

# POSITIVE ANARCHY

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Now that it has become difficult to deny the resurgence of anarchist action and ideas, we have witnessed a new operation designed to limit and distort the scope of this resurgence. Much has been said about the libertarian spirit, the leaven, the ferment, the libertarian detonator. The implication is that anarchic extremism has proven capable of galvanizing energies, directing youth revolt toward social struggle, and harshly shaking up a socialism mired in reformism and bureaucracy. But once the momentum is given, anarchism reaches the end of its possibilities. It is then a matter of returning to tactics that effectively prepare for the seizure of power: restructuring and strengthening left-wing parties and workers' organizations, developing a government program, etc.

Such a conception excludes the possibility that anarchism could be anything other than a transitional moment of violent negation and radical critique. Recent experience, and the very positions expressed by many of our comrades (sometimes the most active), seem to confirm such a point of view. The resurgence of anarchism has not so far strengthened the libertarian movement, if by this we mean the organizations and publications proclaiming themselves libertarian. No new connections have been envisaged; dispersal remains the general rule. This, it might be said, is because the anarchist movement does not exist outside of the movement in the most immediate sense: direct action, agitation, violent confrontation.

## *This is only the beginning...*

In fact, the question cannot be avoided: can anarchism lead to the formation of a permanent, evolving "movement" and doctrine, or does it only truly express itself in the spontaneity of a period of upheaval and acute crisis? In the latter case, anarchism would not be linked to any organization or set of theoretical works. It would simply be the awakening of consciousness and the surge of protest occurring at a given time to shatter oppressive structures and open a breach. It would be linked exclusively to phases of brutal confrontation, global questioning, and violent rupture. We would then have to be content to "read" anarchism in a discontinuous sequence of historical events (the Paris Commune, Makhno's Ukraine, revolutionary Spain).

There would therefore be a libertarian *practice*, recognizable by a certain number of constants, but not a libertarian theory. Various statements by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, point in this direction. They indeed contain references to historical experiences, but also a clear refusal to adhere to a specific theory. Finally, we come to say with Daniel Guérin ("Le fait public" No. 6): "Any social revolution cannot, *at the moment of its emergence*, be anything other than libertarian." (Emphasis added.) This is a return to the idea that anarchism is merely a moment of revolutionary upheaval. To account for this moment and the practice that characterizes it, all that

remains is to resort to another theory, starting, for example, from the perspective that “anarchism has entered into symbiosis with Marxism” (Guérin).

In fact, the libertarian action of the spring of '68 has been commented on primarily, even by those who led it, in Marxist terms. I am not at all inclined to side with the “traditionalists” in the old anarchism-Marxism quarrel, whose terms remain as ill-defined as ever. (Bakunin saw things much more clearly than our current purists.) However, one can only introduce a great deal of confusion by formulating a specifically anarchist action in Marxist terminology. And it must be recognized that this is not a simple borrowing of vocabulary. The almost exclusive use of Marxist references and concepts reveals, beneath the explicit rejection of all theory, the recourse to Marxism as the only available revolutionary theory.

Was it not possible to express libertarian practices by drawing on the intellectual resources of anarchism? This effort at “specific” expression would not only have allowed us to better identify the ins and outs of the action, but it would also have highlighted, through concrete examples, the foundations and particular themes of libertarian thought.

### *Is there an anarchist theory?*

There is no question of “purging” anarchism of all contributions from dialectical materialism! But it seems essential to me to clarify, even if it is primarily a matter of making our practice understood, the guidelines and foundations of an anarchist theory. This raises a new question: does this original anarchist theory exist? Can we rely on anything other than disparate works, involving very different methods and postulates, sometimes difficult to reconcile?

To answer seriously, we would first have to return to the works, rediscover their internal logic, their lines of evolution, and clarify their concepts. We will undoubtedly search in vain for those willing to undertake this work. All recent studies on Proudhon, for example, are by men who have no connection with anarchism. (1) This necessarily influences the direction of their analyses. And even these works, which nevertheless reflect a certain updating of Proudhonian thought, we ignore. The same can be said of studies devoted to Stirner. (2) It is also true that many of us, relying on the polemical judgments of Marx and Marxists, consign Proudhon and Stirner to the dustbin of history without further ado.

All this, it will be said, has nothing to do with the action that must mobilize us permanently and as a priority; this remains to be proven. To those who in May-June criticized libertarians for their sole aim of destruction, the best response was slogans: all power to the councils, self-management. Wasn't this the moment to make known, even for informational purposes, the idea that anarchists had of a socialist organization? And what can self-management represent for us if we don't situate it within a federalist framework? A wonderful opportunity to shed light on Proudhon through current events. There was no need to pull out a rigid and infallible model, but at least to propose a possible path, capable of various extensions.

