

CONSTRUCTING ANARCHISMS: A WORKSHOP
Organized by Shawn P. Wilbur
WEEK FOUR READINGS

Constructing an Anarchism: Tradition

I've decided to skip "Notes" this week and devote the time to other projects. (So if, for example, you were interested in 175 installments of anarchist writing, fiction and memoir, on exile in New Caledonia, I've at least provided the [bibliography](#).) The post on An-Anarchy has elicited some passionate responses, but they have mostly been of the "after the horse has bolted" gate-keeping variety. And while it is true that even those conflicts have their uses — C'est du choc des idées que jaillit la lumière and all that — some kinds of light are considerably less likely to provide much clarity for our particular purposes here.

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Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. — Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

Anarchism is a permanent obstacle for the anarchist. — René Furth, "The Anarchist Question" (1972)

We've started with a rather complicated collection of remarks on *anarchy*. For the purposes of my *construction*, I'll be emphasizing anarchy in social relations as a matter of strict horizontality or absence of hierarchies. But the sense of much that has been said so far is that anarchy is not the sort of concept that can be conceptualized once and for all, requiring instead repeated reformulations in evolving contexts. We'll be continuing to explore the ways in which we not only can, but perhaps must "make our own anarchy" as we "make anarchy our own." Part of that exploration will involve an encounter with *individualism* in a few weeks, but right now we have to address the fact that what Marx said about "making history" (no doubt in the most *materialist* sense) is also true of *making sense of history*, as we turn to the question of (collective) *anarchist tradition*.

(We'll get to the question of just now *nightmarish* the weight of that tradition might be or what sort of *obstacle* it might pose to anarchists, but first let's see if we can present tradition in a somewhat kinder light.)

In the "Notes on the Approach," I described *tradition* as "[a] kind of approximation, subject to competition, reevaluation, revision and ... ongoing synthesis." In "[Extrications: History, Tradition, Theory](#)," I described it as "a loose bundle of narrative elements likely to be invoked when anarchists, or relatively well-informed others, talk about anarchist theory and practice"—before going on to explore the relations between history, tradition and theory in considerably more detail. Rather than repeat that material here, I encourage folks to read that essay carefully. And for the purpose of the current *construction*, picking up the discussion there of the various kinds of *anarchy-talk*, let's just say this:

☞ The *anarchist tradition* is, in its *actual* form, simply the ensemble of all that anarchists are saying about anarchism or anarchist ideas in any given moment, together with whatever share of historical anarchist utterances remain *active* in some sense in anarchist discourse. It is not a *sum* or *resultant*. We cannot count on it to “add up” in any very consistent sense. Indeed, we expect that it would exhibit considerable conflict and inconsistency, assuming we could somehow make all of its elements simultaneously present to consciousness. It is what we might call, following Proudhon, a work of *collective reason*. As part of what that means is that we don’t really expect to find all of it in any one head.

At the end of our exploration, those who wish to will presumably propose their own sense of *anarchism* as a *concept*. But anarchism is also various other things, other *phenomena*, which together form the environment and context for projects like the present one and which any fresh conceptualization of anarchism will have to confront. As we’ve already noted, there is no question of starting our conceptualizations and constructions “from scratch.” Our anarchism may end up being an *affirmation, modification* or *rejection* of other anarchisms that are present among the elements of the current state of anarchist tradition, but it will almost certainly be one of those things.

There is, of course, much more that might be *activated* through our explorations. Just as we can’t help but know that we are not the first to make the effort to “be an anarchist,” we can hardly help but sense that the anarchist past contains a great deal about which we can simply have no very informed opinion. Elements come and go from the active, current mix, responding to changes within the anarchist milieu, so that ideas or views that were quite central to the anarchist tradition of another time and place may be largely unknown in the present and new concerns may burst suddenly into anarchist discourse. And the more we sense the richness of the resources not currently in use, the more we have to suspect that incorporating them might then lead us on to still other resources that have, at present, only a kind of *virtual* relation to the *actual* anarchist tradition.

We end up with choices to make about how far afield we are going to look for possible pieces of our own anarchist theory, what breadth (in terms of applications and ideologies) and what depth (in terms of history, languages, etc.) we are prepared to explore in our engagement with tradition, and how much energy we are prepared to bring to the task of activating elements of the anarchist past presently on the margins or outside the scope of the anarchist tradition. Those choices should logically be shaped by our present circumstances and needs, including our degree of comfort with the anarchist tradition as we experience it and our sense of the adequacy of existing anarchist theory.

I have quite obviously chosen to embrace a very broad and deep conception of anarchist tradition—and those of you who have decided to ramble with me through the “lost continent” of early anarchist history don’t have much choice but to accept that breadth and depth as conditions of the joint exploration. It should already be clear that my own choices are driven by a sense that *synthesis*, across both ideological currents and the divisions of time and place, is necessary for the development of anarchist ideas. But it is important to note that an expansive conception of anarchist tradition does not in any way commit *you* to that position or to agreement with any of the elements, familiar or unfamiliar, that you choose to explore. The scope of tradition recognized involves a choice of what you are prepared to account for or, in the defense of your conceptualizations, to be accountable for.

Those who believe that answers to questions about anarchist theory should only draw from a narrow tradition, made up of presumably tried-and-true elements, might have a practical point, provided we think that the need for new exploration really isn't that great. But I expect that a deep faith in the tried-and-true is not something to be taken for granted among those willing to take on the sort of itinerary we've mapped out.

Still, there are limits to how far afield it is practical to go—and these questions regarding anarchist theory are presumably of some practical concern for most of us. So it probably makes sense for participants to be on the lookout, particularly when we turn to the rapid survey of the anarchist past, for elements and episodes that look particularly promising. In my own case, I eventually found, after decades of rather unfocused exploration, that the issues that seemed most pressing to me involved the concept of *anarchy*—at which point my task became that of finding some useful way back to present concerns, starting from Proudhon and his “barbaric yawp,” *je suis anarchiste*. Others will find other points of emphasis and plot out other itineraries for their individual research. But my hope is that the process of looking over my shoulder as I continue to come to terms with my truly expansive conception of the anarchist tradition will both suggest resources that might not otherwise have come to mind and mark out some excursions as not worth more than a second-hand experience, while providing at least a sketch-map of the anarchist past.



☞ *Tradition*, then, is something given as soon as we make the attempt to “be an anarchist.”

We can make choices about how we will think about anarchist tradition, but we can hardly avoid thinking about it, even if it is just to attempt to somehow strike out on our own and “be anarchists” in some entirely novel way. And even then we might be forced to recognize that our attempt to break free of a given conception of anarchist tradition simply amounts, from a less individual perspective, to our contribution to the collective work from which tradition arises. The next would-be anarchist to come along would confront an anarchist tradition — in this very general sense — shaped by our rebellion, but would face the confrontation nonetheless.

The question becomes whether this amounts to some kind of failure, whether in the structure of anarchism as *-ism* and collective identity or in our individual practice in relation to it. If, as Marx suggested, accumulated tradition “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”—and I don't think we can easily dismiss the possibility—is there some way to do without?

Marx seems to have envisioned a sort of eventual clean break, beyond which the nightmare would disappear and the brains of the living would express themselves in something like a “new language.”

...the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.

There's some “end of history” stuff involved in his vision of the new revolution:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world

history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase.

There's certainly something appealing, potentially freeing about the approach: "let the dead bury their dead." But in order to judge its lasting utility, we probably have to account for the sense in which it marks a *beginning*, as well as foreseeing an end. The "Eighteenth Brumaire" is not "the Manifesto," but these passages still have a manifesto-like quality, marking a moment in which revolutionary change is presumably on the verge of occurring.

We've emphasized all of the uncertainty and potential packed into the moment when Proudhon first declared himself an anarchist. We should note here that, beyond the possibilities packed into the declarations themselves, we are also witnessing there an anarchist expression unconstrained by a consciously anarchist tradition. Indeed, one of the things that tends to confuse us about Proudhon—and many of the other early anarchists—is the extent to which they not yet speaking the new language that we would inherit from them as the language of a tradition. For Proudhon in 1840 and for Marx in 1852, new things are emerging—and it is possible to imagine "forgetting the native tongue" of a pre-revolutionary world. For us, however, things look different. Not only have the language and traditions of the old world not been forgotten, but the revolutionary movements of the 19th century have contributed their own traditions, which now weigh on the minds of the living in their own way.

