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Gruppo Comunista Anarchico di Firenze
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October 1979

Retrieved on 30th October 2021 from www.fdca.it
From “*L’informatore di parte*”, No.4, October 1979, quarterly
journal of the *Gruppo Comunista Anarchico di Firenze*.

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Anarchist Communism & Libertarian Communism

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(...) We have seen how the anarchist communist tendency descends directly from Bakuninist, pro-organization and communist thought, and how it has constantly had to stand up to the anti-organizational theories that have periodically appeared throughout the history of anarchism (and social democracy, too).

However, the “organizational” tendency of anarchism (for the sake of simplicity, we will use this name to describe that tendency that has historically been opposed to the “anti-organizational” trend in the anarchist movement — the anarcho-communists, nihilists, Sternerist individualists, etc.) has also included another tendency alongside the anarchist communist one — the libertarian communist tendency.

This term has at times been used as a synonym of anarchist communism, differing little from the latter as far as historical and strategical definitions are concerned. Other times, however, it has been used to describe a synthesis between marxism and anarchism.

Leaving aside for the moment the older definition of libertarian communism used by Sébastien Faure in the 1880’s, we will ex-

amine the use of the two expressions starting with the definitions attributed to them in 20th century Spain.

Ever since the foundation of the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* in 1909, an organization in which anarchists played a fundamental role, the term libertarian communism has been used to define the programme of anarchist communists who, in a mass organization, have to balance their revolutionary strategy with the day-to-day struggle and the gradualism typical of a mass organization, aiming at a programme and a method of struggle which can be as libertarian as possible and which can promote self-management as much as possible.

After 1927, the CNT was flanked by the *Federación Anarquista Iberica*, an anarchist communist organization that grouped together class-struggle militants around a shared revolutionary strategy. The relationship between the CNT and the FAI were characterized in fact by the presence of the best known and most active FAI members in the CNT. As a result of this presence, these militants were extremely influential within the organization and, during the period from 1936 to 1939, led the revolutionary Spanish masses towards objectives and achievements which had a strong anarchist communist and self-management character.

“In this way — and it was probably the only time in the whole history of anarchism¹ — the Bakuninist idea of a

¹ Throughout his work, Woodcock diminishes the concrete action of anarchists, but here cannot hide the importance of the Spanish anarchists' organizational dualism and the concrete results that it provided. Woodcock forgets, however, the activities of the Russian anarchists during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, and those of the Italian anarchists during the “*biennio rosso*”. In both cases the practice of organizational dualism existed, in the sense of membership of a specific anarchist organization (*Nabat* for the Russians, the *Unione dei Comunisti Anarchici d'Italia* — later the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* — for the Italiana) joined with class-struggle activism (the Russians in the soviets of peasants, workers, soldiers and sailors, the Italians in the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* or the CGL).

Libertarian communism, in the sense of a synthesis of marxism and anarchism, is very much a minority in the Italian anarchist movement, often introduced as a means of expressing sympathy with certain positions of the *Autonomia* area from 1973 on.

pelled and who would “organize” themselves in the “**Groups of Anarchist Initiative**” (GIA — *Gruppi di Iniziativa Anarchica*).

The same process of clarification had already got under way in France in the early 1960s, leading in 1967 to the formation of the **Revolutionary Anarchist Organization** (ORA — *Organisation Révolutionnaire Anarchiste*) on clear anarchist communist positions. After 1974, this organization entered a period of crisis and became the **Libertarian Communist Organization** (OCL — *Organisation Communiste Libertaire*) in an attempt to synthesise marxism and anarchism¹¹ and at the same time set itself up as the embryo for a mass organization.

This process of altering anarchist communism occurred to a lesser degree in Italy where, indeed, the process within the anarchist movement was going in the opposite direction. From 1969 on, starting within the FAI and later in certain nation-wide networks, there developed a debate on anarchist communist strategy which would lead to the birth of national federations and nation-wide networks based on firm anarchist communist positions.¹²

This was the case with the **Revolutionary Anarchist Organization** (ORA — *Organizzazione Rivoluzionaria Anarchica*), at first limited to the Apulia region but later extended to other parts of Italy, and also with many other federations (the Ligurian, Tuscan and Milanese federations, for example) using the name libertarian communist as a synonym of anarchist communist.

¹¹ The tradition of synthesising marxism and anarchism in France has its origins in the crisis of luxemburghism and the leftist current of international marxism, of trotskyists and of anarchists who were unhappy with the traditional synthesist organization in France, the *Fédération Anarchiste*. See for example the experience of “*Socialisme ou Barbarie*” (1949–1969).

¹² This was the case with, for example, the National Coalitions of Anarchist Workers (CNLA — *Coordinamenti Nazionali Lavoratori Anarchici*) who, from 1973 on, sought to begin a constructive debate on the strategy of work with the mass organizations on the one hand and the need for an anarchist communist organization which could develop beyond the parochial nature of the local federations.

secret elite² of fervent militants at the helm of a public mass organization was translated into fact.”³

Thus, on the eve of the Spanish revolution, in 1936, the CNT Congress in Zaragoza set out its revolutionary strategy for the creation of “libertarian communism”, which was actually a mid-term programme for anarchist communism, and build the skeleton of an anarchist communist revolutionary strategy which was partly achieved in the revolutionary period in the form of collectivizations and in the running of those cities where anarchists enjoyed notable influence.

