

Nietzsche and Anarchism

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Nietzsche's work has been the object of a large number of interpretations: an extreme right-wing interpretation, for example, but also a Christian interpretation, or even, very early on, an anarchist interpretation and, more recently, a reading that could be called libertarian, linked to the revival of this current of thought over the last thirty years. The Nietzsche that anarchists first discovered (from Fernand Pelloutier to Libertad, via Georges Palante) was above all an individualist Nietzsche. And it is only much later, with authors not specifically anarchists (Deleuze and Foucault for example), and as this text would like to show, that this individualist interpretation could be widened to a consideration of the collective and social dimension of the libertarian project, in particular in its workers' dimensions. It is true that this enlargement was not at first self-evident. The vocabulary, the figures and more generally the historical and scientific references used by Nietzsche had nothing that could make immediately readable a proximity between his thought and the political and social dimension of the workers' libertarian movements. How could anarchists or revolutionary syndicalists have recognized themselves in formulations where, in contrast to the dominant moral and populist interpretations, Nietzsche constantly takes the side of the "strong" and the "masters" against the "weak" and the "slaves" who, according to him and against all evidence, have prevailed over the "masters"?¹

"The strong must be protected against the weak", says Nietzsche. A paradoxical formula that only a philosophical interpretation could make intelligible. Today, we can better perceive how, for Nietzsche, masters and slaves constitute types, applicable to a great number of situations, each time requiring a great finesse of evaluation and interpretation. Masters and slaves are not always where we think we find them; and these modes of being owe nothing to the signs and representations that claim to fix and express them. It is true however that for Nietzsche the people, the democracy, the egalitarianism of the ballot boxes, the crowd and the masses always ready to submit to the first platform speaker who promises them the moon, are a particularly bright manifestation of the negative figure of the slave, of a reactive and envious force, subjected to the hatred and the resentment. But as even the most superficial knowledge of the libertarian movement suggests, there is nothing about this judgment that would shock anarchists. And it is precisely here that Nietzsche's analysis justifies being confronted with what we can know, historically, of the different forms of the libertarian workers' movement and, behind them (or after them) of what any libertarian movement can be.

Anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism have only very little theorized their practices and, *a fortiori*, called upon philosophical references from which their militants were very distant. The "intellectuals" — Sorel, Berth, etc. — who claimed to speak for them, referred to Bergson, much more rarely to Nietzsche. This is therefore a retrospective interpretation. It could be formulated as follows. Contrary to appearances, if the masses submitted to politicians or fascinated by charismatic leaders (from Mussolini to Mao Tse-toung) unquestionably belong to what Nietzsche calls "slaves", the so-called anarcho-syndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist workers' movements, as well as what sociology and history show about the values and the kind of life of the classes or the professional circles that made them possible, are just as indisputably of the type of "masters" and "aristocrats" as Nietzsche conceives them. To support this thesis, one could multiply the points of convergence; on the side of Proudhonism and Proudhon of course, in the way the latter thinks of the strength and weaknesses of the "people"; but also through the histor-

¹ Sans parler des violentes attaques de Nietzsche contre « l'anarchisme » assimilé à une simple variante du « socialisme ». Sur ce point, voir plus loin.

ical and sociological approach of a certain number of working-class professional sectors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the systems of values that they develop, of their relationship to the world and to others; or again about the so-called anarcho-syndicalist labor movement, from the so decried “agitating minorities” to the mixture of individualism and collective action that characterizes them, through its equally misunderstood conception of the “strike” as an affirmation of workers’ strength and will. Here we will consider only three main aspects: separatism, federalism and direct action.

Separatism

When Nietzsche distinguishes between masters and slaves, it is also for him a way of opposing Hegel, his way of dialectically uniting the two terms. For Nietzsche, the antagonism between masters and slaves is only a secondary effect or (if not) a simple slave point of view. There is nothing dialectical about their relationship, in a relationship where, worse, the active principle would be on the side of negation, of the one who denies in order to affirm himself. How could an affirmation be born from a negation, from nothingness? For Nietzsche, this is indeed a slave’s thought. For him, it is necessary to adopt the point of view of the masters (in the sense that he gives to this word), to understand how what distinguishes them from the slaves is precisely a separation, a differentiation. The antagonism between masters and slaves presupposes first of all a relation of differentiation of the masters, not as a struggle that connects and attaches, but as a separation that detaches and distinguishes. But it is precisely here and from this point of view that we can understand why the libertarian workers’ movements have always been, historically, so radically alien to Marxism (a variant of Hegelianism) and its conception of the class struggle, insofar as they obey a movement of differentiation of the strong and the masters of which Nietzsche speaks.