One reason for embracing an expansive conception of the anarchist tradition is to connect ourselves, in whatever ways we can, not just to "our end" of that tradition, but also to its earliest beginnings. If we were committed to a transformation of the sort that Marx described, then there would be very little choice but to think of our whole tradition as a matter of beginnings drawn out across centuries (or to retreat, I suppose, to some ideological fantasy about our own advances and the false consciousness of others.) And we can see the desirability, perhaps even the necessity of eventually attaining some degree of forgetfulness of the language of *archy*. The more difficult question is how to deal with the weight of specifically anarchist tradition. There doesn't seem to be any question of forgetting the language of *anarchy*, which is at once traditional and still in the process of formation. So "let the dead bury their dead" is arguably not going to suffice for us.

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For an alternative, perhaps it makes sense to turn to figures closer to our own situation. Among the elements that have seemed worth attempting to *activate* through research and commentary, the various discussions of renewing and reconstructing anarchism have often topped my own list. There was an international flurry of such activity in the 1920s, which produced the ideas about synthesis that will be the focus of next week's post, which, if not precisely remembered, is closely enough related to the emergence of *platformism* that it at least comes as no surprise. The post-'68 French discussions that produced Furth's "The Anarchist Question" are less well-known, but should, again, come as no surprise when we encounter them.

When I first encountered Furth's essay, I was immediately struck by the bold opening line: "Anarchism is a permanent obstacle for the anarchist." The course it follows is perhaps not the one we would expect, based on that beginning—and the greater value may be in the development, rather than the inaugural provocation—but I will confess that the line has stuck with me, in part because I'm not entirely certain how the remainder of the essay addresses it.

Having already present anarchist tradition as a kind of inescapable constraint on new anarchist thought, anarchism as “permanent obstacle” is no great leap. But the insistence on *permanence* is interesting, particularly given all that follows.

It rang vague bells, as well—although it took me a while to make the connection. I had stumbled on Furth’s essay after encountering his name in the pages of *Recherches Libertaires*, where he had discussed the *individualisme social* of Charles-Auguste Bontemps. That led me to a fascinating debate about renewing the anarchist tradition and ultimately to “The Anarchist Question.” Furth’s essay was striking enough to distract me from Bontemps for a while, but when I returned to works like “Synthesis of an Evolving Anarchism,” which is among this week’s suggested readings, and “Anarchism and Evolution,” it was hard to miss the ways in which *permanence* was also featured in those writings. *But what curious ways...* In the latter essay, under the header “Permanence of Anarchism,” we find the following (somewhat roughly translated for now):

...The elaboration of anarchism has never presented its views as immutable certainties. Our opponents should realize that its fundamental anti-dogmatism protects it from this nonsense...

Anarchism is revolt and freedom. Its steadfast pursuits exonerate it from its temporary mistakes. It is endlessly made and unmade. It always desires to be unfinished so that it may always be alive. In this sense, the future belongs to it; it does not stray from its path. This must be for us a reason to refrain from believing that we will see the end of the road...

Throughout the writings of Furth and Bontemps, the “permanence” of anarchism seems to be very hard to distinguish from a kind of impermanence, with all the endless making and unmaking, all the attention given to reconstruction.

This connection of change and permanence is not, of course, a new or particularly challenging problem for anarchists. We might just note it as evidence of continuity with ideas as old as Proudhon’s conception of *progress*. But before I settled down to write this final section I did run across a way of thinking about the problem that was at least new to me.

In *L’Individualisme social: Résumé et commentaires*, a work that Bontemps published in 1967, the final chapter (or *résumé conclusif*) was entitled “Pérennité de l’anarchisme” (“Perennity of Anarchism.”) Now the *pérennité* appealed to in this case is more clearly describing the persistence back through history and presumably into the future of a basic libertarian impulse, with the more explicit forms of anarchism simply being this “evolving philosophy” in a particular form. That, too, is not a particularly novel notion. But I was struck, while still wrestling with the question of permanence in Furth’s work, with this notion of *perennity*—not so much because I find particular appeal in positing anarchism as an instance of another “perennial philosophy,” but because the question that brings us to this point, a question of the persistence and periodic renewal of anarchism, is perhaps very much a question of *perennation*, of the means of surviving the harshest seasons.

And perhaps that’s a concept we can do something with next week.



The suggested readings for this week, like Furth's essay, are general descriptions of anarchism, each with some emphasis on synthesis. Beginning with next week's readings, we will be focusing much more narrowly on specific aspects of anarchist analysis.

Gérard de Lacaze-Duthiers, “The True Revolutionaries” (1935)

The true revolutionaries have always been, in all times and all countries, those whose minds have been broad enough to grasp the most conflicting formulas, to extract from each of them the portion of truth that they contain and to attempt to reconcile them in a higher harmony. The “revolutionaries” are not always those whom we designate by that name: instead, these often deserve the epithet of “reactionaries,” as their acts entirely justify.

The revolutionary is the opposite of the sectarian. A sectarian revolutionary would only be a pseudo-revolutionary. There are far too many revolutionaries who have a sectarian spirit and thus prove that they are not revolutionary at all. A slogan is nothing; sincerity is everything; it is independence and character that count; it is generosity and courage, it is fidelity to the ideal that alone means something. Each day we see sad persons wrap themselves in a label in order to profit from it, place themselves in one party or another, from self-interest, and ultimately their conduct breeds disgust and nausea among their friends. Rejected everywhere, because they have been seen at work everywhere, they are wrecks who deserve pity rather than hate. To hate them would be to take them seriously; to pity them is to punish them as they deserve.

The revolutionaries are not the ones who believe they are in possession of the truth, but the ones who know that truth is everywhere and that their duty is to discover it everywhere it exists. They are not the ones who know only one means of improving humanity: violence. They are the ones who absorb a great thought, who contemplate and dream. They do not assault anyone to impose their ideas: it is on themselves that they exert their violence; they reform themselves and seek to be better. It is in their heart of hearts that they realize the great day [the revolution]. It is this bastille of prejudices that the social revolution set them to attack. It is their own will that they ask to aid them in becoming new.

That internal revolution, which is the finest effort of the individual towards truth and justice, is the integral revolution par excellence. Apart from it there is no progress. It is the prelude of the great social transformations, the crucible in which the humanity of tomorrow will be produced. Believe that it is as difficult, that it is more difficult than *revolution through violence*, and that it is much more fertile in results. To ask a man to chase passion and selfishness from his heart, to demand that he be tolerant enough to welcome every sincerity and extract their profound reality, is without doubt to demand of him an effort much greater than that of making a contribution, of listening to an orator, of insulting an adversary, of wearing a badge or defying an authority. With that internal revolution, let us begin the transformation of society. The moral revolution will give rise to more benefits than the bloody revolution of which dictatorship is the poisoned fruit.

When we speak of internal revolution, we do not intend to apologize for the ivory tower, to contemplate events with a smile, to shrug our shoulders each time the people try to shake off their chains. We simply claim that every popular movement must have a disinterested aim: it is not in order to take the place of their masters that the people revolt, but it is in order to push on toward an ideal of justice and beauty, in order to give birth to a better humanity. The true revolutionaries have always had before their eyes, not an immediate and practical aim, but a distant goal of liberty and harmony. It is not to discourage spirits, but to affirm that society does not change in a day and that for that change it is necessary to learn, study, observe and live. We do not deny the utility of an economic revolution—far from it. We desire it and desire it with all our hearts, but we subordinate it to the revolution of heart and mind without which it is not possible. We are impatient to evolve in a more just society, where each individual will realize that the maximum of happiness, but we do not believe that this happiness resides solely in

material pleasure; we believe that it must be completed and surpassed by the intellectual pleasures without which life is only a snare. While we are with the revolutionaries each time that propose to react against ignorance and selfishness, we are against them when, betraying their ideal, they appeal to ignorance and selfishness to transform society. The Revolution will be accomplished when individuals understand that it is not enough, to be a revolutionary, to obey a slogan or take up a gun to slaughter their enemy, but that they must, to be worthy of the title, possess a soul and a conscience.

Charles-Auguste Bontemps, “Synthesis of an Evolving Anarchism” (1952)

In order to be permanent, to endure and satisfy the hearts and minds of those who devote their efforts to it and make it the law of their lives, an anarchism must be established in such a way that it remains valid at all times, no matter the events and independent of the future accomplishments that it envisions, but regarding which we cannot know if or how they might come to be.

In my opinion, it must meet five conditions necessary to the activity of a life: 1) an underlying philosophy; 2) a resulting ethics; 3) an object consistent with the ethics; 4) a form of action corresponding to the object; 5) an organization that allows and sustains collective action without enchainning the individual.

Taking into account the experience acquired in forty years of observations through wars and revolutions, it is from these realistic—but not disillusioned—premises that I attempt to synthesize the lessons of that experience in a few brief formulas. Perhaps they will be useful to the young. They are chapter titles. You can add to them, subtract from them, correct them, and, above all, develop them. Their theme is eternal.