The terms libertarian communism and anarchist communism thus became synonymous within the international anarchist movement as a result of the close connection they had in Spain (with libertarian communism becoming the prevalent term).

In post-War Italy, the sector of the Italian anarchist movement which was in a majority, the organizationalists, contained a great number of militants who identified with anarchist communism.⁴

This was the case with the **Libertarian Communist Federation of Upper Italy** (FCLAI — *Federazione Comunista Libertaria dell’Alta Italia*)⁵, which used the term libertarian communist as a synonym of anarchist communist, though it remained as part of

² Woodcock emphasizes the idea of an organization of anarchists which for Bakunin was secret only in the case of necessity, in other words where it was legally impossible for the organization to operate publicly. In fact, while the Spanish anarchists did organize themselves in a semi-secret fashion during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1927–1931), they made the FAI a public organization as soon as it became possible to do so.

³ G. Woodcock, *L’anarchia*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1966, p.335

⁴ Among other things, we should remember the large number of Italian anarchists exiled under the fascist regime who actively participated in the armed struggle and in the Spanish revolution. Many died, but all the survivors remained profoundly affected by what anarchist communism managed to achieve.

⁵ Immediately following the liberation of Italy, the FCLAI had no fewer than 28 branches with 1,200 members in Milan alone. Its first general assembly was held on 23–25 July 1945.

the **Italian Anarchist Federation** (FAI — *Federazione Anarchica Italiana*)⁶, a synthesist organization which grouped together all the various tendencies within anarchism, from the individualists to the anarchist communists.

The other face of the term libertarian (used without the term communism, and not by chance) can be found in the experience of the **Italian Libertarian Federation** (FLI — *Federazione Libertaria Italiana*), formed from the merging of the marxist, luxemburghist **Spartacus Union** (*Unione Spartaco*) and a group which split from the FAI in 1946. This organization was an attempt to synthesize marxism and anarchism (before degenerating into social democracy) and was suspected of being riddled with provocateurs.

This has not been the old split in the FAI. Other defections and splits occurred as a result of this organization's political inability to express a class-struggle line, dominated as it is by a well-organized (!) anti-organizationalist current. Though this current describes itself as "libertarian", it is in reality a mixture of liberalism and anarchism, and leads only to the worst sort of inter-classism.⁷

Despite a large number of supporters, in the 1950s the newly-reborn Italian anarchist movement was to slip further and further

⁶ As early as 5 September 1945, groups of comrades from the regions of Liguria, Lombardy, Emilia, Lazio and Tuscany came together to form the Italian Anarchist Communist Federation (FCAI — *Federazione Comunista Anarchica Italiana*) and recommenced publication of *Umanità Nova* whose first issue came out on 8 September that year.

⁷ One of the leading figures in this tendency was Cesare Zaccaria, a "liberal, anarchist, then liberal again" who maintained strong links with similar tendencies in Britain and America. This tendency began to organize itself in Italy, where it had arrived on the heels of the Allies, with the Congress of Naples of the southern groups on 10–11 September 1945. It is no coincidence that during the Congress, they spoke about "free initiative" as the basis for future economic development, about Kropotkinist communalism, they claimed to have "improved" the class analysis of society by outlining its composition in social "castes" and, most importantly, they presented themselves as being ferociously anti-communist, both in the sense of their stance against the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and against anarchist communism.

into the hands of this current which was to impose its inter-classist ideology on it and took over the running of the anarchist press, the FAI's National Council and the management of funds.⁸

In 1949, this scenario of political incapacity was met with an attempt by one current of the anarchist movement to organize itself in order to create "an oriented, federated movement". Expelled from the FAI in 1950, it led to the creation of the **Anarchist Groups of Proletarian Action** (GAAP — *Gruppi Anarchici di Azione Proletaria*). During the years to follow, these groups were to carry out a great deal of activity within the workers' struggles, in an attempt to update anarchist communist strategy, but this activity was undermined by the groups' mistaken conception of the relationship between the vanguard (in the sense of conscious elements) and the mass⁹ and by elements of leninism that led them into marxism within the space of a few years.¹⁰

The collapse of the hopes that Italian anarchism could return to communist, class-struggle positions threw the whole movement into a period of deep crisis and saw it reduced to being simply a movement of opinion.

The new rise in struggles in Italy in the 1960s would lead to new militants joining the anarchist organization, thanks above all to the work of single militants who had remained, uncoordinated, within the mass organizations in those years, and to a period of healthy reflection. For example, in 1965 there occurred the long-expected split between the two biggest tendencies in the FAI, the organizationalists and the anti-organizationalists who were effectively ex-

⁸ For the history of the FAI in the period after the Second World War, see "*Convegni e Congressi*", edited by Ugo Fedeli, Genoa 1963.

⁹ This current ended up fighting to organize a party of revolutionaries which was supposed to group together the most conscious minorities within all tendencies, the so-called Third Front, instead of struggling for the creation of class-struggle positions within the mass organization.

¹⁰ Many members of the GAAP were involved in the setting up of Communist Action (*Azione Comunista*) in 1956 and Communist Struggle (*Lotta Comunista*) in 1961.