauvoir and Sartre “will know how to criticise Mao and Castro when the time comes. When many intellectuals proclaim themselves Maoists, they will maintain a certain distance.”⁷ The author of these words specifies that “when the Maoist directors of the review *La Cause du Peuple* were arrested in 1970, Jean-Paul Sartre assumed the direction of the review. But what led him to this support was more freedom of the press and his sympathy for young people than any real support for Maoist thought⁸. Sartre even went so far as to “publicly criticize the propagandistic spirit of *La Cause du peuple*, to the point of arguing that the bourgeois press contained, despite its lies, more ‘truth’ than the GP’s [Gauche proletarienne, proletarian Left] daily newspaper.”⁹ Beauvoir

the Vietnam war; opposition to the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. Not to mention his extremely active support for the French Maoists. Non-exhaustive enumeration.

⁵ Pierre de Boisdeffre, *loc. cit.*

⁶ Richard Wolin, Michel Kail, “Le moment maoïste de Jean-Paul Sartre”, *L’Homme “et la Société*, 2013/1-2 n° 187-188. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-homme-et-la-societe-2013-1-page-253.htm#re32no32>

⁷ Sandrine Dauphin, “En terre d’Icarie: Les voyages de Simone de Beauvoir et de Jean-Paul Sartre en Chine et a Cuba”, *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* Volume 20 20032004, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Voir « L’ami du peuple » dans *Situations VIII*, *op. cit.*, p. 474-475 (Entretien avec Jean-Edern Hallier et Thomas Savignat, *L’Idiot international*, octobre 1970). Sur l’épisode du Sacre-Creur, cf. Si-

even declared that the *Little Red Book* contained “primary truths of a disheartening platitude”¹⁰

“Sartre is undoubtedly seduced by Castro the intellectual who forges his theory once the action has taken place. This Sartrean infatuation is reminiscent of the story of Plato who was seduced by the two Denys, tyrants of Syracuse, and who hoped to make them philosophers by the discussions he had with them. This did not prevent the two Denys from remaining tyrants and getting rid of Plato when the time came.”¹¹

Claude Lefort was trained in Marxism through Trotskyist militants of the Courant communiste internationaliste, whom he met in 1942, thanks to whom he acquired a solid knowledge of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, and of the history of the Labour “movement. He wrote in *Les Temps modernes* that he was looking for “a Marxism that was faithful to the idea of Marx that I had formed, a radical critique of bourgeois society in all its forms, linked to the revolutionary action of the proletariat, a Marxism that would reveal the alliance of theory and politics, an anti-authoritarian Marxism.” If it is difficult to imagine the possibility of finding an “anti-authoritarian” Marxism by reading Marx, the task seems even more difficult by reading Lenin and Trotsky.

Lefort adds, “What I found repugnant in the USSR (my information was scant but I knew quite a few samples of Soviet propaganda, and I had read Gide¹²) was the militarization of society, the bureaucratic hierarchy, the inequality of wages, not to mention the monstrosity of socialist realism.” So we see a man who, in 1942, forms an idea about the Soviet Union through “samples of Soviet propaganda” and reading Gide, ignoring the enormous mass of information (and warnings) published about the Soviet regime by the Russian and European anarchist movement in the 1920s and by the councilist current in the 1930s.

This remark, which could also be made about Sartre, reveals a surprising disconnection between the intellectuals leaning towards Marxism, and the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement, the former seeming to be totally unaware of the literature of the latter, which was abundant at the time. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s the libertarian movement was very lively and active, its publications were numerous and visible, and its public meetings were well attended. Perhaps the real divide was

mone de Beauvoir, *La Cereemonie des adieux*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, p. 27-28. <https://www.caim.mfo/revue-l-homme-et-la-societe-2013-1-page-253.htm#re32no32>

¹⁰ Sandrine Dauphin, “En terre d’Icarie: Les voyages de Simone de Beauvoir et de Jean-Paul Sartre en Chine et a Cuba”, *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* Volume 20 20032004, p. 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹² Andre Gide, French writer who in the early 1930s became enthusiastic about the Soviet regime, but suffered disillusionment during his trip there in the summer of 1936. He published his testimony the same year, *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.*, which earned him virulent attacks from the Communists. However, he persisted in his denunciation of Soviet totalitarianism at the time of the Moscow trials and at the same time became involved in the intellectuals’ fight against fascism.

between intellectuals of bourgeois origin and the libertarian movement, which was totally absent from university circles. Intellectuals who might have been tempted to obtain information about the situation in the Soviet Union from the point of view of the non-communist working class would have had to seek it in places where they were unlikely to go.

In 1948 Claude Lefort, who entered the *Temps modernes* under the protective wing of Merleau-Ponty, published “Kravchenko et le probleme de l’URSS”.¹³ A note preceding the text regrets that the USSR is the accused and specifies that Lefort’s article does not commit the magazine. Sartre covers his tracks. In 1949 the name of Claude Lefort is associated with that of Cornelius Castoriadis in the adventure of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which wanted to be both an editorial and a militant project. Coming from a dissident fraction of the Internationalist Communist Party, the journal asserted itself as a break with Stalinism. In 1953 Lefort publishes “Marxism and Sartre”¹⁴, a criticism of the voluminous text of Sartre entitled “The Communists and the peace”. Lefort reproaches Sartre for confusing Stalinism and Marxism.