Philosophy

I. — The universe is given. We accept it as it is. We can equally consider it as immanent, existing in essence for all eternity, or else as created by some inconceivable being.

But the idea of a creator is not rational, as the creator itself could only be an immanence (no matter what the Catholic religion says), which would only pose the problem, uselessly, at two degrees.

God, then, can be or not be. Proof of God’s existence being impossible and that existence explaining nothing more than the immanence of the universe, let us consider the idea of creation as in no way necessary to reflective thought.

II. — A Morality for humanity is only valid as such if it concerns (or can concern) all men. The reference to divine pseudo-wills is opposed to this view, as the gods are divers and contradictory. Such a reference makes no sense, given that it imagine man in the image of God. Now, man could not be made in the image of God because of the similarity of his physical being and of many aspects of his psychological being with those of the animal. Even if it were only on the mental plane, there would be a similarity between God and the animal, which is absurd.

On the spiritual plane, it is no less absurd to claim to liken the spirit of a transitory being to the spirit of a God who is only conceived as an absolute.

On the other hand, the history of religions teaches us that men have always imagined some divinities imitating their own mentality and on their level. Which resolves the question: God is a creation of man.

III. — The Absolute-God being incomprehensible (if not through the anthropomorphic figures that bring it down to human scale and thus destroy it), its wishes would not be comprehensible except through the discovery of the laws of nature of which he would be the author. So it is of no direct utility to us since all research can thus begin only from nature, as a function of man and for man.

That would appear clearly when one reflects that there are problems only because men pose them.

IV. — In the physical order, what we know of the world has been acquired by the method of objective science. It is the only efficient means of knowledge. The views of the metaphysical spirit are only the paths of hypotheses. These are denied or confirmed by the analytic data of science. Reason and judgment perform the syntheses and force the religious dogmatist to take refuge in symbols.

There is probably a limit to that way of knowing. If such is the condition of man, the fables will change nothing. But we must not forbid dreams to one on whom imagination confers a faculty of illusion.

There must also be a limit to his pride at being a remarkable mammal. Man is only an effect, doubtless accidental, of natural evolutions and not a condition of the laws that rule existence.

Ethics

I. — If morality exists only in man and for man, its source is in our complex nature: instinct and intelligence, selfishness and altruism, sympathy and hostility, individualism and sociability.

A rational ethics is an attempt to reconcile these opposites through a simultaneous submission and resistance to the imperatives of nature. Biology provides us with its elements, and psychological observation completes them.

This ethics varies then with the enrichment of knowledge and the evolution of the milieu. It is a concept of life and not of death. From this virtualité variation flow two moral systems: a customary social morality, in slow evolution and of practical utility, and a morality, open to the future, particular to the individual life of a libertarian mind, constructed on the margins of the milieu, prefiguring and provoking changes within it.

II. — The present state of biology indicates an invariability of the human faculties. Man does not change. But he can change the environment, render it favorable to the manifestation of tendencies beneficial to himself and others, but hostile to harmful tendencies.

The result is the same as if man himself had progressed.

That constant receptiveness of the mind, that will be be “oneself” to the highest degree, to promote a social condition where all the “selves” find the climate of their choice, such is the constant element of the libertarian spirit.

Object

I. — The object of anarchism is contained in its ethics: To realize a life as harmonious, intense and coherent as the natural difficulties permit. To achieve it for ourselves, but in such a way that it is potentially accessible to all. To consider that life had no other end than itself. That if an imaginary hereafter had, by chance, a reality, there could be no better conduct to achieve it than to execute our life cycle at a high level through a diligent cultivation of character and intelligence.

Not to seek the happiness that depends on accidents, but to construct the conditions for eventual happiness and give ourselves joys that are matters of thought and sensibility proper to us.

II. — The sum of sorrows is divided, although unequally, among all men. To diminish the number of its causes is to diminish the portion that will be handed to us. To struggle against harm is the object of anarchism.

III. — It is most useful for a libertarian mind to learn to consider the facts and to accept the rigors they impose, in to overcome them, rather than conceal them with idealism. Idealism is a form of the simple religious spirit, an inconsistent form of timid thought. The idea, on the contrary, is a projection that is corrected by knowledge of the facts.

IV. — To promise the coming achievement, through some final revolution, of an anarchist paradise, is to lie deliberately, to recruit false disciples, strangers to the anarchist spirit, and to very quickly disappoint and lose them. The church, more skillful, has at least had to take care to situate its paradise somewhere sheltered from analysis.

Anarchism is an avant-garde, a will to truth irreconcilable with any demagoguery or herd instinct whatsoever. It works passionately for the outcast, considered as a victim; it is without scorn, but one can see clearly that it would refute itself if it recruited, without transition or selection, a mass of outcasts under the precise symbol of anarchism.

It is in the lateral organizations (syndicates, cooperatives, groups for study and social action, etc.) that the libertarian must contribute to these gatherings, even kindle and animate them, in order to then draw from them more thoughtful adherents.

Let us understand clearly. It is neither their social origin nor even their culture (which they will acquire on their own) that distinguishes the anarchists, but their character.

V. — Like everyone, the anarchist thinker makes mistakes. Knowing this, their law is free controversy, the constant reassessment of problems and of their method.

There are two vices that would ruin anarchism and are condemned by its ethics and aesthetics: dogmatic intransigence and its opposite, thought that gives in to demagoguery.

Action

I. — Anarchism is essentially a concept of life, a method of thinking about life, a means of living it; it seeks a social climate where it will be allowed to exist, even if all men should never manage to achieve it in collective organization. That explains and is sufficient to justify action in and on the social.

However, action requires conviction and constancy. The doctrine that founds it must therefore embrace all aspects of a changing reality and yet hold itself on a permanent line, situate its motives in the instant without losing sight of the future; but it is only secondarily that it will tend towards a possible, uncertain future in order that the militant is without disappointment.

In that regard, the views of the mind of the nineteenth century are wrecked by the more exact knowledge that we have of men, of the vices of their revolutions of which we have had the discouraging experience. From Proudhon to Kropotkin, what survives from our master to think anarchism is their methods of research and their freedom of mind, their profound analyses of man in society, not their ideal constructions. It is fidelity to them to rectify their outdated conceptions.

II. — The first condition of constancy in anarchism, is to be libertarian for yourself, without vulgar ambitions, for the satisfaction of feeling free in thought, of ceaselessly enriching yourself in knowledge and experience. It is to live with one's morality in oneself and for oneself, with pride in an autonomy delivered from palinodies and grimaces. It is to live for the sake of it, in a deliberate and lucid manner, according to a coherent philosophy that allows you to be "the one" without having to refuse yourself to others.

The second condition — where action begins — is to arrange meeting places and publications where ideas are exchanges and natural socialibility is satisfied.

III. — On these solid bases (which build more than one bridge between communist anarchism and individualist anarchism), social action centers itself as if by necessity. It is commanded (whatever the tendencies and nuances of doctrine) by generosity, which is wealth, since it is the capacity to give. It spurs those who know to awaken thought, to teach those who do not know or who know less. From this begins an educational action that never disappoints because it is never completed.

Action is then commanded by the obligation to have an effect on the masses and, through them, on the powers that be, in order to prevent the reactions of social conservatism through which our capacities to be and express ourselves are constricted, and also to provoke ruptures, at least to force evolutions that open spaces for us.

There is no limit to this activity, which, being useful to us, happens to be useful to everyone. It leads us to intercede even within conformist organizations, with the aim of stirring up conduct and imbuing them with views that serve the liberation of humanity.

Within the syndicalist and revolutionary movements, whether they are libertarian in origin or simply professional, the same objective guides our action. It makes us seek federalist and decentralist methods compatible with the conditions of a given problem, to advise the progressive substitution, in that which concerns production, administration or solidarity, of systems of direct action for administration by functionaries, to give priority to freely developed contracts on administrative regulations. There are many occasions to prefer, in the present, the responsible man, in contact with his fellow citizens, to the fallacious guarantee of a disembodied public service or the automatism of a dehumanized rule. It is also the role of libertarian economists to promote the use of statistical science, with regard to the coordination of production and distribution, in order to mitigate the harmful effects of authoritarian centralizations.

There are numerous, immediate tasks for the libertarian who consents to act in the relativism of the shifting real, to not refuse the provisional minimum, awaiting an uncertain theoretical maximum, and not be satisfied with a doctrinal absolute that, in the final analysis, has always shown itself to be sterile.

There are two pitfalls that can doom a libertarian: to slide from intelligent expediency to a mediocre opportunism, or else, in order to guard against it, allowing oneself to be imprisoned in a theoretical conformism that destroys anarchism by leading to sectarianism and destroys the libertarian by limiting them.