Indeed, in the anarcho-syndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist conception, the working class, considered from the point of view of the emancipation of which it is the bearer, is not first or mainly defined by the class struggle, by the exploitation, the oppression and the physical and moral misery that these do not fail to cause. Its emancipatory power depends essentially on its capacity, historically and locally defined, to constitute itself as an autonomous, independent and affirmative force, having at its disposal all the services, all the institutions and all the values necessary to its independence, which depend only on it, on its capacity to bring about another world. For anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism, the working class must first make a radical secession, having nothing in common with the rest of society. In the discourse proper to this libertarian component of the workers’ movement, but which largely overflows the often uncertain ideological borders, this movement of differentiation bears the quite limpid name, from a Nietzschean point of view, of “workers’ separatism”. The workers’ movement must “separate” itself from the rest of society. What Proudhon explains thus in his posthumous book, *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, undoubtedly one of the texts most read by the workers’ militants of before the First World War: “The separation that I recommend is the very condition of life. To distinguish oneself, to define oneself, is to be; in the same way that to merge and absorb oneself is to lose oneself. To make a split, a legitimate split, is the only way we have to assert our right [...]. Let the working class, if it takes itself seriously, if it pursues something other than a fantasy,

hold it to be true: above all, it must get out of its tutelage, and [...] act henceforth and exclusively by itself and for itself”.²

In this way of seeing, the class struggle is obviously not absent, but it has nothing dialectical anymore. For revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists, the strike, the privileged expression of the class struggle, is first of all a founding and untimely act that could in many ways be qualified as autistic, a tearing of time that is always singular and circumstantial, a rupture of the previous links and fetters that, through the multiplication of partial conflicts, contributes decisively to the transformation of the very being of the worker. In this incessant repetition of the strike, the workers’ organizations can give themselves immediate objectives, make agreements; these objectives are always secondary and these agreements always provisional. For what constitutes them as revolutionary forces, they do not aim at any reasonable compromise because defined by the framework in which it is made, at any “satisfaction” that would come from the economic and social order from which they obtain it. Even and especially when they sign conventions, the workers are not in a situation of demand. They are content to obtain a part of their “right”, provisionally, while waiting to obtain it in its entirety, freely, without other “respondents” than themselves. If the workers don’t ask for anything, it’s because they don’t feel any envy for the old world they want to abolish. Their revolt is a pure affirmation of the forces and the movement that constitute them, and it is only in a derivative way that they are forced to fight the reactive and reactionary forces that oppose this affirmation. They ask nothing from anyone, but everything from themselves, from their capacity to express and develop the power they carry.

In another way, we find Nietzsche’s approach, perceptible as early as *Zarathustra* and later in his will to overthrow values (not in the sense of turning them into their opposite but in the sense of destroying the tables of the law), to cut history in two and to establish an entirely new world. As with Nietzsche, the libertarian project, affirmative and differential, is part of a messianic type of approach that can be found almost everywhere in industrializing societies, from Spanish anarchism to the libertarian Judaism of Central Europe described by Michael Löwy³. The theme of the general strike or its popular expression of the “Big Night”, illustrates well this radical conception of the revolutionary struggle of the libertarian workers’ movement. With the general strike, which gives the meaning of partial strikes, the working class stops everything, crossing its arms. Like the trumpets of Jericho, it is its way to break down the walls of the existing order, deploying the power of another possible. In this conception of the Revolution, the working class has effectively nothing to ask, nothing to say to anyone else, since it claims to be everything and, above all, something entirely new that no one can give it, since it is it that brings it.

Federalism

Another point of encounter between Nietzsche and the libertarian workers’ movements is federalism. Nietzsche’s approach is affirmative and necessarily “multiple”, because “it belongs essentially to the affirmation to be itself multiple, pluralist, and to the negation to be one, or heavily monistic⁴”. The Nietzschean “will to power” does not designate a unified force, nor a central principle from which everything would emanate. As Michel Haar shows, it refers “to a

² P.-J. Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Rivière, pp. 237 et 244.

³ M. Löwy, *Rédemption et utopie, le judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale*, Paris, PUF, 1988.

⁴ G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, Paris, PUF, 1965, p. 25.

latent plurality of impulses, or to complexes of forces in the process of uniting or repelling each other, of associating or dissociating⁵. By determining itself, the will to power tends to unite and hierarchize the multiple forces of chaos. It does not destroy them, does not reduce them, does not resolve their differences or their antagonisms in the manner of the Hegelian dialectic. “Affirmative and strong, the will to power will assume variety, difference and plurality⁶”. This conception of the will to power is particularly enlightening to understand the forms that the workers’ movements of the anarcho-syndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist type have taken.