After Krouchtchev’s report to the 20th congress of the Communist party of the USSR of 1956 and the Hungarian uprising, Lefort revised his criticism of Sartre by accusing him of putting the USSR out of reach of Marxist reflection: “Little does it matter that Sartre declares ‘inconceivable’ the politics he attributes to the perpetrators of the repression [of the Hungarian uprising of 1956], he is careful not to conceive of anything else, and his reasoning achieves its goal: the USSR is immune from radical criticism, beyond the reach of Marxist reflection.”¹⁵

Between Sartre and Lefort, we have two approaches that are at opposite ends of the spectrum of interpretation of Marxism, especially on the question of the party. When Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, he was supposed to be writing the programme of the League of Communists, a small German organisation without much structure. The “Party” at that time was not an organisation as we understand the word today, it was the grouping of people who had taken up a cause. Marx actually had no idea what a party was: At that moment, the actor of the revolution is the proletariat.

During the revolution of 1848-49, Marx bureaucratically dissolved the first communist party in history in the midst of the revolution because, according to one of the League’s members, he considered that “the existence of the League was no longer necessary since it was a propaganda organisation and not an organisation for conspiracy, and that, under the new conditions of freedom of the press and propaganda, this could be done openly, without going through a secret organisation.”¹⁶

This point of view could be approached to a certain extent to that of Lefort a century later.

¹³ Claude Lefort, « Kravchenko et le probleme de l’URSS », *Les Temps Modernes*, 29, p. 1490-1516.

¹⁴ Claude Lefort, « Le marxisme et Sartre », *Les Temps Modernes*, 89, 1953, p. 1541-1570.

¹⁵ Claude Lefort, *Elements d’une critique de la bureaucratie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 268.

¹⁶ Quoted by Fernando Claudin, *Marx, Engels et la revolution de 1848*, Maspero, p. 133.

Marx had made a severe criticism of the socialist program adopted in Gotha, whose inspiration was very clearly Lassallean. At that time, the socialist leaders did not want to hear about Marx's disagreements concerning the Gotha program, so Marx's critical text was not published. And when Marx asked Liebknecht to communicate it to Bebel, Liebknecht refused. When Bebel eventually read these critical notes in 1891 (Marx was dead), he tried by all means to prevent their publication... Lassalle was seen as the man who had given life to the German labour movement after the failure of the revolution in 1848 during which Marx and Engels had taken very ambiguous positions which were sharply criticized after and not forgotten: the official histories of Marxism naturally conceal the fact that, exiled in London, the German Communists excluded Marx and Engels from the League of Communists for their attitude during the revolution of 1848/1849.¹⁷

Lassalle was the one who had put in place the organizational structures of what would later be called German Social-Democracy and this applies to both the reformist and the revolutionary branches of social democracy. Finally, it should be pointed out that Marx's political project during his lifetime had nothing to do with Lenin's: it was essentially parliamentary. The "revolution" referred to in the *Manifesto* is the one that will establish universal suffrage.

Naturally, the "orthodox" Marxist authors do not want to hear anything about the Lassallian impregnation of German social democracy. This is the reason for Hal Draper's fierce hatred of Marx's biographer Franz Mehring, who is also a perfectly orthodox Marxist, but who has the peculiarity of being relatively honest for a Marxist, and who places Lassalle and Marx as cofounders of social democracy — although personally I think that Lassalle holds 75% of the shares and Marx 25%.

German social democracy is much more of Lassallian than Marxist inspiration: It should be known that the Gotha congress ended with the song of the "Marseillaise of the Workers" whose text said:

"We follow the audacious path that was shown to us by [...] Lassalle..."

Once the German social-democratic party was launched, it took on an important extension and Marx, although in London, followed its evolution very closely, despite his disagreements with its leaders. In a way, the party model of which Lassalle was largely the creator became the Marxist party model.

Between Sartre and Lefort we have two radically opposed visions of political action: one centred on the party, the other on the "proletarian experience", the title of an article by Lefort. This concept is one of Lefort's main contributions developed within the Socialisme ou Barbarie group during the 1950s. :

¹⁷ See: Rene Berthier: "Quand Marx liquide le premier parti communiste de l'histoire... et s'en fait exclure" (<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article602>) (When Marx liquidates the first communist party in history... and is excluded from it...).

By denying the necessity of a party, Lefort was at the other extreme with positions that border on spontaneism. He elaborated the concept of “experience of the workers’ movement”, which is a dynamic process by which the working class constitutes itself as a historical subject, bearer of a project of social emancipation within the framework of a praxis preserving its autonomy in relation to theory. Lefort intends to show that the working class is not content to react to the conditions that are made for it, that is to say to its objective condition¹⁸, but that its accumulated historical experience creates, in a way, a collective consciousness, which constitutes it as the subject of its history. “It is in function of this constitutive creativity of the proletarian experience, which takes back to its account the organization of the production and appropriates it by its initiatives, that we can conceive the possibility of a revolutionary upheaval of which the proletariat would be the driving subject.”¹⁹

There are in this concept of experience of the workers’ movement real analogies with anarcho-syndicalism, which considers that the communist project is contained in the forms of organization and struggle of the working class. This approach implies that there is no political party aspiring to the conquest of power. Whereas the party is in a way a “counter-state”: the workers organized on the basis of their role in the production process constitute a “counter-society” capable of assuming the organization of society, what Nicolas Poirier calls the “constitutive creativity of the proletarian experience, which takes over the organization of production and appropriates it by its initiatives”.²⁰

For revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, the workers’ class organization, which is their instrument of struggle under capitalism, also constitutes the model of the organization of society after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. This is the meaning of the expression “destruction of the state”: the destruction of the state is nothing else than the replacement of the class organization of the bourgeoisie - the state - by that of the proletariat. The class organization of the workers, which is the instrument of struggle under capitalism, constitutes the model of political organization of the society after the revolution. This is a basic idea of Bakuninism and, later, of anarchosyndicalism. We find this idea in a theoretician of council communism, Anton Pannekoek:

“Since the revolutionary class fight against the bourgeoisie and its organs is inseparable from the seizure of the productive apparatus by the workers and its application to production, the same organisation that unites the class for its fight also acts as the organisation of the new productive process.”²¹

¹⁸ Voir « L’expérience prolétarienne », *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, n° 11, 1952, repris dans *Elements d’une critique de la bureaucratie*, Genève, Droz, 1971, reed. « Tel- Gallimard », 1979, p. 73.

¹⁹ Nicolas Poirier, “Retour sur la notion d’expérience prolétarienne : Claude Lefort a *Socialisme ou Barbarie*”, *Revue internationale de théorie critique*, 15/2011. <https://doi.org/10.4000/variations.105>

²⁰ Nicolas Poirier, *loc. cit.*

²¹ Anton Pannekoek, “Remarques générales sur la question de l’organisation”, *Living Marxism*, vol. 4, no. 5. November 1938.

While Castoriadis saw in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* the nucleus of the future revolutionary party, Lefort, who thought that the existence of a revolutionary party was not justified, distanced himself from the group. He wrote an article in *S ou B* n° 10 of July-August 1952, “Le proletariat et sa direction”, in which he questioned the necessity of the party but made it clear that this did not call into question the Marxist conception of the proletariat²²; he disputed that the working class should be protected against itself by a “corps of specialised revolutionaries” (p. 69).²³

When Lefort writes that “the history of the proletariat is hence *experience*”²⁴, he is in agreement with anarcho-syndicalism for whom the working class does not rely so much on a theory as on the experience of struggle. In the same way, there is convergence with anarcho-syndicalism in the assertion according to which “it is first of all a fact that the elaboration of the program of the party as the initiative of its constitution is the work of nonproletarian elements, in any case escaping from the exploitation which reigns in the process of production. It is the work mostly of petty-bourgeois intellectuals who, thanks to the culture they possess and their way of life, are able to devote themselves completely to the theoretical and practical preparation of the revolution.”²⁵

The analogy with anarcho-syndicalism stops there insofar as the latter, while contesting the necessity of a party, does not exclude the constitution, within the class organization, of an organization of militants whose role is to prevent the capture of the organization by external elements: this was the role of the famous Bakuninian Alliance.

Lefort’s break with Trotskyism is manifested in “Trotsky’s contradiction”, where he analyses Trotsky’s *Stalin* in *Les Temps modernes*, published in 1948. From then on, the USSR is seen as a new form of exploitation society. “Stalinism is for us a system of exploitation, which it is advisable to understand, as it is advisable to understand modern capitalism, with a view to contributing to the workers’ movement, the only one likely to overthrow them”. On the other hand, there is no question of calling into question Bolshevism, which is “the expression of an era”. Bolshevism, Lefort still says, “did not fail because the proletariat was without future, but because it was a historical anticipation”²⁶ (!!!) This is not very coherent with what Lefort says elsewhere in his article. Indeed, he reminds us that “we know only too well with what exceptional violence Lenin was determined to exterminate his adversaries, whether they were left-wing revolutionary socialists or anarchists”. However, the date that Lefort evokes for

²² Claude Lefort. “The assertion that the necessity of the party cannot be called into question without at the same time calling into question the Marxist conception of the proletariat seems to us to be erroneous.” p. 57

²³ Lefort’s article is included in *Elements d’une critique de la bureaucratie*, Gallimard, 1979.

²⁴ C. Lefort, “Le proletariat et sa direction”, in *Elements d’une critique de la bureaucratie*, Gallimard, p.61.

²⁵ Lefort, *ibid.* p. 63.

²⁶ Claude Lefort, “La contradiction de Trotsky” in *Elements d’une critique de la bureaucratie*, “Gallimard, p. 57.

this relentlessness is 1921, well before the Thermidorian drifts, which Trotsky himself does not really manage to date: 1923, 1926, 1927, 1928-1929?

“The terror that begins with the extermination of all opposing parties, all competing groups, and ends, within the Bolshevik party itself, with the banning of fractions, reaches its climax with the repression of the workers of Kronstadt, who, once considered the revolutionary elite, and fighting for demands, some of which are confused, but most of which are democratic, are treated as agents of the counter-revolution and implacably crushed.”²⁷

What is the repression of the Kronstadt insurrection the “anticipation” of? And all the other “Kronstadt” of the Russian revolution, which are rarely mentioned?

“La contradiction de Trotski” (Trotsky’s Contradiction), a text in which Lefort underlines “the prodigious historical role of the Bolsheviks”, was published in 1949 in *Les Temps modernes*. The article was integrated in 1979 in a book gathering different texts of Lefort, under the title of *Elements of a critique of Bureaucracy*. In a note to this reprint, Lefort adds this: “In this study, written in 1948, we are only evoking the crushing of the Kronstadt Commune and the repression exercised by the Bolshevik power against the workers’ oppositions”; the author adds that since the first publication of the article, “a lot of information has been published”. In other words, it took Lefort more than twenty years to seriously integrate events widely known since the 1920s and 1930s from perfectly accessible anarchist or councilist sources.