I know only two safeguards against the deviations and disillusionments. The first is the free attachment to libertarian ethics, adopted in the belief that they are indispensable to our satisfaction. And then there is a very modest point of view, apparently quite down to earth and yet of great significance, namely that a man lives today and not tomorrow.

IV. — An action conceived in this way does not escape from hard failures; that goes without saying. Its successes will likely only be partial and always to be continued. Isn't that the condition of life itself? And we have known, since William the Silent, who was not a libertarian, that it is not necessary to succeed in order to persevere when the path that we have committed to is that of the only choice with which our selves are satisfied. The believer in a God has never needed his church to be triumphant to live for their faith.

Moreover, there are successes that we hardly see, but which are, unbeknownst to us, profound; they bear their fruits in time because an anarchism thus established on these bases is a permanence. It persists as a moral in each and that duration ensures its reach. Critical in the pure state and within the opposing milieu where it insinuates itself, constructive through its

philosophy and its social action by means of the lateral groups that it inspires, it is formidable to power, destructive of prejudices, of obtuse herd instincts, of enslaving conformity. It is a force.

That force is not always spectacular in its continuous effects, which are of another nature than political exploits and flashes. This is because it is the force of the quality of characters and not the brutality of the regimented masses. But it is not forbidden, quite the contrary, to act in the heart of the mass organizations and to disrupt them, so that the authoritarian policies of the leaders face difficulties, and to promote solutions marked with our spirit.

Anarchism is and must remain above all a lofty ethics, in which we could not adorn ourselves while still aspiring to the laurels of the demagogue. Every militant must, at some moment of their life, choose to be someone or something. The bad choice only matters to the one who makes it and purges the movement. “My” anarchism does not depend on the choices of others.

Organization

I could stop here the presentation of a conception that only has interest as a testimony, in that it has allowed me—individually—to continue despite so many motives for doubt and desertion.

However, I am too accustomed to debates not to know that a supplementary question quite possibly be asked me: “Can this conception, which is individual, also suit other comrades? And, in this case, how are we to make a coordinated movement?” So I respond in advance to that question with an organizational sketch.

I. — Every anarchist organization must be such that the individual retains his capacities for initiative and personal activity; that they are not forced into any action that does not meet with their free agreement, even if they are the only one opposed.

It seems that, on the basis of a common philosophie, the rule of that association should be the free discussion of existing problems and that the conclusions of these debates, transformed into a program of action concerning the point discussed, enlist only those who have accepted them. But the sense of efficacy, of reciprocity, of camaraderie and of loyalty leads those opposed,—save in cases of conscience and when it is only a question of tactics and opportunity—to not impede the experiment of the majority.

II. — Organization seems to me to be rationally constituted by specifically libertarian grassroots groups, assembled by locality or by district, without preventing the existence in the same place of several affinity groups, provided that it is specific objectives that motivate them and not, naturally, deep divergences of doctrine. These groups should also meet on the occasion of any external demonstration.

III. — These specific organizations should propose the following tasks:

a) to unite libertarians of the same tendency for the purpose of internal studies of the problems of man and society;

b) to organize for shared pleasure cultural events and events that are simply entertaining, in a libertarian spirit, free from commercial vulgarity;

c) to cultivate and to put to work in every circumstance a rigorous spirit of reciprocity and solidarity;

d) to apply themselves, through group meetings or lateral groups and by means of a word-of-mouth propaganda, to the recruiting of comrades likely to become libertarians;

e) to educate and train these recruits;

f) to take the initiative in the creation of lateral bodies not specifically libertarian (among other, groups for popular education and social action) and to choose for their realization the comrades most fit because of their skills as leaders, educators or propagandists, acting under the constant control of the group;

g) in the same spirit and with the same goal, to appoint or aid militants to enter into the most diverse milieus in order to accomplish a labor of informing them and making clarifications regarding the general framework of personal rights and the defense of liberties by which the audience for our philosophy is increased.

It goes without say that, outside of the group, the activity of a militant is free, on the condition that this activity is unambiguous and does not pretend to avoid the critical, but cordial critique of the comrades.

IV. — The local groups should ensure a link between them through regional federations and through a general federation proposing three goals:

1) to debate problems of action in congresses;

2) to coordinate that action on the regional, national and international planes, in exactly the same spirit and with the same conditions as on the local plane;

3) to designate the commissions responsible for publications and for carrying out of the decisions of the congresses.

Each group will appoint to these congresses one or more representatives of the majority and of the minority in order to represent it, but every militant could intervene in the debates in an advisory capacity, the time for speakers being divided equally among all those offering opinions.

The regional congresses will only concern themselves with regional affairs. It is the local groups themselves that would be directly represented in the general congress and regional congress alike.

It seems that such an organization reconciles the principle of the free determination of the individual with coordination in the federative form.

Action, thus established according to the method of natural association, appears to me to need no other rule than those of the conscience, subject to the individual priorities that usefully characterize, with regard to public opinion, an authentic libertarian: camaraderie, objectivity, reciprocity and loyalty.

Charles-Auguste BONTEMPS.

Voline, "On Synthesis" (1924)

I.

Legend maintains that Jesus Christ gave no response to the question of Pontius Pilate: "What is truth?" And it is very likely that in these tragic moments he hardly had the heart to concern himself with philosophical arguments. But even if he had had the time and the desire to engage in a controversy concerning the essence of truth, it would not have been easy for him to respond in a definitive manner.

Many centuries have passed since then. Humanity has made more than one step toward knowledge of the world. The question of Pontius Pilate has troubled humanity, it has made people think, work and seek in all directions, and it has brought suffering to a great number of minds. The ways and methods of the search for truth have varied many times... Yet the question always remains without an answer.

Three principal obstacles arise along the path we follow to seek and establish objective truth, no matter in what direction or in what region we hope to find it.

The first of these obstacles is impressed with a purely theoretical and philosophical character. In fact, the truth is the great existing All: everything that exists in reality. To know the truth means to know what is. But to know what is, to know the veritable truth, the essence of things ("things in themselves") would appear to be, for several reasons, impossible at this time, and perhaps it will always be so. The essential reason for that impossibility is the following: The world would never be for us anything but the idea that we fashion of it. It presents itself to us, not as it is in reality, but as it is depicted to us by our (or more) poor, false senses, and by our incomplete and crude methods of knowing things. Both are very limited, subjective and fickle. Here is an example drawn from the domain of the senses: as we know, there exists in nature, in reality, neither light, nor colors, nor sounds (there exists only what we believe to be movements, oscillations); however, we have above all an impression of the monde consisting of light and colors (oscillations collected and transformed with the aid of our visual organs) and sounds (movements collected and transformed by our auditory apparatus.) Let us also not that a whole series of phenomena unquestionably taking place in nature elude the organs of our senses. To serve as an example in the domain of knowledge, it is enough to indicate the fact that, constantly, certain theories are rejected to be replaced by others. (A very recent example is that of the famous theory of Einstein on relativity tending to "devastate" all our systems of knowledge.) The only thing that I know immediately is that I exist (*cogito, ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am) and that there exists some reality outside of me. Without knowing it exactly, I know nonetheless that it exists: first, because if I exist, there must exist some reality that has created me; second, because some entity that is found outside of me communicates to me certain impressions. It is that reality, the essence of which I do not know, that I call world and life; and it is that reality that I seek to know as much as it will lend itself to the knowing.

Obviously, if we wanted to always consider that obstacle, it would only remain for us to say once and for all: everything that we think we know is only lies, deception, illusion; we cannot know the essence of things, for our means of knowing are far too imperfect... And on that basis, we would have to renounce every sort of scientific labor, every work in search of the truth and of knowledge of the world, considering every attempt of that sort perfectly useless and destined to never succeed.

However, in the overwhelming majority of our scientific acts, acts of thought as well as practice—if we set aside the domain of purely philosophical speculation—we hardly consider that obstacle: first, because if we did, we would truly have to renounce all scientific activity, every search for the truth (something which, for many reasons, is entirely unacceptable to us); and then, for we have certain reasons to believe that our impressions reflect all the same, up to a certain point, reality such as it is, and that our understanding comes closer and closer to knowledge of that reality, to knowledge of the truth. It is this last argument in particular, together with other impetuses, that leads us to widen and deepen without ceasing our work of research.

Taking as data, — that is as having for us a real, concrete meaning, common to us all, — our impressions and especially our knowledge of the world and of life; taking as given the milieu, concrete for us, in which we live, work and act, — we think and we seek on the bases and within the limits of that reality as it presents itself: a subjective and conventional reality.

The question of truth is equally posed within the limits of that reality. And, above all, to decipher that reality, accessible to our understanding and our impressions, as well as to pursue the continual widening of its knowable limits — this already appears to us as a problem of the highest importance.