The imagination in power! It is true that imagination abdicates and becomes rigid within the shackles of conventions, passivity, and systematic conditioning. But it is also certain that it runs on empty if it cannot rely on precise information and reasoned hypotheses. Federalism is one of these hypotheses; it supported revolutionary spontaneity more than once. Let us recall the leading role played by the Proudhonists in the Commune: “All the administrative, economic, and political

measures taken by the Commune were inspired by Proudhon,” writes Gurvitch. “The very name of *fédérés*, adopted by the supporters of the Commune, attests to this.” (3) And further: “The combined influence of French revolutionary syndicalism and Proudhonism itself played a certain role in the formation of the rank-and-file soviets which, after the October Revolution, seized power in factories and enterprises, where they achieved workers’ self-management.” Finally, it is unnecessary to recall the extent to which the federalist model — which had its original roots in Spain — stimulated the achievements of the CNT during the Civil War.

### ***The illusion of a clean slate***

Destroy first, build later. The formula is more striking than realistic or even imaginative. We only truly destroy what we are capable of replacing. If the May revolt had escalated into a revolution, how, through what channels and through what coordination, would the establishment of a self-managed economy have taken place? Even if, from the outset, the most lucid saw the May movement as nothing more than a stage in the revolutionary process, the question must be asked. For we will encounter it at all decisive turning points, and in any case, it should be a stimulus for the imagination, a guide for action.

Undoubtedly, more immediate problems were at hand. Although there were enough discussions in which such utopias could have been inserted. And now? Attention is so focused on the new detonating action that we forget to deepen and develop the ideas of May. And the disappointment of the relapse blocks both exchanges and intellectual work. All of this only reinforces the distrust of any theoretical research that goes beyond the realm of radical criticism.

At least as far as anarchists are concerned. For others, just as left-wing, are organizing, disseminating their ideas, and developing their own tools. Should we once and for all abandon the need for coordinated activity, the need for connection and permanence that constantly draws those who find no opportunity to build in the anarchist movement to other groups or alternative activities? Is it an aberration to want to “build” in today’s society? Is it necessarily a way to neutralize the energies directed against the capitalist system?

The desire to participate, with a minimum of permanence, in a collective effort seems to me to be a healthy and spontaneous psychological factor. Creation within the provisional limits of the possible is also a defense against sterilization and conditioning. And the clean slate is itself a dangerous illusion: in the network of determinisms and conditionings in which we are caught, a revolutionary outbreak constitutes only a temporary liberation. Once the excitement has subsided and been repressed, the old mechanisms, the old models of life and thought, are taking over. Undoubtedly, real cracks remain: we must prevent them from closing at all costs, and above all, prevent demoralization and nihilism from further strengthening the framework of conditioning. To achieve this, we must tirelessly develop not only a critique of the imposed way of life, but also the affirmation of other values and other possibilities, the experience of different relationships and behaviors.

It is also essential not to limit ourselves to fragmentary expression and experimentation. Of course, each of us, and each group, can only undertake partial attempts. It is all the more necessary to place these fragments within a general framework that gives them meaning and coherence. Hence the importance of theoretical research and expression with a dual goal: to propose models of action and

implementation, and to establish a constant link between criticism, protest, experimentation, and restructuring efforts.

### ***For a Libertarian Culture***

Here are some paths toward a “positive anarchy” that could be briefly outlined:

It is within our capabilities, and it is extremely urgent, to revitalize and develop a libertarian culture. I know the allergic reactions provoked by the very word “culture,” but we must move beyond this fetishism, this conditioned reflex, to seriously examine the various critiques of culture that have been made in recent times. It is certain that culture, whether “elite” or “mass,” is an instrument of ideological intoxication. But cultural activity cannot be reduced to this factor alone. Otherwise, all that would remain would be to renounce all knowledge, all reflection, all expression. If it is true that there is a *dominant culture*, it is also true that there is one, or more precisely, many *cultures dominated*, mutilated, and repressed. This is the case with libertarian culture. And anarchists themselves have done much to sabotage it.

A considerable body of studies, reflections, critiques, original ideas, and constructive proposals remain buried in works abandoned to the “gnawing criticism of mice,” even though the essence of libertarian thought was formed there. Men who fought their entire lives against oppression left their testimonies, the results of their experiences, and plans for new experiments. Very often, the proponents of the dominant culture have tried to lock them away behind a wall of silence and derision, and have succeeded only too well. It’s a matter of “taking them out of the ghetto,” not through pious commemorations, but by extracting from their contribution what is current and powerful, by rediscovering behind formulas that may have aged the logic behind their thought, the dynamics of their activity, the tendencies of their sensibility. It’s not a matter of constituting purely biographical or literary knowledge about them, but of identifying a way of feeling, thinking, and acting: a position taken in the face of the present world.