The texts of councilist origin were published in particular in the *International Council Correspondence*, in *Living Marxism* and *New Essays*. The “Theses on Bolshevism”²⁸ published in December 1934 in *Raetekorrespondenz* says almost everything there is to say on the question.

From the first years of the revolution, the Russian anarchists - but also many workers without a party - denounced at the congresses the bureaucratization, the substitution of the party for the working class, the state capitalism, the Bolshevik counter-revolution. These militants certainly did not develop a finished theory of bureaucracy, as others could do later with a more rested mind, but they exposed the problem in an extremely clear way.

The resolutions of the conferences of the Russian anarcho-syndicalists anticipate from 1918 all the analyses which will be developed later. The first of these conferences, held in Moscow from August 25 to September 1, 1918, takes position against “the triple counter-revolutionary threat of the foreign bourgeoisie, of the internal counter-revolution and of the currently dominant party, which has become counter-revolutionary”.²⁹ The conference denounces the tactics of the Bolsheviks towards the

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 52.

²⁸ <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article477>

²⁹ Cf. *Les anarchistes dans la revolution russe*, La Tete de feuilles, 1973, textes recueillis et traduits par Alexandre Skirda.

soviets and the other workers' organisations, "which only increase", as well as "the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks over the soviets and the workers' organisations which pushes the workers to the right, towards the Constituent Assembly". It takes a stand in favour of "really representative soviets, organised on a collegiate basis, subject to direct delegation by the workers and peasants of a given factory, village, etc., and not by chattering politicians who enter on party lists and who transform the soviets into demagogic chattering rooms".

In 1921, Rudolf Rocker, a German anarcho-syndicalist activist, published a book, *The Bankruptcy of State Communism* (which Spartacus Editions published under the title *The Soviets Betrayed by the Bolsheviks*). Rocker writes prophetically: "Robespierre's policy led France to IX Thermidor and then to the military dictatorship of Napoleon. To what abysses will the policy of Lenin and his comrades lead Russia?"

As early as April 1922 Alexander Berkman published a text in the *Revue anarchiste*:

"A mechanical centralization paralyzes the activity of the country (...) The government monopolizes all life: the revolution is taken away from the people. A bureaucratic machine is born, frightening in its numbers, inefficiency and corruption. In Moscow alone this new class of sovbur (Bolshevik bureaucrats) is greater in number than the total of the employees of the administration of the tsarist regime of 1914."

In 1922 also, Emma Goldman wrote a book, *My further disillusionments in Russia*, an excerpt of which was published in the *Revue Anarchiste* in 1925. In it she states that "It would be an error to assume that the failure of the Revolution was due entirely to the character of the Bolsheviks. Fundamentally, it was the result of the principles and methods of Bolshevism." It thus poses from this time the problem that the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* would develop some forty years later: the role of Bolshevik ideology in the birth of the bureaucracy³⁰.

A book published in 1923 by the Group of Russian Anarchists Exiled in Berlin, translated in French by Voline, entitled *Repression of Anarchism in Soviet Russia*,³¹ is perfectly explicit about the nature of the regime: the book was widely distributed. Many other works were published.

Let us mention also Arthur Lehning who wrote in 1929 *Marxism and anarchism in the Russian revolution*³², in which he shows that the revolution is not confused with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, that the dictatorship of the proletariat was only that of the party and the bureaucrats: "One cannot separate the Bolshevik conceptions of the State and of socialism: the Bolsheviks were State socialists and the economic doctrine of socialism also fixed the political means to realize it". A theory of state capitalism is sketched out at the end of the book:

³⁰ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/cornelius-castoriadis-the-role-of-bolshevik-ideology-in-the-birth-of-the-bureaucracy>

³¹ <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article361>

³² Editions Spartacus.

“But if the capitalist monopoly becomes a state monopoly, if capitalism becomes a state capitalism, if these two monopolies of power and property come to have more and more the same character, merge and join in one hand, then instead of destroying each other, instead of neutralizing each other they become by their union a formidable power. (...) The forced concentration of political oppression and economic exploitation does not engender freedom but leads, on the contrary, to a rationalized slavery.”

I thought it necessary to mention the positions taken on the nature of the Soviet regime prior to those of Sartre and Lefort in order to show that there was already information available in the 1920s and 1930s on the basis of which they could have formed an opinion. It is true that the anarchist and council communist critique does not apply directly to Stalinism, which is Sartre’s preoccupation, but to Leninism, which poses a real problem because it actually anticipates the critique of Stalinism and calls into question Leninism itself. The same argument applies to Lefort, who does not seem ready to question Leninism.

The blindness of Sartre as well as Lefort to libertarian analyses of the Russian revolution may be due to the fact that they are not directly addressed to Stalinism, but show the obvious link between the latter and Leninism.