But, in this case as well, we see loom up before us, and the path of research and of the establishment of truth, two other obstacles, of a concrete character as well.

Second obstacle. — Like life, truth is undivided. Truth (like life) is the great All. To know this or that part of the truth still cannot mean that we know the Truth (although it is sometimes necessary to go from knowledge of the parts to the knowledge of the whole). To know the truth — this means, to be precise, to know all the universe in its entirety: all of existence, all of life, all the paths of life, as well as all its forces, all its laws and tendencies, for all times and all terms, in all its different secrets, in all its phenomena and separate details, as well as in its entirety. Now, even if it was only within the limits of the world intelligible to our faculties of impression and understanding, — to embrace the universe, to know life and penetrate its inner meaning appears to us impossible at present, and perhaps it will never be possible.

Third obstacle. — The most characteristic trait of life is its eternal and uninterrupted movement, its changes, its continual transformations. Thus, there exists no firm, constant and determined truth. Or rather, if there exists a general, complete truth, its defining quality would be an incessant movement of transformation, a continual displacement of all the elements of which it is composed. Consequently, the knowledge of that truth supposes a complete knowing, a clear definition, an exact reduction of all the laws, all the forms, all the combinations, possibilities and consequences of all these movements, of all these changes and permutations. Now, such a knowledge, so exact an account of the forces in infinite movement and oscillation, of the continually changing combinations,—even if there exists a certain regularity and an iterative law in these oscillations and changes,—would be something nearly impossible.

II

To know the Truth—that means to know life as it is, to know the true essence of things.

We do not know that true life, [so] we do not know the Truth.

However, we possess some knowledge of it.

As we receive impressions of life and we learn to know it through the testimony of our senses and through the means of knowing that we find at our disposal, precisely as we run up against the obstacles indicated,—we learn, first, that life is some great synthesis, as reality as

well as personal feeling: some resultant of a quantity of diverse forces and energies, of factors of all sort.

We also learn that this synthesis is subject to a continuous movement, to incessant variations; we know that that resultant is never found at rest, but that, on the contrary, it oscillates and varies without ceasing.

To know the Truth—that would mean to embrace, know and understand the whole of this global synthesis in all of its details, in all its entirety and in all its eternal movement, in all its combinations and its uninterrupted variations.

If we know life in its details, in its entirety and in its movements, we will know the Truth. And that truth will be the resultant, constantly in movement, of a quantity of forces: a resultant of which we should also know all the movements.

We know neither the true life, nor its synthesis; we know neither its reality, nor its meaning, nor its movements. For us, life in its entirety is the great enigma, the great mystery. We only manage, from time to time, to pluck some fragments of its synthesis from the air...

We do not know the authentic truth, the objective truth of things. Not only have we still not managed to discover the truth, but we do not know if we will ever discover it. We only succeed, from time to time, in finding some isolated grains of the truth—dispersed and brilliant sparkles of precious gold, from which it is still impossible for us to form anything whole...

But—we seek the truth (or to put it better, some of us do.) We have sought it for centuries and thousands of years. We scan on all sides, in all directions—obstinately, offering all our forces to the search, painfully, sorrowfully.

And if we know that life is a great synthesis, we know, consequently, that the search for truth is the search for synthesis; that the path of truth is that of synthesis; that in seeking the truth, it is important to always remember the synthesis, to always aspire to it.

And since we know that life is a continuous movement, we should, in seeking the truth, constantly consider that fact.

III

The field of interest that particularly interests us is not that of pure philosophy and speculation. The circle within which our interests, our aspirations and our attempts principally move is the much more concrete and accessible one of the problems of biology and above all of sociology.

Seeking to establish some social conception, to intervene actively in social life and to influence it in a certain direction, we wish to discover in that concrete domain the guiding truth.

What do we do to find it?

Generally we take up certain phenomena in the given domain of life, we analyze them, we seek to know them and penetrate their meaning.

It often happens that we succeed in drawing the exact assessment from some phenomenon and that, consequently, we manage to put our finger on a coin, on a part, on a fragment of the truth.

Four fundamental errors are very frequent—and very characteristic—in these cases.

1. Human analysis is not infallible. It does not lead directly to the exact and indubitable, absolute truth. In every analysis, in every human research, we inevitably encounter, along with some scraps of truth grasped on the spot, more or less great errors, lapses, sometimes oversights

and clumsy false judgments—thus, [we make] assertions not in conformity with the truth. We generally forget that this is the case, and instead of seeking to establish and to eliminate these errors, to find and apply the necessary corrections, we disregard them or else we do still worse—we consider our errors as an expression of the truth, so that we disfigure it and distort its value.

2. Save for very rare exceptions, we are generally inclined to exaggerate the significance, sometimes very minuscule, of the bit of truth found by us, to generalize it, to make of it the whole truth, to extend it, if not to life in its entirety, at least to phenomena of much larger and more complicated order, and at the same time to reject other elements of the truth we seek.

3. We let ourselves be carried away by the analysis and a generalization, erroneous from its immediate results, we constantly forget to consider the second moment—and that is the most essential one—necessary to the search for the truth: of the true and accurate way of generalization; of the necessity,—the analysis once made and a phenomenon, a fragment of truth grasped and understood,—not to take hold of that bit and raise it to the rank of keystone, by making it the entire truth, but, on the contrary, to remember other phenomena relating to the same order of ideas, to seek to fathom their meaning as well, to compare them with the bit of truth discovered and to do everything in order to establish a correct synthesis. This problem of the second degree generally escapes us. We forget that life is a synthesis of a great number of factors.

4. We forget at each step that movement and variability never cease; we forget that there exists no apathetic truth, that in life “everything flows,” that life and truth are the dynamics par excellence. Habitually, we do not account for this factor of an extreme importance and value: the uninterrupted dynamism of life and truth. However, just as it would be erroneous to take the form adopted at a certain moment by an amoeba in motion for its constant form, it would be a mistake to suppose a similar rigidity in the essence of truth: what has just been (or what could have been) truth moment a moment ago—is not longer truth in the following moment. The synthesis itself is not immutable. It is only a resultant constantly in motion, which sometimes comes closer to one of the factors and sometimes to another, and never remains close to one or the other for long. We do not take sufficient account of this singularly important fact. [1]

The errors indicated have a particularly harmful importance pour for the domain of the human sciences, for the comprehension and study of our social life, which represents an exceptionally complicated synthesis of particularly numerous factors, the majority of which are of a special order, a movement and a series of combinations—both exceptionally complicated—of the most diverse elements (which, moreover, are far from being solely mechanical.)

It is precisely in this domain that the most serious errors most often take place. It is especially the numerous followers of the seekers of truth who are guilty of this. The mission to reexamine their “truths,” to redress their errors and make the necessary corrections later falls to others.

Here are some examples that could serve as an illustration: the definition made by Marx-Engels, and especially by their followers, of the role of the economic factor in history (the so-called “historical materialism”)—that excellent but unilateral (and consequently not precisely correct) analysis, and—the exaggerated and “firm” (consequently quite inexact) deductions that have been drawn from it; the theory of classes of Karl Marx and his followers—that analysis, just as brilliant, but narrow and insufficient (and thus erroneous on many points), and the perverse deductions that have been made from it; the “law” of the struggle for existence (Ch. Darwin and also, and especially, his supporters in the various branches of science) with all its errors and exaggerations; the unilateral individualist theory of Max Stirner (and especially of his followers) and so many others.

The economic doctrine of Marx and his theory classes, the individualist conception of Stirner, as well as the law of the struggle for existence de Darwin, etc., etc., are always admirable analyses—well directed and called to give some important results—of one of the factors, of one of the elements of the complicated and vital synthesis, but in order to approach the truth of the synthesis, all these theories are lacking one essential thing: the understanding of the necessity of juxtaposing them with the analysis of other elements and other factors, with the deductions that can be made from the results of these other analyses. They lack the desire to account for phenomena of a different order, the aspiration to seek the synthesis. We forget that real life is a synthesis of different series of phenomena; that that synthesis is moreover the moving and variable outcome of these series, series that are also constantly in movement. We lose sight of the real and moving synthetic nature of life and the necessity of a corresponding synthetic character in scientific knowledge. This is the source of the errors of generalization and deduction. Instead of approaching the truth, we distance ourselves from it.

This erroneous attitude with regard to the phenomena examined, to the bits of truth discovered, causes considerable damage to all our attempts at social construction, for they cause us to wander very far from the road leading to a precise solution of the problems that loom up before us.