Indeed, it would be a gross misinterpretation to interpret in the anachronistic register of a totalitarian conception the claim of revolutionary syndicalism to be “self-sufficient”, to expect no one else to ensure the advent of a new world of which it considers itself the sole bearer. This claim is closely linked to social and workers’ federalism. If trade unionism claims to be everything, it is because it is multiple, infinitely multiple and different in its components. It carries the “other” within itself and the “difference”, as radical as it may be, is experienced in the very movement that leads it to claim to occupy all of social reality. It is in this sense, among others, that revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism are Proudhonian. Proudhon is not only the socialist theorist who insists the most on the necessity for the different components of the working class to radically autonomize themselves from the rest of society (separatism). He is undoubtedly the only one to think of the plurality of forces that make up the working class, to conceive of it as a multiple reality. Contrary to Marx, Proudhon speaks most often of “the” working classes and not of “the” working class or “the” proletariat. Whereas for Marx the working class is only the abstract moment, because it is instrumentalized, of a reason at work in history, for Proudhon the working forces are always concrete and living forces, different and in the process of becoming, which can always disappear and reappear under other forms, change their nature, be absorbed, dominate other forces or be dominated by them, in an incessant movement of transformation where nothing is ever definitive. In the conception of revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, the “organized working class” is an effect of composition, a “resultant” as Proudhon and Bakunin say⁷, a composition of multiple, diverse and autonomous, even contradictory forces, which recognize themselves as necessary to each other to give birth to a new world.

It has often been misunderstood why revolutionary syndicalism was so keen, in the decisions of the congresses, that each union should have the same importance, regardless of the number of its members. Procedural tactics within the congresses were undoubtedly not absent from this requirement. But this demand referred above all to a more fundamental revolutionary conception, a qualitative and not quantitative, differential and not abstract conception of reality. Extremely diverse, depending on the regions and countries, the development and the functioning of the workers’ movements of so-called direct action correspond completely to the analyses of Proudhon and Nietzsche on the modalities of affirmation of “power” (Proudhon) or of the “will to power” (Nietzsche). In fact, and to stick to the singular experiences of the French workers’ movement (in particular within the framework of the labour exchanges), workers’ federalism is always characterized by the conflicting union of extremely diverse forces, too precious in their singularity for the point of view of only one of them to be crushed by the law of numbers, by the false evaluation of quantity and measure. Associations of miners, of musicians, of cabinetmak-

⁵ M. Haar, *Nietzsche et la métaphysique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ Sur la notion proudhonienne de « résultante », cf. *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Eglise*, Rivière, 1932, t. III, pp. 409 et suivantes.

ers, of typographers, of carpenters, of “men of toil”, of plumbers, etc., so many types of collective arrangements carrying a singular mode of being, so many specific forces struggling to unite and affirm themselves in a vaster force which draws itself all its power from what constitutes it thus as a combination of distinct forces.

The trade union forms are not only diverse in relation to each other. Each constituent force of the labor movement as a greater power is itself a composition of forces that are just as multiple and singular: geography of the places where it is deployed, methods of organization, types of militants, number of members, rhythms and methods of operation, links with the rest of the profession, relative share of union members, nature of professional know-how, types of tools, types of enterprises, organization of work, origins of the workforce, etc, each basic organization of a labor exchange (which admits only one per type) is not only a specific force, different from all the others. It is itself the “resultant”, always in disequilibrium, of a composition and a selection of equally autonomous forces, which can, to varying degrees, in the interplay of relations within the labor exchange, be composed (or opposed) directly with other components or compounds of components of this exchange. Closer to Nietzsche, one of the essential characteristics of libertarian movements lies in their capacity to allow all the forces that constitute them to express themselves, to assert themselves and to constantly seek to evaluate the meaning of their association, to experiment and to struggle among themselves in order to determine the hierarchy of values that their composition carries.

