

**1917–1921: And paedophilia brought down
Sébastien Faure**

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The question was evaded by his contemporaries, and only skimmed over by historians. Was it police slander? There were indications to the contrary, but no one bothered to dig. But recent revelations leave no room for doubt: this internationally renowned anarchist activist, who fought courageously all his life against capitalists, anti-Semites, imperialisms... was also a sexual predator.

As usual, the Clignancourt flea market is crowded on this autumn Sunday in 1917. We are in the middle of the “zone”, an area that is supposed to be undevelopable, but covered with slums, within a 250-metre radius of the fortifications of Paris. The flea market attracts both Parisians on the go, strolling past the stalls of the second-hand dealers, and scruffy children who crowd the fairground attractions. This miserable childhood attracts predators. For a few coins or a bag of chips, “satyrs”, as they were called at the time, could buy the favours of “children from the area” and, a little to the side, indulge in sexual touching. Some of them, casual, full of impunity or possessed by their impulses, act almost in public.

And this is what happens today, 23 September 1917.

Surrounded, he was taken to the police station by an angry crowd

Several onlookers noticed the behaviour of a 55–60 year old man. He hovered around girls aged 8 to 12, staring at them with rapture, then rubbed himself against them and felt their buttocks. Some of them move away; others let him. The individual goes so far as to unbutton the petticoat of a girl to caress her, with her fly open. In three hours of this merry-go-round, the individual abuses seven children, until a 24-year-old linen maid, Léontine Bonafoux, is disgusted and rushes over to him and slaps him: “*Disgusting! If it’s not shameful to put your hand between the legs of little girls!*” The crowd is in an uproar; several people have seen the same thing as Léontine and vilify the satyr. He then tries to flee but, surrounded, is taken to the police station by an angry crowd.

There, the police immediately confronted him with the witnesses. “*If I like giving money to little girls, it’s nobody’s business,*” he tries to defend himself. The police officers took down everyone’s identity. But the identity of the defendant did not fail to make them tick: they were looking at an internationally renowned anarchist activist.

This is the first time that Sébastien Faure will be brought down by paedophilia. It’s not his first time, but he has so far been able to get away with it.

A leading light and his dark side

In 1917, Sébastien Faure had more than thirty years of militancy behind him. In the 1890s, as an itinerant lecturer, he had done more than anyone else to spread libertarian ideas throughout the country. In 1894, during the great repression of anarchism, he headlined the “Trial of the Thirty”, a show trial that turned out to benefit the accused. In 1895, he founded the weekly *Le Libéraire* with the sponsorship of Louise Michel, and tried — less convincingly — to do theoretical work. In 1898–1899, during the Dreyfus Affair, he took the lead in the anarchist fight against the anti-Semites. In 1905 he founded a libertarian farm-school near Rambouillet, La Ruche, which over the years became a small institution in the workers’ movement. With the Great War, he

established himself as one of the figures of the pacifist opposition, whose main newspaper, *Ce qu'il faut dire* (CQFD), he co-founded.

In short, Sébastien Faure is a great man. But he is also a great man with a cursed side.

It was on 9 September 1903 that he was first caught in the Père-Lachaise square “*indulging in obscene touching*” and “*kissing on the mouth*” three girls aged 8, 11 and 12 to whom he had given some money. Denounced by a walker, Faure was taken to the police station but, as the parents did not press charges, he was released.¹

On 19 November 1907, it was the vice cops who incidentally came upon him. While following a woman who was prostituting her 14-year-old daughter, they identified one of her clients as Sébastien Faure. The two women spent part of the night at his home.² This observation was noted, but not acted upon.

“Held” by the Ministry

He was again caught red-handed, this time in the middle of the war, on 28 September 1916, in the Buttes-Chaumont park. With another man, Sébastien Faure was sexually touching two girls aged 9 and 10 after giving them a few coins. They were arrested and taken to the police station, but this time, the reason why the case was not referred to the courts was that the police commissioner himself had kept the report with him. As he later explained: “*I thought [...] that I had a dangerous revolutionary propagandist and that I could use this document to curb his propaganda*”.³ And indeed, on 5 October 1916, he summoned Faure to threaten him.