Indeed, if in each truth found by us we inevitably find mixed an alloy of non-truth; if every partial truth established by us is never the entire truth; if truth, like life itself, is always synthetic and moving,—then in our constructions we approach the truth, we reckon and understand vital phenomena and processes that much more correctly and exactly to the extent that we verify more meticulously the bit of truth found, to the extent that we compare it with other phenomena and bits of truth discovered in the same domain, to the extent that we approach synthesis and that we constantly recall the essential fact of the uninterrupted movement of all things. And we distance ourselves from the truth, from a proper understanding of life, from a correct conception—that much more as we concern ourselves less with verifying, comparing and contrasting, to the extent, finally, that we distance ourselves from synthesis and the idea of movement.

It is very probable that we will never attain the knowledge of a correct and complete synthesis. But the principle that must guide us is a constant effort to approach it to the greatest extent possible.

Each time that we close our eyes to the defects and the vices of the bits of truth found by us, we distance ourselves from the result sought. The proper method consists, on the contrary, to carefully account for these errors and of seeking their correction.

Each time that we take a fragment of truth found by us for the whole and only truth, and we reject the other fragments, sometimes without even taking the trouble of examining them closely—we distance ourselves from the correct solution. The correct method consists of juxtaposing each fragment found with others, to strive to discover some always new parts of the truth and to seek to make them agree, so that they form one single whole. That is the only way that we can reach our goal.

Each time that we limit ourselves to drawing the appraisal of our analysis made from a single aspect of the question, and we forget the necessity of continuing our work of research by aspiring to accomplish its synthesis with the other aspects—we distance ourselves more from the goal, however brilliant and exact our work of analysis has been. Each time that we forget to take into account the constant factors of movement and variability, and we take the bit of truth found by us for something stable, firm, “petrified,”—we distance ourselves from the truth. The true path is to

always account for the multiplicity of factors that all find themselves engaged in a continuous movement and to seek the resultant (also moving itself) of these factors.

IV

If we would consider anarchism and its aspirations, we must also note, to our keen regret, that we find there, and at each step, the same errors, demanding the same work of rectification; that there as well we are still very distant from correct methods of seeking the truth and, consequently, from correct conceptions.

Here also our habitual method remains the same: after having found and established a certain bit of truth (often even long since discovered), we begin by closing our eyes to the errors and defects mixed in there, we do not seek to understand and eliminate them, then we begin to proclaim that bit as being a crown of creation, constant and unshakeable, we hasten to consider it as an immutable and complete truth, we forget the necessity of moving to a work of synthesis and end up neglecting to account for movement in its capacity as major function of vital development, especially in the domain of social creativity. This is also why we habitually entrench ourselves, with pettiness and blindness, in some very small nook of truth, defending ourselves furiously from the desire to enter into other corners, even [when] perfectly well lit,—and this instead of setting ourselves to work seeking synthesis embracing the work in its entirety.

I read, for example, the articles of comrade Maximoff (“Benchmarks”, in the Russian paper from America, *Golos Truzhenika*) and I see that he is concerned with establishing, in the most meticulous manner, not just the general plan, but even the most minute details to be adopted by the future social structure in the course of the social revolution. I say to myself: “All of that is very good and has already been sufficiently dwelt upon. But how does comrade Maximoff think that he can usefully stuff or pile the complicated, hectic ensemble of life, all that enormous, lively synthesis, within the cold margins of his dried-out plan made on paper?” I know that life will refuse to introduce itself into this scheme; I know that this scheme will only contain some few bits of truth, surpassed by numerous faults and gaps. And to the extent that comrade Maximoff means to make of his formula a finished thing, polished and solid, in so far as he pretend that this formula (or any other similar in its place) contains the sole and only truth, and that everything that is not that truth must be criticized and condemned,—I am, myself, of the opinion that it (or any other precise schematizing) only exaggerates the importance of the factor of organization, correct by itself and having great significance, but far from being the only factor, and imbued with certain defects for which it is indispensable to account, without which and apart from the synthesis with other factors of an equal importance it would lose all significance.

When the “anarcho-syndicalists” say that syndicalism (or anarcho-syndicalism) is the single, only way of salvation and reject with indignation everything not adapted to the standard established by them, I am of the opinion that they exaggerate the importance of the bit of truth in their possession, that they do not want to account for the defects inherent in that bit, nor for the other elements forming, in concert with it, the correct truth, nor for the necessity of synthesis, nor for the factor of vital, creative movement. I am, then, of the opinion that they distance themselves from the truth. And I greatly fear that they will find themselves in no state, when necessary, to resist the temptation to impose and inculcate by force their scholastic opinion, which the true life will refuse to accept as being opposed to its vital truth.

When the “communist-anarchists” open the question by the same process and, admitting only their own truth, immediately reject syndicalism (or anarcho-syndicalism), they deserve the same reproach.

When the “individualist anarchist,” thumbing their nose at syndicalism and communism, only admits their “self” as reality and truth, and when they mean to reduce to this little “self,” the whole of the great vital synthesis, they still commit the same error.

When I read in the article “The Unique Means” (cf. Анархический вестник / *Anarkhicheskii Vestnik*, no. 1, July 1923) that the internal perfection of the personality and the reasonable of conscious personalities in agricultural community forms the one and only truth and the only path to salvation, I think of the anarcho-syndicalists and of their “unique means” too; and I realize that all these people, instead of seeking the truth in synthesis, each peck at their little grain of millet without ever being satiated.

And if it is “makhnovists” who believe that the only true form of the movement is their own and who reject everything that is not it, they are as distant from the truth as the others.

And when I hear it said that the anarchists should only do work of critique and destruction and that the study of positive problems does not fall within the domain of anarchism, I consider that assertion a grave error in relation to the synthetic character [synthèticité] indispensable to our research and ideas.

However, it is precisely the anarchists who more than anyone must constantly recall the synthesis and the dynamism of life. For it is precisely anarchism as a conception of the world and life that, by its very essence, is profoundly synthetic and deeply imbued with the living, creative and motive principle of life. It is precisely anarchism that is called to begin—and perhaps even to perfect—the social scientific synthesis that the sociologists are always in the process of seeking, without a shadow of success, the lack of which leads, on the one hand, to the pseudo-scientific conceptions of “marxism,” of an “individualism” pushed to the extreme and to various other “isms,” all more narrow, stuffer, and more distant from truth than the last, and, on the other hand, to a number of recipes for conceptions and practical attempts of the most inept and most absurd sort.

The anarchist conception must be synthetic: it must seek to become the great living synthesis of the different elements of life, established by scientific analysis and rendered fruitful by the synthesis of our ideas, our aspirations and the bits of truth that we have succeeded in discovering; it must do it if it wishes to be that precursor of truth, that true and undistorted factor, not bankrupting of human liberation and progress, which the dozens of sullen, narrow and fossilized “isms” obviously cannot become.

I am not an enemy of syndicalism: I only speak out against its megalomania; I protest against the tendency (of its non-worker personalities) to make a dogma of it, unique, infallible and ossified—something of the sort of marxism and the political parties.

I am not an enemy of communism (anarcho-communism, naturally): I only speak out against all sectarian narrowness of views and intolerance; I protest against its dogmatic perversion and against its mortification.

I am not an enemy of individualism: I only speak out against its egocentric blindness.

I am not an enemy of the moral perfection of the self: but I do not accept that it be recognized as the “unique means.”

I am not an enemy of organization: but I do not want anyone to make a cage of it.

I find that the work of the emancipation of humanity demands by equal title: the idea of free communism as the material basis of a healthy life in common; the syndicalist movement as one

of the indispensable levers à the action of the organized masses; the “makhnovstchina” as an expression of the revolutionary uprising of the masses, as insurrection and élan; the wide circulation of individualist ideas that reveal to us radiant horizons, that teach us to appreciate and cultivate the human personality; and the propaganda of aversion towards violence that must put the Revolution on its guard against the possible excesses and deviations...

It seems to me that each of these ideas, that each of these phenomena contain a granule of truth that will manifest itself clearly one bright day, as well as faults, errors and perversions; and the exaggerations will be rejected.

It seems to me that all these granules—all these phenomena and these ideas—will find sufficient place under the wide wings of anarchism, without there being any need of mutually making a bitter war. It is enough to want [to] and to know [them] to unite and unify them.

In order to attain that goal, the anarchists must begin by raising themselves above the prejudices imported from outside into their milieu and absolutely foreign to the essence of the anarchist conception of the world and life, from the prejudices of human narrowness, from a petty exclusivity and from a repulsive egocentricity; it is indispensable that all put themselves to work,—each in no matter what sphere of ideas and phenomena, in conformity to their situation, their temperament, their preferences, their convictions and their faculties,—closely linked and united, and respecting the liberty and personality of the others; it is necessary to work hand in hand, seeking to mutually lend aid and assistance, demonstrating a friendly tolerance, respecting the equal rights of each of the comrades and admitting their liberty to work in the chosen direction, according to their tastes and their way of seeing—the liberty to fully develop every conviction. This posed, the task will fall to us to decide on forms that this unified collaboration should adopt.