Direct Action

We know that for anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism, the workers’ forces must always act directly, without intermediaries, without “representatives” and without “representation”. The notion of representation must be understood here in the broadest sense of the word and in a way that directly echoes Nietzsche’s thought, his critique of political or scientific representation, whether it be of the State, the Church or Knowledge. As Deleuze shows, for Nietzsche science and politics are reactive forces that aim to “separate active forces from what they can”, to render them powerless, to deny them as such by enslaving them to other ends⁸. This is true of science or knowledge which, from “simple means subordinated to life [...] has set itself up as an end, as a judge, as a supreme instance⁹”. But this is also true of politics and religion, two other ways of fixing and representing active forces in order to better enslave them to a deceptive reactive arrangement. “The State [...] is a hypocritical dog [...] it likes to talk — to make it seem that its voice [...] comes from the belly of things”. As for the Church, “it is a kind of State and it is the most deceptive¹⁰. Science, Church, State, it is always a question of enslaving reality to the lie of signs and representation, “movement” to “substance”, active forces to reactive forces.

It is true that, for Nietzsche and as Deleuze reminds us¹¹ 12], the dominating and mystifying powers can be identified with Humanity, with the Proletariat or with the working class itself, but this critique of socialism (virulent in Nietzsche) has nothing (from this point of view at least) to surprise a reader of Proudhon and, with him, the numerous militants who, in the heat of the

⁸ G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, *OPC*, t. IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, pp. 61 et 152.

¹¹ *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

action, have tried to think anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism. On the contrary, one could say, because in a certain way, and as long as one pays moderate attention to what the two say, it provides, against all apparent evidence, a final indication of what may have brought them together.

For Deleuze's Nietzsche, "culture" is a "generic activity", a "prehistory" of man that allows him to "speak" and no longer "answer", to be his own "master", his own "right", but which, historically, has been "captured by foreign forces of a completely different nature"¹². "In place of generic activity, history presents us with races, peoples, classes, churches and states"¹³. This "generic activity"¹⁴ that "communities" and other forms of "associations" manage so well to cover and absorb, Deleuze relates it elsewhere, more broadly and especially much more offensively, to what he calls "univocal being." "Power" irreducible to the social forms and to the individuals that it contributes to produce, "the univocal being" "acts in them as transcendental principle, as plastic, anarchic and nomadic principle, contemporary of the process of individuation and that is not less capable of dissolving and destroying the individuals than of constituting them temporarily"¹⁵. Deleuze is right to think "the univocal being" under the "plastic" sign of an "anarchy of the beings", where in the affirmation of its existence each singular being is "the equal" of all, because "immediately present to all things, without intermediary nor mediation"¹⁶. Indeed, in Proudhon it is almost in identical terms that we find this distinction. On the one hand we have "action". The origin of all "ideas" and all "reflection", action can take on the double face of war and work: "war", without which man "would have lost [...] his revolutionary faculty" and reduced his life to a "pure community", to a "stable civilization"¹⁷; "work", "the plastic force of society", "one and identical in its plan" and "infinite in its applications, like creation itself"¹⁸. On the other hand, we have the appropriation of the collective forces and the power of action of human beings by a succession of forms of social individuations posing as "absolute"; an appropriation that Proudhon describes as follows: "incarnated in the person, the absolute, with a growing autocracy is going to develop in the race, in the city, the corporation, the State, the Church; it establishes itself king of the humanitarian collectivity and the university of the creatures. Having reached this height, the absolute becomes God"¹⁹.

Let us listen to Victor Griffuelhes, then secretary of the French CGT, when he attempts to define syndicalism, a perilous exercise from the point of view of Nietzsche and Proudhon: "Syndicalism is the movement of the working class which wants to achieve full possession of its rights over the factory and the workshop; it affirms that this conquest with a view to realizing the emancipation of labor will be the product of personal and direct effort exercised by the worker"²⁰. "Amazing sentence under the wear of words, which, in two propositions, manages to condense a great number of characteristics of revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism without ever enslaving them to an identity, a representation or an organization. "Personal and direct effort", "conquest", "emancipation", "affirmation", tension towards "the full possession of one's

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁵ G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris, PUF, 1968, p. 56. En ligne

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55. En ligne

¹⁷ P.-J. Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix*, Paris, Rivière, p. 32.

¹⁸ P.-J. Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre*, Paris, Rivière., p. 421 ; et *De la Justice*, Rivière, t. III, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁰ *Op. cit.* p. 2

rights”: the “generic activity” of which Deleuze spoke about Nietzsche finds here a content and a formulation that immediately determine the definition of syndicalism. For Griffuelhes, trade unionism is neither a thing, nor, a fortiori, a representative or an organization (of the working class in this case). Trade unionism is a “movement”, the “movement” of the working class.