Stifling the Buttes-Chaumont affair in order to keep it under wraps was entirely in the mind of the Minister of the Interior at the time, Louis Malvy, whose policy consisted not in blindly repressing pacifists, but in keeping them under control, like Sébastien Faure, who was “held back” by his affairs of vice.

In militant circles, it was a shock

However, a year later, at the Clignancourt flea market, the scandal was too big. And Malvy, who had left the Place Beauvau, was no longer there to protect Faure. The latter, fearing the wrath of the law, fled and hid in Marseille under a false identity. In his absence, the criminal court sentenced him to two years in prison for “*public indecency*”.⁴ Finally recognised and arrested, he appealed against the judgement and, on 28 January 1918, his sentence was reduced to six months.

In militant circles, it is a shock. Was it a police manipulation? As soon as he was released from the Santé, at the end of May 1918, Faure circulated a leaflet in militant circles denouncing an “*odious machination*”. This leaflet was followed by a brochure entitled *Une infamie*, claiming that the whole affair had been fabricated with false witnesses. But the libertarian milieu was only half convinced and kept an embarrassed silence for the most part. Held in suspicion, Faure preferred to go into exile for several months in Vichy.

¹ Summary by Sub-Brigadier Gondouin of 1 December 1917.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Statement by Émile Laurent on 24 July 1918 at the Malvy trial, *Revue des causes célèbres*, August 1918.

⁴ With the 1994 reform of the Penal Code, “public indecency” became the offence of sexual exhibition. Sébastien Faure was therefore not convicted for abusing children... but for doing so in public!

He waited until December 1919 to make his grand return. By then, a majority of activists had apparently agreed to give him the benefit of the doubt, and to classify his case as a set-up. During the explosive year of 1920, Sébastien Faure once again became the great revolutionary orator of the moment, breaking attendance records at his conferences, with thousands of listeners.

Known to children as “Monsieur Fontaine”

It was then that paedophilia brought him down for the second time. On 15 March 1921, he was arrested with two other men in the Lesage-Bullourde housing estate, an insalubrious block in the 11th arrondissement of Paris, where they had paid two girls aged 11 and 12 to commit sexual abuse. The police investigation revealed that five other girls aged 13–14 had previously been their victims in La Villette. Sébastien Faure was known to children in the neighbourhood as “Monsieur Fontaine”.

All three were incarcerated at La Santé and charged with “*indecent assault without violence*” and “*habitual incitement of minors to debauchery*”.⁵ On 15 June 1921, they were tried in correctional court in camera, and it was finally for “*public indecency*” that they were sentenced.⁶ Faure was fined 500 francs and sentenced to eight months in prison. On his release, he published a letter in *Le Libertaire* in which he claimed to be the victim of a “*trap*”, and minimised the facts: “*It was one of those trifles for which no one — except me — would have been bothered for five minutes*”.⁷ Seriously affected in terms of morale, he thought for a while of withdrawing from political life. But in the end the libertarian movement chose, once again, to believe in the set-up, and Faure continued to play a role in it. Obviously, from *L’Action française* to *L’Humanité*, there will be no shortage of comments on the “*satyr*” to discredit the libertarian movement.

And what about La Ruche in all this?

At this point, it is inevitable to ask the question of La Ruche, this libertarian farm-school where Sébastien Faure took in 20 to 30 “*orphaned, abandoned children from needy families*” from 1905 to 1917. Was it a place of sexual predation for him? It is plausible, given his known paedophile tendencies, the authority figure he embodied and the availability of a “*captive audience*” of very vulnerable boarders — orphans or children from poor families indebted to the great man.

In a letter dated 8 January 1918, the anarchist Second Casteu reported the testimony of his daughter-in-law Marguerite, who had lived at La Ruche from November 1913 until its closure in February 1917. According to her, Sébastien Faure “*took little ones into his bed at night and taught them obscene caresses*”; she believed that “*this had been going on since the foundation of la Ruche*”, as other girls told her they had been among them.⁸

After 1921, there is no further mention of “*indecent assault*” by Sébastien Faure, neither in the press nor in the police archives. During the inter-war period, the old militant devoted his

⁵ In the 1994 reform of the Penal Code, these offences became “*sexual abuse of a minor*” and “*corruption of a minor*”. In 1920, sexual maturity was set at 13 years.