It is only on such a basis that an attempt could be made at true union between the workers of anarchism, at the unification of the anarchist movement. For, it seems to me, it will only by on that basis that our antinomies, our exaggerations pushed to the extreme, our sharpness and our sourness could be mellowed, that our errors and deviations could be rectified, and that, tightening more and more our ever vaster ranks, crystallizing in living form, burning with an ever more ardent flame, appearing always more clearly and with ever greater grandeur—the Truth.

VOLINE.

[1] This phenomenon of the “constant variability of the resultant,” as well as the importance of its application to the study of the facts of human history, will be examined in detail in another work.

ON SYNTHESIS (Second Article)

In the preceding article, we stopped at the question of the method of the search for truth, the general manner of theoretically considering the problem.

We have expressed the opinion that this manner must be synthetic, that instead of persisting in a single recognized part of the complete truth, thus disfiguring it and distancing us from it, we must, on the contrary, seek to know and embrace as many parts of it as possible, bringing ourselves as a result as close to the true truth as possible. In the opposite case, instead of a coordinated and fraternal labor, expanding and productive, we will surely get bogged down in interminable and absolutely senseless disputes and disagreements. We will always fall into those

coarsest errors, which inevitably accompany exclusivism, narrowness, intolerance and sterile, doctrinaire dogmatism.

Let us now address, also in broad strokes, another essential question. Who, what forces will bring about the social revolution,—especially these immense creative tasks? And how? What will be the essence, character and forms of this whole magnificent process?

First of all, it is incontestable that the social revolution will be, in the final account, an extremely vast and complicated creative phenomenon, and that only the great popular masses, working freely and independently, organized in one manner or another, could resolve the gigantic problem of social reconstruction happily and fruitfully.

Whatever we mean by the process of social revolution, however we imagine the content, the forms and the immediate results of the great future social transformation,—all of our tendencies must reach agreement on certain essential points: an anarcho-syndicalist, anarchist-communist, an individualist and the representatives of other libertarian currents will inevitably fall into agreement that the process of the social revolution will be an phenomenon [that is] infinitely extensive, many-sided and complex, that it will be a most fundamentally creative social act, and that it cannot be realized without an intense action from the vast, free, independent and organized masses, in whatever form, united in one manner or another, linked among themselves and acting as a whole .

So what will these great masses do in the social revolution? How will they create? How will they resolve the task, so vast and so complex, of the new construction?

Will they concern themselves directly, precisely and uniquely, with building anarchist communes? Certainly not. It would be absurd to suppose that the only path and the only form of social and revolutionary action will be the construction of the communes, that those communes alone will be the foundations and instruments of the new construction, the creative cells of the new society.

In their revolution, will the masses follow exactly and uniquely the “syndicalist” path? Of course not. It would be no less absurd to think that the syndicates, and the workers’ organizations in general, would alone be called to achieve the great social reconstruction, and that precisely and uniquely they will be the levers and cells of the future society.

It would be as absurd to believe that the tasks of the social revolution will be resolved solely by some individual efforts by some isolated, conscious personalities and [by] their associations of ideas, which alone out of such unions, associations or grouping by ideological community will serve as the bases for the coming world.

It would be generally absurd to imagine that this enormous, formidable work of the social revolution—this creative and living act—could be channeled into one uniform path, that this form, that method, or some particular aspect of struggle, organization, movement, or activity would be the only “true” form, the sole method, the unique face of the social revolutionary process.

The fecund social revolution, advancing with a firm step, truly triumphant, will be executed by the oceanic masses driven to its necessity by the force of things, launched in this powerful movement, seeking widely and freely the new forms of social life, devising and creating them fully and independently. Either this will occur, or the creative tasks of the revolution will remain unresolved, and it will be sterile, as were all the previous revolutions. And if this is the case, and we imagine for a moment this whole gigantic process, this enormous creative movement of the vastest masses and its innumerable points of application, it will then appear absolutely clear that that they will move along a broad front, that they will create, that they will act, that they will

advance in multiple ways at once—ways that are diverse, bustling, and often unexpected by us. The reconstruction by the great masses of all the social relations—economic, social, cultural, etc., given also the variety of localities, that of the composition of the populations, of the immediate requirements of the character and aims of the economic, industrial and cultural life of the various regions (and perhaps countries),—such a task will certainly demand the creation, application and creative coordination of the most varied forms and methods.

The great revolution will advance by a thousand routes. Its constructive tasks will be accomplished through a thousand forms, methods and means, intertwining and combining. The syndicates, the professional unions, the factory committees, the organizations of productive workers, etc., with their branches and federations in the cities and industrial regions, the cooperatives and all sorts of connecting associations [organes de liaison], perhaps also the soviets and every other potential organization that is living and mobile, the peasant unions in the countryside, their federations with the workers' organizations, the armed forces for defense, the truly libertarian communes, the individual forces and their ideological unions,—all these forms and methods will be at work; the revolution will act through all these levers; all these streams and torrents will spring up and flow in a natural fashion, forming the vast general movement of the great creative process. It is through all their measures, through all their forces and instruments that the vast working masses engaged in the true revolutionary process will act. We are convinced that even the present reformist and conservative workers' organizations will inevitably and rapidly "revolutionize" in the course of this process, and, having abandoned their recalcitrant leaders and the political parties acting behind the scenes, will take their place there, will reunite with the other currents of the impetuous, creative revolutionary torrent.

This movement will not be, naturally, a simple pulverization of society; it will not have the character of a rout and a general disorganization. It will aspire, on the contrary, naturally and inevitably, to a harmony, a reciprocal liaison of the parties, to a certain unity of organization to which, as well as to the creation of the forms in themselves, it will be driven urgently by the vital, immediate tasks and needs. This unity will be a living and mobile combination of the varied forms of creation and action. Certain of these forms will be rejected, others will be reborn, but all will find their place, their role, their necessity, their destination, amalgamating gradually and naturally into a harmonious whole. Provided that the masses remain free in their action; provided that a "form" destroying all creation is not restored: power. On the thousand local (and other) conditions will depend the circumstances and the creative forms that will emerge will be rejected or gain a foothold. In any case, there will not be place for only one single form, much less for an immutable and rigid form, or even for a single process. From different localities, diverse conditions and varied necessities will arise as many varied forms and methods. And as for the general creative torrent of life, de the construction and the new unity of society, it will be a living synthesis of these forms and methods. (It is in this way that we understand, among others, a true federation, living and not formal. We believe that the icons that we quite often make in our federalist milieus, especially among the "anarcho-syndicalists," of a uniform means, method or economic and social form of organization, absolutely contradict the true notion of a federation as a free union, exuding all the fullness and multiplicity of life, not molded, and, consequently, creative and progressive, natural and mobile, of social cells [that are] naturally varied and mobile.)

The economic essence of this synthesis will certainly be the successive realization, evolution and strengthening of the communist principle. But its constituent elements, its means of construction and its vital functions will be multiples, just as multiple as the cells, organs and

functions of the body, that other living synthesis. Just as it would be absurd to affirm that it is precisely the nervous or muscular cells, the digestive or respiratory organs that alone are the creative, active and “true” cells and organs of a living organism, without accounting for the fact that the organism is a living synthesis of cells and organisms of various types and purposes, just so it would be absurd to believe that precisely one or another method and form would be the only “true” method and form of the future social construction, of the new, emerging social ensemble.

The true social life, the social creation and the social revolution are phenomena of plurality in synthesis, that plurality and that synthesis being made up of living, mobile, variable elements. (It is, particularly, the social life [that is] currently musty, stationary and fashioned by force, that inspires in so many among us, thoughtlessly, this erroneous point of view that the revolution must advance along some specific, unique and determined path. It is as if we do not know how to free ourselves from this anemic, miserable and colorless existence. It holds our thoughts, our ideas in a vise that involuntarily mold the future. But once that modeled existence is rejected, and the sources of a vast creative movement open, the true revolution will transform social life precisely in the direction of a spectacular general movement, of the greatest variety and its living synthesis.) We must resolutely account for this circumstance, that is to say, we must no longer trip ourselves up with a single model, but to seek to count on that plurality and begin as much as possible that synthesis (without forgetting the mobility of the elements), if we want our aspirations and our social constructions to match the veritable ways of true emancipation and become a real force, called to aid these means and aspirations to be clarified and realized.

Thus, also, from the purely practical point of view, we come to note that the plurality and its living synthesis are the true essence of things and the fundamental foundation stone necessary for our reasoning and our constructions.

