

The Current State of Anarchist Studies in France

An Interview by Nathan Jun

Although anarchist studies, like anarchism more generally, has long aspired to be a genuinely international movement, anarchist scholars often seem divided from one another by linguistic and cultural barriers. To cite just one example: although English speaking anarchists have a long history of valorizing—some might even say fetishizing—French political thought (e.g., situationism, poststructuralism) and practice (e.g., the Paris Spring, the Tarnac 9), relatively few engage directly with the contemporary French anarchist movement. It is not surprising that there appears to be a general lack of familiarity with important French and Francophone thinkers (e.g., Daniel Colson, Mercier Vega) and publications (e.g., *Réfractions*, *Interrogations*) among English-speaking anarchist scholars.

In this first of two interviews with contemporary anarchist thinkers outside the English-speaking world, I discuss the state of anarchist studies in France with Irène Pereira,¹ Vivien Garcia,² and an “Anonymous Comrade” who asked that I not disclose his identity. All three of the interviewees express regret

¹ Irène Pereira is a militant anarchist and an active member of the Libertarian Alternative organization. She is also a sociologist and lecturer in philosophy as well as a contributor to the anarchist journal *Réfractions*. She is the author of two books on the subject of anarchism: *Anarchistes* (La Ville Brule, 2009) and *De l'anarchisme dans les textes* (textuels, 2011). Her responses, originally in French, were translated by the author with the assistance of Stuart McClintock.

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about the failure of English-speaking anarchists to engage with contemporary French anarchist thought—although they admit that French-speaking anarchists are often guilty of the same kind of provincialism and one-sidedness. The interviewees also provide interesting critical perspectives on the state of anarchism and anarchist studies in France. To those who are mostly unfamiliar with the French anarchist milieu, some of what they say will no doubt prove surprising. At the same time, many of their experiences will resonate with American, Canadian, and English readers, particularly as concerns the marginalization of anarchism in broader political and cultural contexts.

Nathan Jun: Can you describe the recent history of anarchist studies in your country? How would you describe the state of contemporary anarchist studies there? How do you explain its successes and/or failures?

Irène Pereira: The study of anarchism or anarchists has enjoyed a certain renewed vigor since the 1990s but remains, overall, relatively limited. By “anarchist studies,” we might mean, in the first instance, work being done at universities. However, these studies occasionally end up producing questionable results when conducted by people outside of the anarchist movement, who apply their own prejudices to the subject. “Anarchist studies” may also refer to work being done by anarchists, many of whom are outside of academia. These works are often driven by an interest in producing scholarly work, but they don’t always escape the criticisms leveled against militant studies [more generally].

Vivien Garcia: Irène is completely right. I would just add that the development of anarchist studies is, for the most, probably related to the growth of the anarchist movement since the 90s. As a more visible social phenomenon, it became worthy of interest for some academics, and some anarchists decided to pursue academic research projects about (or related to) their praxis. The proliferation of such studies may also be linked to the

² Vivien Garcia is the author of *L’Anarchisme aujourd’hui* (foreword by Daniel Colson, Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, « La Librairie des humanités », Paris, 2007) and a member of the editorial collective of the anarchist journal *Réfractions*.

collapse of the Soviet Union. Traditional Marxism used to be a dominant approach in academic disciplines such as philosophy and, as a consequence, anarchism was generally only lightly considered or simply left out all together. But even if they were uncommon, anarchist studies existed before this academic interest, thanks partly to structures that preserve the past and contextualize the present of the anarchist movement—e.g., the *Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme* (both the Swiss one and the French one), the *Centro Studi Libertari* (in Italy), etc.

Anonymous Comrade: I don't know of any university that would even today recruit an intellectual whose research is centered on anarchist studies. I can tell of several scholars who never were able to succeed in that way. Those who succeed in getting through the loopholes have probably contributed valuable works in other fields.

For a very long time, university departments were divided into three tribes: right wing, socialist, and so-called Marxist professors (few members of the communist party were accepted). The latter, who were often Trotskyites, would never accept an anarchist, and this is still the case in a daily newspaper like *Liberation*, except for theater and concerts. Some of the liberal right were more open-minded than the socialists.

There was no place for anarchist studies, except in history where research about anarchism, made by historians, was more or less centered on the “*attentats*” or antimilitary propaganda. The great and remarkable exception was Jean Maitron, who was not an anarchist but may be considered as the Max Nettlau of French anarchism.