⁶ Why this reclassification? It is not known. The trial was held in camera and the judicial file is missing from the Paris Archives.

⁷ “*Je sors du tombeau*”, *Le Libertaire*, 23 September 1921.

⁸ Letter to Alfred Mignon, 8 January 1918.

energy to his conferences; to his printing house, La Fraternelle, which he had founded in 1917; to opposing platformism by writing *La Synthèse anarchiste*; and to his great editorial work: the *Encyclopédie anarchiste*.

It was not until 2021 (*see below*) that the judicial file was unearthed, ruling out the thesis of police manipulation.

A time when we turned a blind eye

When Sébastien Faure was arrested twice, in 1917 and 1921, the first instinctive reaction of the anarchist movement was to cry out that the police were using him as a tool... without formally denying the facts. Behind the scenes, people were indeed quite suspicious of Faure's actions.

But, with the benefit of hindsight? After Sébastien Faure's death in 1942, his paedophilia was evaded by his contemporaries, who were certainly unaware of the events of 1903, 1907 and 1916, but could not deny those of 1917 and 1921.

Thus, in the hagiography she dedicated to him in 1949, *Sébastien Faure. L'homme, l'apôtre, une époque*, the libertarian feminist Jeanne Humbert found all the most contradictory excuses for him, mixing denial ("*police lies*"), denigration of the victims (their "*precocious vitiosity*"), biologism (his "*tyrannical desires*"), intellectualism ("*very close link between sexuality and cerebralism*") and relativism ("*What's so serious about that?*").

In the 1965 edition of his memoirs, *Le Cours d'une vie*, the famous anarchist Louis Lecoin commented only on the 1921 affair. He summed it up as a machination by the police against Faure, using "*a young underage girl they had placed in his path*", a "*lady who solicited men and appeared to be at least 18 years old*". In his 1988 study *Sébastien Faure et la Ruche*, Roland Lewin considered the 1917 affair to be pure police manipulation, but his only source was the pro domo pamphlet *Une infamie*. He was more embarrassed by the 1921 case.

The judicial file of the 1917 case, kept in the Archives de Paris under the reference D2U6/199, was made freely accessible in February 2018.

In 2021, Dominique Petit, a contributor to the Maitron dictionary, published the entire file on his blog *Archives anarchistes*, definitively ruling out the thesis of police manipulation. Most of the testimonies and documents cited in this article come from this source. The 1921 judicial file has not been preserved, but the minutes of the arrest can be found in the Archives de la Préfecture de Police, under the reference BA/1704.

Cases without follow-up and convictions

1903 First documented sexual assault on minors, in the Père-Lachaise square. Arrest without judicial follow-up.

1907 Sébastien Faure is identified among the clients of a woman prostituting her 14-year-old daughter.

1916 Arrested with another man in the Buttes-Chaumont park, for sexual abuse of minors. No legal action taken because the prefect keeps the report to put pressure on Faure.

The 1917 affair

23 September Public scandal at the Clignancourt flea market. Sébastien Faure is arrested. The police record seven testimonies against him.

24 September Goes to the editorial office of CQFD where he takes a large sum of money from the cash register, then flees. Hides in Libourne, then in Marseille, under a false name.

5 October In a letter to his puzzled CQFD comrades, he claims that he fled because the police wanted to arrest him for a pacifist speech he had been forbidden to make.

13 November The examining magistrate hears five witnesses.

23 November An arrest warrant is issued for Faure.

5 December Sentenced in absentia to two years in prison for “public indecency”.

11 January 1918 Recognised and arrested in Marseille.

28 January On opposition, new trial in Paris and sentence reduced to six months.

End of May 1918 Released from prison.

June 1918 Spreads a leaflet denouncing a plot.

The 1921 affair

15 March Arrest of Faure and two accomplices in cité Lesage-Bullourde, Paris, for abusing two girls aged 11 and 12. The investigation reveals that he had already abused five other girls in the neighbourhood.

15 June Sentenced to eight months in prison and fined 500 francs for “public indecency”.

Mid-September Released from prison.

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