Claude Lefort eventually abandoned Marxism. “As far as I am concerned, the departure from Socialisme ou Barbarie freed me from a whole series of constraints. To put it better, it was like being freed from censorship. I’m not talking about that of others, but my own, because, within Socialisme ou Barbarie, I forbade myself to give form to thoughts which would have revealed, in my own eyes, my break with Marxism and the ‘revolutionary’ project of the group. Lefort came to the following conclusion: “My attachment to the idea of a society of councils was no less equivocal than that which I denounced with the critique of the revolutionary party”:

“For, finally, what did the model of a pyramid of councils mean? Doesn’t it presuppose a hierarchy of responsibilities, and, if we admit that information circulates from the bottom to the top, as well as from the top to the bottom, and that collective mobilisation is such that the wills of the bottom make their way to the top, don’t the functions of the executive recreate, under the cover of the selection of competences, or in favour of the power of the word, and despite the principle of the permanent revocability of the delegates, the conditions of a dominant- dominated division? In short, it was the belief in a solution, in a general formula for the organisation of society, that I had to denounce as illusory, by showing that the power of the bureaucracy had been built on this illusion, and that breaking with it (trying to break with it, because it is a question of a break that must always be made again) was, on the other hand, the fundamental condition of a struggle on all fields, against the present or potential forms of domination.”

In some way, Lefort had come to the positions of the individualist anarchists of the 1890s-1900s who rejected all forms of organisation because they produced “authority” - that is “bureaucracy” -, although he affirmed at the same time that “the struggle could be placed under the sign of self-management in work-places”, especially as he specified that “it was to allow oneself to be caught up in the trap of ideology to imagine its outcome in reality”.³³

Lefort was known at the University of Caen (in Normandy) for having been head of the sociology department at the Faculty from 1965 to 1971 and, during 1968, for having shown his sympathy towards the student protesters. Accompanied by the inseparable Marcel Gauchet, who was extremely virulent at the time, he took part in the general assemblies - in fact, permanent meetings - at which the countless variants of revolutionary Marxism clashed. He gave fascinating lectures on psychoanalysis and on Plato.

His evolution led Lefort to devote himself to reflection on antitotalitarianism and to “reexamine the idea of democracy”: in his own words: he was “one of the first left-wing intellectuals to reject the sirens of communism”, as Elodie Maurot wrote in an article in the daily *La Croix*³⁴. If, like Churchill, he came to implicitly consider that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others”, he had the merit of not being one of those Parisian intellectuals who supported Pol Pot or the Ayatollah Khomeini.

³³ Entretien paru le 19 avril 1975, dans *L'Anti-mythes* n°14, repris dans « Le temps present », Belin, 2007, pp. 223 - 260

³⁴ “Claude Lefort, un sage de la démocratie”, *La Croix*, 29-11-2010

Sartre & Adam Schaff

Sartre's clearly expressed intention in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was to make intelligible Marx's idea that circumstances determine men as much as men determine circumstances. Sartre wanted to complete Marx's work by integrating the individual(s) into his general scheme. He started from the dominant idea at that time that Marxism was only interested in global social processes and neglected the individual: there was therefore a deficiency on this question, which had to be rectified, as expressed by H.R. Burkle: Sartre "has been urging orthodox Marxists to free themselves from their fixation on general social dogmas and to turn to the neglected problems of concrete individuals"¹.

Sartre makes no secret of the fact that he is inspired by the work of Marx: "my formalism, which is inspired by that of Marx, consists simply in recognising that men make history to precisely the extent that it makes them". (*Critique* p. 97) This quote can be related to what Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*: "circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances." He also refers to aspects of Marx's work that he considers cannot be questioned, such as the labour-value theory: "the essential discovery of Marxism is that labour, as a historical reality and as the utilization of particular tools in an already determined social and material situation, is the real foundation of the organization of social relations. This discovery can no longer be questioned".

The phrasing is curious: one gets the impression that Sartre has really made an extraordinary discovery and that he is in a hurry to assert that it is incontestable. Yet this thesis of labour-value, according to which labour, and labour alone, is the source of value, is widely recognised in a large part of the community of economists, and it is by no means a "discovery" of Marx: the concept was used long before him by Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Proudhon².

¹ Howard R. Burkle, "Schaff and Sartre on the Grounds of individual freedom", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 5, Issue 4, December 1965 <https://www.pdcnet.org/ipq/content/ipq/1965/0005/0004/0647/0665>

² Cf. Proudhon:

"As a principle of utility and a force of production, labour is the primary source of wealth. All other conditions being equal, it can be said that the more a society works, the richer it becomes; and conversely, the more labour decreases, the more production decreases and wealth decreases with it." (*De la Justice dans la Revolution et dans l'Eglise*)

"Utility is the basis of value; labour fixes its relationship; price is the expression which, except for the aberrations we shall study, translates this relationship" (*Systeme des contradictions economiques*)

If Marx has enunciated certain truths, these are still only abstract concepts, they are not connected with the social world of which they are the expression: this is why the *Critique* aims to make Marxism intelligible. Marxism, says Sartre, “did not satisfy our need to understand”: this is why existentialism must “allow the individual concrete ... (to) emerge from the background of the general contradictions of productive forces and relations of production”.

“Marxism, after drawing us to it as the moon draws the tides, after transforming all our ideas, after liquidating the categories of our bourgeois thought, abruptly left us stranded. It did not satisfy our need to understand. In the particular situation in which we were placed, it no longer had anything new to teach us, because it had come to a stop.

“Marxism stopped.”³

Secondly, Sartre argues in the *Critique* that labour is the foundation of all social relations (p.152 n), but it is not clear to what extent he assumes this idea insofar as, with the advent of automation, labour would lose its primacy in production, and consequently its determining role in the social relations of production. We can deduce that this reservation, made by Sartre, would imply that labour as the basis of all social relations would be limited to a relatively simple economy, of a quasi-craft type. However, the appearance of automation does not in any way take away the fundamental quality of work, firstly because workers had to work to make the automated machines, and secondly because in any case workers and technicians are needed to ensure the supervision and smooth running of these machines and their maintenance, and if they stop working there is no longer any production. All this suggests a rather simplistic view of Marxism in Sartre.