The fashion, now, is to co-opt “anarchism” (on the condition, of course, that it remains unrelated to the historical anarchist movement and its ideas). However, there are a few exceptions, especially in philosophy; and on *France Culture*, the only intelligent radio we have here, one or another anarchist is sometimes invited. Those instances are rare. Hardly 5 or 10 times in a year. As for television programs, this may happen sometimes but generally at midnight. For instance, next Wednesday, there will be a documentary at 12 a.m. presenting the mother of former

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prime minister Jospin, who was a pacifist and demonstrated even when her son was prime minister.

Nathan Jun: Many of the most renowned writers in contemporary studies are Anglophone. As a result, anarchist studies is often perceived as an Anglo-centric discipline in which relatively little attention is paid to non-English writers. What are your thoughts on this dynamic? In your view, who are the most important non-Anglophone writers in contemporary anarchist studies?

Irène Pereira: Institutionalizing anarchist studies runs the risk of separating them from the militant movement. One can ask if this isn't already the case, in part, for Anglo-Saxon anarchist studies, [many of which] have grown out of the post-structuralist tradition [as opposed to the existing anarchist movement]. In France, a great deal of work in anarchist studies, even when it is produced by intellectuals in the academic world, is distributed through militant channels and received primarily outside of university context. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that intellectual work on anarchism often lacks boldness in terms of new theory. It seems to me that a foreigner who would like to familiarize herself with current work being done on anarchist thinking in France should read [the journal] *Réfractations* (to which Vivien and I contribute).

Vivien Garcia: Maintaining that “many of the most renowned writers in contemporary studies are Anglophone” is an Anglophone point of view. Most of the writers in Anglophone anarchist studies are unknown to non-English readers. Only few books are translated one way or the other. With the exception of these sparse passageways, there is a symmetrical ignorance regarding the different contexts of anarchist studies. To some extent, this situation is due to (and maybe reinforced by) the partly distinct histories and developments of the anarchist movement. “Classical” anarchism is still too often described in a fanciful way in some Anglophone anarchist studies, and some recent anarchist currents and developments that are important in the Anglophone debates are sometimes unfairly despised (even though they are not understood well) in non-Anglophone writings. But on each side the situation seems to have improved

in recent years.

Anonymous Comrade: Why is French anarchist thought never translated into English (with a few exceptions, I suppose)? Let me mention my own experience when I tried to have my history of U.S. anarchism translated in English. There was a grant from the French government (I was on the same list as Michel Foucault!) and Columbia University Press agreed to publish it. They asked a German specialist to translate the work. It was a disaster and the translation was simply hilarious. After five or six years, Columbia U.P. [University Press] told me that they had renounced, that I could do the translation but that they would not guarantee that I would be published.

I also gave another manuscript to some publisher whose name I have forgotten. I had written it in English; it was about popular free-thought in the U.S. The contract had been signed. Yet, when I brought the manuscript, it was simply rejected. I therefore don't bother anymore about being published in English speaking countries. Besides, if I had to translate my own books, it would take me too much time.

As you know, there is a love-hate relation between France and the U.S. However, the importance of French culture in the past did not make English so necessary in France: it was mostly used in shop logos and in advertisements. This is changing now, of course, since France is being colonized. However, there are special difficulties for the French to speak perfect English, especially as there is no accentuation on French syllables (there are other technical problems). And I imagine that as the nation is now in decline there will be less and less interest in translating French works.

However, French scholars are now more opened to the present world. Anarchist works when I was in the University still concentrated on the Spanish war, and I believe that many of the old scholars have never decided to live in the present times.

The best French intellectuals I know are certainly more engaged in historical research than in pure ideas. I've certainly been

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more influenced by Louis Mercier-Vega (a Belgian) than by some well-known anarchist theoreticians, with the exception of Daniel Colson, whom I think is one of the most original contemporary writers.

Rather than mentioning names, I prefer to name groups. I think that the best work is presently made by a team like *Réfractations*, the bi-annual journal. However, in many respects, it has rather difficult and abstract articles. But this is changing thanks to the new generation which is now making its way in the review. There also is a remarkable paper which may have not been mentioned to you, It is *A Contretemps*, which is essentially devoted to book reviews and anarchist history. The contributors are mostly historians, they are anarchists, and some of them are excellent.