The answer to the questions posed at the beginning is:

The social revolution will be accomplished by the great masses with the aid of a connection and of a combined action of different forces, levers, methods, means and forms of organization born from diverse conditions and necessities. In its essence, in its character and its forms, this whole magnificent process will consequently be “plural-synthetic.”

What good then to squabble endlessly and break lances over the question, if it is the workers’ syndicates, the communes or the individual associations, if it is the “class-based organizations” or the “groups of sympathy” and the “revolutionary organizations” that will bring about the social revolution, which will be the “true” forms and instruments of the revolutionary action and creation, the cells of the future society? We see in these disputes absolutely no reason to exist. In the light of what has come before, the object of these quibbles seems completely void of sense. For we are convinced that the syndicates, the workers’ unions, the communes, the individual associations, the class-based organizations, the sympathetic groups, the revolutionary organizations, etc.,—will all take part, each in its own sphere, in proportion to their strength and impact, in the construction of the new society and the new life.

Now, it is enough to note attentively our press, our organizations, to lend an ear to our discussions in order to see that it is for this empty question, rather than for some purely philosophical differences, that a bitter struggle takes place in our ranks, that we deck ourselves out, and that we highlight by dividing in this way our forces still more, with all sorts of labels: “anarcho-syndicalists,” “anarchist-communists,” “anarchist-individualists,” etc., and that our movement is thus crushed and broken in a senseless manner.

We believe that it is high time that the anarchists of different tendencies recognize, in this regard, the absence of any serious foundation for these scissions and divisions. A great step forward toward our rapprochement will have been made when we recognize this fact. There will be one less pretext for dissensions. Each can give preponderance to some particular factor, but admit at the same time the presence and significance of other factors, recognizing, as a consequence, the same right for other anarchists to give the preponderance to other factors. It is in this way that the comrades will take a step towards knowing how to work hand-in-hand in the same organization, in the same organ, in a common movement, by each developing their ideas and activity in the direction that interests them, by struggling ideologically, by confronting their convictions in a common camaraderie and not between hostile camps excommunicating one another. To establish such relations would provide a solid cornerstone to the edifice of the unified anarchist movement.

VOLINE.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]

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Constructing Anarchisms: Clarifications and Additional Tools

Given the rapid buildup of “Constructing Anarchisms,” really in a matter of days, from a proposal among friends to this joint enterprise of really unknown dimensions, it’s no surprise that some of the introductory material didn’t clarify everything that perhaps it should have made clear. *My bad*. The thing to do now is to fill in a few gaps.

What follows is a first sketch of some material that I will probably add to the print version of the project, which is coming together more rapidly than I expected. Some of it was then influenced by the discussion on this last week’s [Anews podcast](#).

One of the questions that came up on the podcast was a question of genres. Should the exploration I’ve been doing be considered *history*? or *philosophy*? And then there were questions about the function of episodes like last week’s treatment of Kropotkin and “On Order”? Finally, there were some comments—section shenanigans aimed at the perceived ideological agenda of my whole project. Not all of the responses were anything like equally thoughtful, but all of them suggest that it wouldn’t hurt to summarize and clarify some basic things at this point.



This first “quarter” has been conceived as an example. *Watch and wonder as, before your very eyes, someone constructs an anarchism!* But the point isn’t to watch and then regurgitate the very individual vision contained in these writings. Instead, it’s a question of developing a personal sense of what “constructing an anarchism” could mean, so that you can attempt something similar on your own, after our survey of anarchist history. That’s one of the reasons that I haven’t felt much need to crank down the levels of *uniqueness* in the expression or curb my tendency to move from one form of exploration to another... and another. “Constructing an anarchism” is going to start out for most of us as a kind of problem, as we struggle to figure out if that’s something we could do, want to do, etc. Given that, there may be something to be said in favor of making the example of “making anarchism our own” unabashedly idiosyncratic.

Given what I know about the people who ultimately gravitated toward the project, I’m going to guess that *uniqueness* as such is not likely to be a problem.

But there’s no point in overdoing it—and if a good deal of what I have constructed in my previous work is quirky, I like to think that it is still a question of quirky *tools*, with some real, practical applications. So let me just take the time to introduce a handful of tools that will perhaps clarify just how *I* conceive the purpose of “Constructing Anarchisms.”



The Ungovernability of Anarchism: Back in 2012, I wrote a couple of posts discussing the various senses in which anarchism (whether understood as an ideological ideal, a tradition or a movement) seemed destined to escape our best attempts to pin it down as sole property of any of the contending anarchist factions. It was intended to be an observation about the character of the *anarchism* or *anarchisms* that we have inherited (whatever connections it might ultimately have to similar observations we have made about the resistance of *anarchy* to certain kinds of definition), based in historical research. A key claim was that “Anarchism hardly had a name before it had an internal diversity that no amount of spinning is ever going to reduce to a single orthodoxy.”

The first post was treated with suspicion, as if I was suggesting that, for example, capitalists or nationalists could be considered anarchists because anarchism was “ungovernable.” My point

was very different—as some of you may have guessed from the historical episodes that I have emphasized. In the suggested readings for Week Two, I was concerned with the ways in which Proudhon’s conception of *anarchy* came to “contain multitudes.” What I was attempting to demonstrate in the treatment of Kropotkin’s “On Order” was how *anarchism* seems to have gained a similarly split character, again essentially at its origins. “On Order” is one of the first attempts to make specifically anarchist history and remains a touchstone for a certain account of anarchism’s origins, so it seems a natural place to look for a clear conceptualization of anarchism. What we find instead—the twists and turns by which Proudhon’s ideas, including that *anarchy*, are first dismissed and then drawn back in as if they were Bentham’s, etc.—is a bit of a mess as origin stories go. The sequel—Kropotkin alternating chair-whirling and the perhaps belated study of Proudhon—reminds us that the conceptualization or reconceptualization of anarchism was an ongoing process.

I’ve never want to appear too hard on Kropotkin, felt that perhaps I was being more direct than usual in the post on *an-archy* and no doubt overcompensated a bit with all the chair-whirling. These are hard balances to strike. It has seemed important to me that the anarchist communist appropriation seems at once to be something very much like entryism and, at the same time, to present no real obstacle to synthesis, beyond some historical confusions that are fairly easily rectified if people want to rectify them. It has seemed extremely useful to concentrate on this episode, as it allows us to examine essentially the whole length of the history of explicit anarchism through the dual lenses of “modern anarchism as a break with previous anarchist projects” and “modern anarchism as a continuation of previous anarchist projects” while focusing on the same events.

Those who have read any of the material for “[Our Lost Continent and the Journey Back](#),” particularly the “Mappings,” won’t have any trouble moving from the metaphor of a “doubled” anarchist history to that of modern anarchism as a kind of “braided stream.” Those who want a quick introduction to some of those concerns might look at “[Anarchism as a Fundamentally Unfinished Project](#)” and “[Anarchist History: The Metaphor of the Main Stream](#).”

The Anarchist Declaration: I’ve said that I consider Proudhon’s first use of the phrase *je suis anarchiste* as a natural starting place for the examination of anarchist history, in part because there is a richness and an uncertainty in that expression that I expect all of the possible accounts leading from it will have difficulty exhausting. And texts like “The Anarchist Tension” suggest that, at the very least, that anarchist declaration—*I am an anarchist*—is going to require some new effort each time we make it, if, that is, we intend to take anarchy and anarchism seriously.

That challenge suggests that there is a basic, constant sort of anarchist practice that involves refreshing our commitment to the anarchist project in whatever new circumstances we find ourselves in. One way, then, of “making anarchism our own” would be this ongoing reconnection of anarchistic ideas to altered contexts. And while sometimes I think that an inkling of that project leads us to reject too much specification and “wing it,” perhaps there is something to be said for some specific efforts to clarify those elements of « our own anarchism » that we expect to be most persistent.

I’m certainly not above winging it—as some aspects of this project undoubtedly show. And one of the aspects of the daily practice that emerged for me in the course of the “[Rambles in the Fields of Anarchist Individualism](#)” is that I hardly consider one of these public explorations complete unless I’ve got myself stuck or nearly so on some theoretical limb in the process. I’m conscious now of fairly constantly pushing myself to go back to basic anarchist ideas, no matter the problem I am confronting, and take my time applying them, exploring their application. I

don't suppose that it is a practice that I will feel the need to keep up forever, but it is a habit that I'm quite consciously trying to cultivate.

And maybe that's the main thing—aside from a lot of challenging tidbits from anarchist history—that I feel it would be worthwhile to share in this joint exploration.

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There are a few more items from this personal toolkit that I will probably find an occasion to share, but the next phase of that work will probably combine quite nicely with the discussion of *synthesis*.