I think that in order to understand Sartre’s point of view, we have to place ourselves in the context of the 1960s: Sartre is a man for whom Marxism is that of the Soviet Union. Indeed, if one examines this Marxism, one cannot help but notice that it has “stopped”, but no serious reader of Marx, that is to say, no reader free of partisan considerations and with a minimum of critical spirit, can affirm such a thing, nor limit Marxist doctrine to Soviet orthodoxy. There were many “heterodox” Marxists around Sartre, to whom he unfortunately did not give credit because they did not have large battalions.

We can understand Sartre’s concern to give back their place to “concrete men”⁴, in other words to individuals, who have played a role in history, but it is possible that by asking Marxism to elucidate this problem he assigns to it a task which is not his, which would rather be that of sociology. Sociology, unlike Marxism, is not a political doctrine but a scientific discipline based on investigation and experimentation. What

³ Sartre, *The Search For A Method*, pp.21-22.

⁴ Sartre, *The Search for a method* (2nd part).

makes Paul Valery, Gustave Flaubert, “petit bourgeois”? Even if a Marxist can rightly ask this question, even if a Marxist can analyse these authors from a class perspective, as Arnold Hauser has done, it is perhaps asking too much of Marxism to answer the question.

“The doctrine of historical materialism revolves around the socioeconomic conditions of existence as the fundamental, even if not exclusive, presuppositions of higher cultural and thus also of artistic structures. Its classical formulations, which stem from Marx and Engels, form the basis of a realistic, not merely speculative, theory of art, although *they are far from providing the principle of a comprehensive and definitive doctrine for the solution of all decisive aesthetic problems.* [My emphasis] Fundamentally they say little more than that art is a part of the spiritual superstructure, which in the last resort rests upon the material basis of a given movement.”⁵

Interestingly, at the same time a Polish philosopher, Adam Schaff, wanted to reconsider Marxism by taking the individual, not the great social masses, the classes, as the centre. As is always the case when one wants to present a “humanist” Marx, Schaff was obliged to refer to his early works, to the concepts of “generic man” of “total man”, etc., “which he quickly abandoned following Stirner’s scathing critique.

Schaff is interested in the question of human freedom in Marxism. He challenged existentialist conceptions that asserted the absolute autonomy of the individual, but admitted a relative autonomy that gave the individual, in certain circumstances, the freedom to choose between various possibilities. “Schaff is thus much closer to Bakunin than Sartre. Indeed, Bakunin recognised that the individual, however determined by his social environment, could revolt against his environment. His point of view was simple common sense: without this capacity to revolt, i.e. to question oneself, society would remain indefinitely immobile.

According to Schaff, Marxist humanism aims to ensure the best conditions for human happiness by eliminating the social causes of unhappiness. For Marx, communism would therefore be a practical humanism. This struggle will have to continue in a socialist society that has not yet completely eliminated alienation.

According to Howard Burkle, Schaff considers that “existentialism is unalterably ‘antagonistic’ to Marxism and that a genuine union is impossible”:

“Schaff admits that Marxists have, unfortunately, failed to develop their own doctrine of the individual, but he insists that they can rectify this now, using nothing more than what is implicit in Marx’s original thought. In any case, they need no help from existentialists.”⁶

⁵ Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 185-186

⁶ H.R. Burkle, *loc. cit.*

Burkle points out that the debate is somewhat skewed in that Schaff is “fully aware that Sartre has outgrown existentialism and that he has made an extensive effort to conceive a thoroughly social philosophy. Schaff treats him as little more than the famous apostle of popular existentialism”. He only retains Sartre’s work prior to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, to which he does not respond: “he simply dismisses it [the *Critique*] as prolix and obscure, which it certainly is. However, he never offers a careful analysis of its content”. (Burkle)

In fact the Sartre-Schaff debate on the individual quickly turns on the debate on determinism, to which the individual is or is not subject, and on its “freedom”. While Sartre is openly “indeterministic”, historical materialism for Schaff implies historical determinism. However, “Marxist determinism understands historical necessity not as a force acting on society from outside, independent of society, but operating precisely through human actions. Men make their own history” says Schaff⁷ who adds that the historical circumstances in return influence their actions and decisions. In *Le Marxisme et l’individu* (French version), Schaff also writes that “man who is the product of history can be considered as being the creator of history”,⁸ agreeing in every respect with Bakunin. Hence Marxism does not deny the role of the individual in history: there are, according to Burkle, “strands of indeterminism in the texture of a largely determined history”⁹.

“The existence of objective laws governing historical development, and of necessity in social processes, neither eliminates men’s creative activity nor erases their freedom. These laws only determine the social foundations on which people engage in activity and give expression to their freedom.”¹⁰

This brings us back to Bakunin, for whom freedom is the knowledge of necessity

Schaff seems convinced that Sartre displays a doctrine of arbitrary spontaneity and anti-social individualism and does not take the social dimension of his thought seriously. As such, he believes that whatever concessions Sartre may be led to make to society, he “always see social unity as a relation among individuals. Society emerges from individuals, and its ethically significant energies and determinations arise from individuals” (Burkle), which a Marxist will not admit, nor will anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, but not for the same reasons. For his part Schaff, Burkle says, “takes society as the principal unit and then distinguishes individuals as subordinate constituents of the whole”.