No doubt this formulation benefits from the infatuation of the time for the notions of action and movement. But in Griffuelhes’ writing, there is nothing conventional or mechanical about it, as the immediate continuation of the text shows. In a very Proudhonian way (and still astonishing), Griffuelhes immediately follows up, not on capitalism, the bosses or the bourgeois, a dialectical counterpoint apparently obliged by the objectives that syndicalism gives itself, but on the question of “God” and “Power”. “To the trust in the God of the priest, to the trust in the Power of the politicians inculcated in the modern proletarian, the syndicalism substitutes the trust in oneself, to the tutelary labeled action of God and Power, it substitutes the direct action [...]”²¹. The movement of the working class is first of all, as a preliminary and as an echo of what we have already said about working-class separatism, the force that allows us to set ourselves in motion, the “confidence in ourselves” opposed to confidence in another and external force, that of the God of the priests and the Power of the politicians. But the movement of the working class is also “direct action” that Griffuelhes, in a somewhat obscure way, opposes to another type of action, an action “labeled tutelary of God and of Power”, or (another possible meaning) “labeled” because “tutelary of God and of Power”, because subjected to their shadow and their domination.

What follows is even more interesting. For four paragraphs Griffuelhes continues to denounce God and the Church, Power and the State. And then, abruptly, he stops, confronted with an apparently minor difficulty because it is concrete and practical. What should be the attitude of trade unionism towards “workers imbued with religious ideas or confident in the reforming value of the leaders?”²² In other words, what to do with workers labeled Christian or reformist? Here again, an obvious answer seems to impose itself, the one popularized by the anthem of the Comintern: “You are a worker, yes? Come with us, don’t be afraid”. To the Christian identity, it is necessary to oppose another identity, the worker identity, to assert the anteriority and superiority (from the point of view of history and economic determinations) of the worker condition. Yet Griffuelhes does not choose this answer, obvious and reassuring, but in the passive order of things, of identities, of “facts” and therefore of representations. Better or worse, he resolutely refuses it as contrary to the desired goal and especially to what revolutionary syndicalism can do. If syndicalism does not have to reject Christian and reformist workers, it is not first of all because they are “workers”, but on the contrary or in a different way, because it is advisable to carefully distinguish between “movement, action on the one hand, working class on the other hand”²³. Belonging to the working class does not guarantee anything, since workers can be Christians or socialists. The difference is the action and the movement, the only ones capable of acting on things and labels, of blurring their reference points and their limits, of dragging workers, Christians, socialists, anarchists, but also bricklayers, founders and bakers, or even Greeks, Germans and Spaniards, into a process that gives itself otherwise difficult objectives since it claims to transform the workshop, the factory and the whole of society. And as if it were necessary to hammer home this essential idea — not only the superiority of the movement and action proper to syndicalism

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

over the working class identity and its representations, but their difference in nature -, Griffuelhes immediately returned to the charge: “Syndicalism, let us repeat, is the movement, the action of the working class; it is not the working class itself²⁴”.

Griffuelhes, in this text, does not define what he means by “direct action,” this “movement” and this “action” that differ so clearly from all identities, whether of class, profession, nationality or religious affiliation. But another CGT leader, Émile Pouget, gives a definition that confirms in every way the affinity that links it to the “plastic force” of Proudhon and Deleuze, to the “generic activity” of Nietzsche: “Direct action, a manifestation of the force and will of the worker, materializes, according to the circumstances and the environment, by acts that can be very harmless, as well as very violent. [...] There is [...] no specific form to Direct Action²⁵”. [emphasis added].

The evidence of a great proximity between Nietzsche and anarchism is not new. As early as 1906, Franz Overbeck, a close friend of Nietzsche’s, could explain how the latter had read Stirner, and how he had made a “strong and quite singular” impression on him, thus confirming the encounter between Nietzsche and the most individualistic dimension of anarchism. But he could also, in an apparently more surprising way, underline “the great affinity” existing between Nietzsche and Proudhon, insofar as the very particular “aristocratism and anti-socialism” of the former was in no way a “sign of divergence” from the latter, whose “democratism and socialism were themselves very particular²⁶”. Without doubt, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that this encounter acquired its true meaning. It was not until the Nietzscheanism of Foucault or Deleuze, the rereading of Spinoza or Leibniz that it authorized, but also the rediscovery of Tarde, Simondon or Whitehead, that the meaning and the scope of a political and philosophical project that had long been ignored and despised was finally brought to light, and which, by its practical and philosophical implications, went far beyond the historical limits of anarchism proper.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Emile Pouget, *L’Action directe*, Editions CNT-AIT, s. d., p. 23. (1910).

²⁶ Franz Overbeck, *Souvenirs sur Nietzsche*, Allia, 1999, pp. 64–65 et 60–61.

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