Most of the best French scholars on anarchism are also activists, and they prefer an idea backed by the weight of history rather than by the weight of theory. This is the reason why they often feel that U.S. scholars miss the point. It's the opposite in the U.S., many scholars who work on ideas have hardly been through the whole intellectual history of the concerned French anarchist theorist they are discussing, they just take a few ideas and place them in some theoretical setting. There are of course some remarkable exceptions, who have worked on Proudhon, Reclus and others. This may explain why there has been more interest in the U.S. for the situationists or for Michel Foucault than for, say, Mercier Vega's remarkable creation of the journal *Interrogations*. Although I hardly read any book, because I'm too busy with what I write, I must say that I presently feel that many debates are insignificant. Many theoretical critiques of the state, for instance, are a waste of time: the French political system is quite different from the British or the German, Paris is neither Monaco nor Washington.

On the other hand, I prefer reading English books. With very few exceptions, French anarchist discourse has been dominated by leftist ideas, that is to say the denunciation of all the horrible practices one witnesses in our present society. French left intellectuals are masochists: they enjoy seeing documentaries and films which show how people suffer and are exploited.

Denunciation of those in power is not something new for the victims of society. To aestheticize or theorize such a discourse can hardly be helpful. On the contrary, I appreciate the fact that in the U.S., there are much more possibilities for a free mind, for hope, for alternative positive responses. More imagination.

Perhaps the best work today is done by artists and movie makers. I think English speaking countries would learn more from certain French movie makers—but someone like Richard Porton could probably tell you more about that.

In conclusion, I think that rather than writing about French anarchist ideas, it would be best for English speaking groups to read the extraordinary number of excellent biographies and monographies of anarchism in France. They would then be able to place French ideas in that country's proper setting.

Nathan Jun: How does anarchist studies relate to other intellectual and academic traditions in your country (e.g., Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, etc.)? How is anarchist studies received in academia?

Irène Pereira: The situation in France is undoubtedly very different from what is happening in Anglo-Saxon countries, where anarchist studies seem to benefit from a certain academic standing insofar as it is regarded as a designated field of study in its own right in some universities. The situation (in France) is certainly regrettable, but the study of anarchism, in the academic context, presents a paradox: if you want to criticize a particular system, you must first get recognition from that system.

Vivien Garcia: It is obvious that there has been much interest as of late in evaluating the similarities and differences which exist between anarchism and Marxism (both in terms of Marx's thought as well as heterodox or anti-authoritarian Marxism, e.g., autonomism, situationism, council communism, etc.). Even though there are some studies regarding the works of "post-structuralist" thinkers from an anarchist perspective (Daniel

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Colson's work is a good example of this), the relation between anarchism and post-structuralism *per se* is not frequently examined. In this context, writers such as Deleuze, Derrida, or Foucault are rarely considered as part of the same theoretical bloc; when they are, the goal is usually to criticize them (as is the case, to provide another anarchist example, in Eduardo Colombo's writings). Some anarchist studies on psychoanalysis exist, but they are anecdotal. The reception of anarchist studies in academia relies on the structures of academic frameworks. In France, anarchist studies doesn't exist at the institutional level, i.e., as a field of study, but as an object that can be approached from various traditional disciplinary points of view. Apart from this qualification, I agree totally with Irène's description. Anarchism is still a marginal object of study.

Anonymous Comrade: In effect, the French university is now at a turning point: the essential question is how long will it be before it is totally privatized, with a few symbolic exceptions? When I see that 10 years old kids learn about the gross national product, I imagine easily what comes next.

Nathan Jun: How, if at all, does anarchism/anarchist studies contribute to public policy debates in your country? In which debates are anarchist intellectuals most deeply invested?

Irène Pereira: The minimal recognition of anarchist studies and their less than bold intellectual innovation mean that they hold a very marginal place in public discourse. This is unfortunate, because anarchism can certainly be an angle of study worth considering in regards to contemporary questions having to do with capitalism and power.

Vivien Garcia: Unfortunately, contributions by anarchists are as unusual in public debates as they are in the university.

Anonymous Comrade: *France Culture* is opened to alleged anarchists but activist thinkers are practically never invited, except once or twice a year. I've sometimes been in the media, and even once had the largest audience of the season (a long time ago), but I've never been invited twice.

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