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The Forgotten Tradition of French Sovietism

A review of David Berry's *A History of the French
Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945*

Michael Schmidt

March 30, 2015

To an English-speaking outsider, the French anarchist movement — as distinct from the Francophone anarchist movement in North Africa, Vietnam, etc — is often viewed as the “mother” movement because of the massive CGT union federation which, under anarchist sway, amalgamated with the local Bourses du Travail in 1895, establishing an “apolitical” model of mass anarchosyndicalism that was replicated in Francophile countries such as Poland and most of Europe and lands as far away as Brazil, Egypt and Senegal.

The French movement proved to be one of the largest, most influential and most durable of all anarchist movements; and apart from its suppression for four years during the Vichy era, it has operated uninterrupted from its rise in the trade unions of the First International in 1868 until today, where it still maintains a 24-hour radio station, several small anarchosyndicalist unions, research institutes, publishing houses, and a significant interlocking set of counter-cultural networks.

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So for a French-speaker, seen from within, the movement while no longer hegemonic in the French labour movement as it was from 1895–1920, can even today provide a totally immersive socio-political experience. Which for a researcher often makes it difficult to see the wood for the trees. What makes the task more difficult is that the movement fragmented in 1920 and subsequently, faced with the prestige of post-1917 Bolshevism, so keeping an eye on *all* the different factional organisational responses to that is rare.

Berry's huge achievement is to provide a really holistic view of the fragmenting movement as it met the triple threat of reformism (the CGT at its peak in 1920 had 2,46-million members, larger than the famous Spanish CNT during the Spanish Revolution – but it was largely white-collar, very removed from its blue-collar origins), Bolshevism, and French fascism and Nazism.

While a majority of “pragmatic” apolitical syndicalists were happy to form an opposition within the reformist (including Bolshevik) union centres, in a self-defeating strategy, the explicitly revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist minority kept splitting away from these centres to form ever smaller purist federations, while alongside this, the “political” anarchist organisations grappled with the erosion of the mass movement's industrial base, resulting in some bitter schisms, especially between the tightly-organised “platformists” and the pluralistic “synthesists”, a lively division that continues to this day.

The fragmentation of the movement also meant very different responses to crucial issues such as how to engage with the French ultra-right, the Spanish Revolution, and the Algerian liberation movement, with the platformists being for direct combat and the synthesists largely for critical support. Berry also does not shy away from the troubling question of those few anarchist individuals who collaborated with or were compromised by Vichy.

But Berry's greatest contribution to our understanding of French revolutionary politics of the interwar years regards the forgotten tradition of French Sovietism, a mass movement that tends to be overlooked by students of sovietism (council communism) in other areas such as Italy, Germany, Hungary, and even Britain. The movement had its roots in the hardline anarchocommunist and anarchosyndicalist resistance to the militarism of WWI, and flowered in May 1919 with the establishment of an anarchocommunist Parti Comuniste (PC). If this seems strange, bear in mind that similar anti-statist, anti-parliamentary, anti-authoritarian (and thus non-Bolshevik) PCs were established in the same period in Britain, Brazil, Portugal, South Africa, and arguably in Czechoslovakia and Vietnam, in each instance predating the "official" PCs.

The PC established rank-and-file networks within the CGT which lead to an Autonomous Regional Soviet appearing in Paris and holding a congress in December 1919 at which 35 such soviets from the capital and other parts of France were represented, defeating the Leninist line and reaffirming libertarian sovietism. This resulted in the formation of the Communist Federation of Soviets (FCS), with le Soviet (The Soviet) as its fortnightly mouthpiece. As Berry explains, the FCS was structured on workplace workers' councils, which together with communities were represented in local soviets, which in turn were represented at regional soviets, with the overarching policy-making body being a congress of soviets to which only workers' councils and local soviets sent delegations. Sadly, the FCS declined in 1921 with the founding of the official PC, whose members were mostly drawn from organisations to the right of the FCS such as the Socialist Party. Favourable revolutionary conditions would not appear in France again until 1968, by which time anarchism/syndicalism was a still-virile, yet fringe movement.

Berry's book is a crucial text for students not just of the anarchist / syndicalist / council communist movements, but of in-

terwar French politics and unionism more broadly. I hope he follows it up with a book on the denouement of the post-war French anarchist movement to the current day.