The Proudhonian concept of “social power” refers precisely to the fact that a given set of individuals is not equivalent to the arithmetical sum of the individuals who

⁷ Adam Schaff, *A Philosophy of Man*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1963, p. 71.

⁸ Adam Schaff, *Le marxisme et l’individu*, Librairie Armand Collin, 1968, p. 162.

⁹ Howard R. Burkle, “Schaff and Sartre on the Grounds of individual freedom”, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 5, Issue 4, December 1965

<https://www.pdcnet.org/ipq/content/ipq/1965/0005/0004/0647/0665>

¹⁰ Adam Schaff, *A Philosophy of Man* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1963, p. 72.

constitute the group: it is this “social power” that makes the capacity for action of a coordinated group out of proportion to the sum of the individual forces that make up this group. It follows that what holds the group together is the relationship of cooperation¹¹. And what ensures the development of the collective force is the “relationship of functions, the solidarity of interests that it creates, the feeling that the producers acquire, the new consciousness that results”¹². Collective force is the “synthesis of individual and collective activities”¹³.

Surprisingly, Burkle attempts a compromise that sounds an awful lot like an anarchist approach:

“Would it not be properly dialectical to treat individuals and society as equally basic poles of the human factor, and derive freedom not from one or the other alone or as subordinated, but from the interaction between them?”

There is a passage in the *Critique* which reveals a strong convergence with anarchism, but of course Sartre is clearly unaware of this since he is speaking on behalf of Marxism:

“If one wants to grant to Marxist thought its full complexity, one would have to say that man in a period of exploitation is *at once both* the product of his own production and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product. This contradiction is not fixed; it must be grasped in the very movement of *praxis*. Then it will clarify Engel’s statement: men make their history on the basis of real, prior, conditions (among which we would include acquired characteristics, distortions imposed by the mode of work and of life, alienation, etc.), but it is *the men* who make it and not the prior conditions. Otherwise men would be merely the vehicles of inhuman forces which through them would govern the social world. To be sure, these conditions exist, and it is they, and they alone, which can furnish a direction, a material reality to the changes which are in preparation; but the movement of human *praxis* goes beyond them while conserving them.”¹⁴

The passage where Sartre says that man is “at once the product of his own production and a historical agent” is reminiscent of Bakunin when he says that man is “the producer of himself”. Bakunin argues that if the individual is indebted to society, society is also indebted to the individual because he influences society even in an unconscious and feeble way. The real life of society is the sum total of the lives, developments, relationships and actions of all the individuals in it. But society is also a

¹¹ Proudhon, *De la justice...*, 4e etude, pp. 259-261

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See: “Proudhon. - Force collective et pouvoir social” <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?artide598>.

¹⁴ Sartre, *Critique*, p. 87.

grouping independent of the will of the individuals gathered and combined; it is more than the mere addition of the individuals that compose it.

Individuals are born, develop, in a material, intellectual and moral context of which they are the expression as well as the realisation. The action of individuals - conscious or not - on the society that created them is in fact the action of society on itself. (IU) Created by society, man is also its creator: man's individual life and his social life cannot be separated. But then why pose the problem of the individual?

The will, like intelligence, is not an "immortal and divine mystical spark that miraculously fell from heaven to earth, to animate pieces of flesh, corpses", adds Bakunin. It is the product of organised and living flesh and also the product of society. It is therefore capable of being developed by education; the habit of thinking and willing, received from outside by education, can constitute in the individual an inner force "henceforth identified with his being" and enable him to continue to develop himself by a spontaneous gymnastics, so to speak, of his thought and will.

"...spontaneous in the sense that it will no longer be solely directed and determined by external wills and actions, but also by that inner force of thinking and willing which, after having been formed and consolidated in him by the past action of these external causes, becomes in its turn a more or less active and powerful force, a producer, as it were, independent of the things, ideas, wills, and actions which immediately surround it." (VIII 211.)

It is in this sense, says Bakunin, that man can become up to a certain point his own educator, his own instructor, the "producer of himself" (VIII 211.) If the generations that follow one another are subjected to ideas, dominant representations from which they can only with difficulty escape, the contestation of these representations, by producing other ideas, can itself be productive of new effects. This is Bakunin's characteristic approach: a phenomenon produced by given causes can, once created, become autonomous from its initial causes and become in itself "producer of new effects".

Thus we can answer Schaff's question: how can individuals introduce innovations into history? How can men make their own history?

Sartre Marxist?

In an essay published by the *Boston Review*, Ronald Aronson praises Sartre's existential Marxism, but Alfred Betschart argues that "existential Marxism is a case of a *contradictio in adiecto*." He adds that "Sartre was never recognized as a Marxist by his contemporaries", which does not seem to me to be the case. It seems to me that the common opinion associates Sartre with Marxism, even if it is not an orthodox Marxism, even if there is no consensus on what kind of Marxism Sartre subscribes to. It is true that later he declared that Marxism and existentialism were separate philosophies. And even later he declared that he had written the *Critique against* Marxism. Obviously, Sartre's relationship with Marxism is somewhat confused.

Alfred Betschart tells us that there are indeed ingredients from Marxism in Sartre's thought, such as the idea that history is the history of class struggle, the idea that the passage from one form of society to another is made by a revolution. To say that history is the history of class struggle implies that class struggle is the only determination likely to produce historical evolutions, which is an extremely caricatural way of looking at things, and which does not correspond to Marx's real thought.