By the way, it is certain that this will not lead to a single theory, an all-terrain system, but to diverse currents, inspiring diverse practices. The important thing will be to give each of these currents its coherence, its aptitude for experimentation and renewal, and to use the work and imagination of those who preceded it to give us an instrument of understanding, communication, and a grasp of the world.

This libertarian culture would already cease to be bookish at a time when its development would lead us to renew ties, to find forms of collaboration and relationships consistent with such an undertaking if it is indeed conducted in a libertarian spirit. A project of this kind also requires a minimum of means for publication, distribution, etc. Providing resources is not everything: it is also necessary to preserve and develop them. The instability of libertarian groups makes this difficult. When a team manages to build a tool (magazine, newspaper, bookstore, publishing cooperative), the fear of seeing what it has acquired shattered in the hands of newcomers immediately incites an attitude of distrust and withdrawal, if not outright sectarianism, which prevents any progress. It is also true that we have seen enough examples of irresponsibility in our circles to understand, which does not mean accept, such an attitude.

The result of such a situation is well known: we constantly start from scratch, energies are exhausted, and available wills are scattered. The work provided by both sides is lost in the short term.

The effort to express anarchism positively is therefore necessarily accompanied by an effort to create the indispensable instruments of connection, production, and exchange. It is unreasonable to loudly demand self-management if one is incapable of collectively managing even the most modest equipment. Blaming the capitalist environment for such an inability is often a false alibi.

### ***Recuperated by the system?***

The most urgent thing is not to think about "equipment." We must first see if teams can be formed. If they come to life, if they manage to maintain coordination and a certain rhythm of activity, the rest will follow.

One more clarification, to avoid a common misunderstanding. What is suggested here is not intended to be considered the only way to advance anarchism. It will never be anything more than a complement, but a complement that cannot be ignored, to the various forms of action. It is not a question of calling back to their studies those who deem it more useful to remain available for permanent harassment and practical protest. Even if we recall that the much-cited unity of theory and practice also requires that theory not be sacrificed for activism.

The primary goal is to stimulate and organize intellectual activity that can engage all tendencies of the anarchist movement, regardless of the type of practice they advocate. It must pose problems for everyone and also propose answers to these problems. It must encourage a critical attitude that is not focused exclusively on the positions and achievements of other groups, but on the choices specific to each individual. This collective intellectual activity could also include in a new community those who, in isolation, attempt to partially apply their ideas in the most diverse sectors of social life, precisely where the greatest risk of "recuperation" exists: teaching, leisure, "popular" education, information, trade unionism, etc. A constant link must be maintained between those leading offensive revolutionary action and those who can serve as relays and mediators to make this struggle known and properly understood. The latter can also devote themselves more easily to creating instruments of exchange and dissemination made available to more mobile and more exposed groups. In return, a permanent confrontation between the two groups has some chance of provoking a self-examination among those who, in their isolation, risk slipping into the ruts of the established order.

The important thing is to react against intellectual sterility and prostration. Because we have allowed the current of libertarian culture to be lost, because we have failed to keep abreast of the evolution of knowledge and ideas, because we renounce original production for fear of being caught up in the system, the awakening of spring 1968 and the resurgence of anarchism are threatened with neutralization.

But isn't the effort to formulate a "positive anarchy" destined to quickly become a factor of integration into the dominant ideology and its means of conditioning? The danger is real, and it would be serious to lose sight of it. Shifts toward harmless liberalism, toward educationism, moralism, or union reformism, for example, can lead us to participate, despite our intentions, in the organization of life under capitalist and technocratic control. We can at least bet on the fact that anarchism manifests an intrinsic tendency toward criticism, negation, and radicalization, which remains latent even in a weakened ideological expression, and which quickly regains its virulence in favorable (individual or collective) terrain. And anything that helps clarify, support, and renew our positions, strengthen

connections at the expense of dispersion, stimulate the imagination, and clarify and develop information will sooner or later contribute to the effectiveness of our action.

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(1) Georges GURVITCH : *Proudhon sociologue* (Centre de documentation universitaire, 1955) — *Dialectique et sociologie* (Flammarion , 1962) — *Proudhon et Marx, une confrontation* (Centre de documentation universitaire, 1964) — Pierre ANSART : *Sociologie de Proudhon* (PUF, 1967) — *Proudhon : Oeuvres choisies*, par Jean BANCAL (Idées-Gallimard, 1967).

(2) Henri ARVON : *Aux sources de l'existentialisme : Max Stirner* (PUF, 1954) - Gilles DELEUZE : *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (PUF, 1962).

(3) *Proudhon* ( PUF, 1965 — collection “Philosophes”) pp. 66-67.

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