Like Sartre, Castoriadis thinks that Marxist theory forgets individuals, whose "consciously or unconsciously motivated action is visibly an indispensable relay of any action of 'forces' or 'laws' in history".¹ Castoriadis aims at the "economic determinism", which limits to a single factor the global process of history. He thinks that "class struggle is not in reality a factor on its own. It is only a link in the causal connections established each time without ambiguity by the state of the technical-economic infrastructure."²

But these "ingredients" mentioned by Betschart - class struggle and revolution - are by no means specific to Marxism, they characterize anarchism just as well. And they can also be said to characterise the French historians of the Restoration, that is, the period of some thirty years after the fall of Napoleon and the re-establishment of the monarchy. They were historians of the bourgeoisie who applied the same criteria to the bourgeois/aristocratic antagonism of the Ancien Regime that socialists in general applied to the proletariat/bourgeoisie antagonism. They disputed that history was made by "great men" alone: with them the masses entered the scene and the idea that the forms of economic production and the resulting social structures are interrelated was imposed. The idea that the class struggle - or, in general, the internal contradictions of

¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, Le Seuil, 1975, p. 41)

² *Ibid.*

a society - are a factor of historical evolution is also imposed. This is a perfectly materialist view of history, but one seen from the point of view of the bourgeoisie. For Guizot, whom Bakunin described as "an illustrious doctrinaire statesman", it is in the state of society that the meaning of institutions must be sought. These historians - Augustin Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, Thiers and a few others - introduced social and historical determinism into their work. They understood that history is made less by exceptional individualities than by the masses driven by a collective determinism. Writing from the perspective of the bourgeois revolution, they believed that the bourgeoisie is the last class in history... By this very fact, the emancipation of the bourgeoisie is seen as the emancipation of the whole of society.

There are other points on which there is only partial agreement:

"He [Sartre] not only failed to show any interest in the question of economic exploitation, but most of the answers he gave in the *Critique* even contradicted Marxist theory. His expression of Marxism as the philosophy of our time seems to have rather been more an act of courtesy than the expression of deep conviction. As Sartre himself later said, Marxism and existentialism are quite separate philosophies."³

On several occasions Sartre paid tribute to Marx without claiming adherence to Marxism. *The Communists and Peace* is a confused document lacking a guiding line, intermingling references to the political events of the day with quotations from Lenin, the Third International, and in which the working class, the Communist Party and Kremlin politics are identified in a schematic manner.

The political context of the time was extremely confused and turbulent, and this confusion is visible in *The Communists and Peace*. There is every reason to believe that if Sartre had been a Marxist, he would have presented the situation more clearly: indeed, this document is not based on any method of investigation, it goes off in all directions, launches into confused hypotheses and simplistic conclusions such as the identification of the masses with the party and the party with Moscow's policy.

Isn't the notion of existentialist Marxism a contradiction in terms? Some authors, such as Adam Schaff during Sartre's lifetime and Alfred Betschart today, think so, in opposition to Ron Aronson, who believes that Sartre's existentialist Marxism is a possible "philosophical foundation for today's revitalized critiques of capitalism."⁴

"Aronson writes about Sartre's turn from his early individualism with his emphasis on absurdity, freedom, and responsibility to Marxism—of course,

³ Betschart, Alfred. "Sartre was not a Marxist" *Sartre Studies International: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Existentialism and Contemporary Culture*, vol. 25, no. 2, Dec. 2019.

⁴ Ronald Aronson, "The Philosophy of Our Time: Jean-Paul Sartre's existential Marxism offers a radical philosophical foundation for today's revitalized critiques of capitalism," *Boston Review*, November 14, 2018.

not a Stalinist version of Marxism, but a rather special version—existential Marxism”⁵

To the question “Is Sartre a Marxist?”, *La Nouvelle Critique*, the journal of the Communist Party, answered “No” in its March 1966 issue. Other authors quoted by Betschart also answer “no” to this question: Adam Schaff, a Polish Marxist, though not an orthodox one, Danilo Pejovic, a Croatian Marxist who qualified Sartrean existentialism as a “typically French variation of radical nihilism.”⁶

The *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, usually considered as an attempt to clarify the theory of Marxism, is however largely a challenge to Marxism. “In my view, the *Critique* must be considered rather as an anti-Marxist opus than as a great Marxist treatise as Aronson claims”⁷, Betschart says again, and adds:

“Whereas in Marxist theory, classes are the prime agents of history, they are reduced to what Sartre calls ‘series’ in the *Critique*. Classes do not act in Sartre’s eyes; at best they form milieus. In this way, Sartre implicitly contests the Marxist idea of a revolution by the proletariat.”⁸

The approximate nature of Sartre’s political formation can be judged when he says in *On a raison de se revolter* that the revolution must give man access to freedom, “and I believe that in a certain sense all revolutions have had the same meaning, even for Lenin.” (*Sic!*) Clearly Sartre is unaware that among the first measures taken by the government he was in charge of were the suppression of all opposition press, the suppression of all political organisations other than the Communist Party, a ruthless repression against anarchists and other left-wing parties - the list would be endless. Yet these events had been warned about by the Russian anarchist movement from the very beginning.

⁵ Alfred Betschart, “Sartre was not a Marxist”, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2019/12/Sartre-was-not-a-Marxist-15585476-Sartre-Studies-International.pdf>

⁶ Betschart, *loc. cit.*, p. 78.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁸ Alfred Betschart, “Sartre was not a Marxist” p. 79.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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