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The Recent Historiography of French Anarchism: Terrorists, Networks, Transnationalism, and a Few Polemics.

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Abstract

This article reviews three recent books on the history of the late nineteenth-century French anarchist movement—one by the French historian Vivien Bouhey and the other two by American scholars, Alexander McKinley and John Merriman. It places these works in the context of a renewed interest in the study of the anarchist movement, as an early example of transnational terrorist organisation, and as a relevant field of application for the historiographic concepts of network and transnationalism. In conclusion, it highlights the differences between French and US approaches to the study of anarchism, and evidences the limits of the 'transnational turn' in this particular historical field.

Illegitimate Children of the Enlightenment. Anarchists and the French Revolution 1880–1914. A. MCKINLEY New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007. 237 pp., £35.50, ISBN 978 14331 00598

Les Anarchistes contre la République. Contribution à l'histoire des réseaux sous la Troisième République (1880–1914). V. BOUHEY. Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008. 491 pp., e24.00, ISBN 978 27535 07272

The Dynamite Club. How a Bomb in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror. J. MERRIMAN. London, J. R. Books, 2009. 228 pp., £18.99, ISBN 978 19067 79542

A protest movement castigating acute social inequalities and dire political corruption, disseminated across Haussmann's glitzy Paris and its sinister banlieues, with international ramifications in London, the United States or Algeria, accused of plotting terrorist attacks, advocating the general strike and industrial sabotage, educational reform, sexual emancipation, and environmentalism . . . As even a cursory outline suggests, belle-époque anarchism offers many stimulating parallels with contemporary events, trends, and social issues. Of all these, the terrorist question has of course been the most eagerly discussed in recent years. The movement went through a terrorist phase which climaxed between the late 1880s and mid-1890s, which is known as the period of 'propaganda by the deed'. As a result, since September 2001, the history of the late nineteenth-century anarchists has been repeatedly cited and studied as a possible precedent for the current wave of terrorist attacks in the Western world. Convincing or overstretched parallels between anarchists and jihadists have thus been drawn by scholars and journalists across the ideological spectrum, most recently in a documentary shown on Channel 4 entitled *The Enemy Within*, where quotes originally pertaining to last century's anarchist exiles in Britain were used as dialogues for actors playing contemporary jihadists, thus highlighting a number of similarities.

Whilst emphasising the movement's wide-ranging modernity, these three monographs devoted to French anarchists, one of the most active and violent anarchist groups in the Western world, fortunately resist the temptation of such easy analogies and nonetheless make valuable contributions to the ongoing debate on terrorism. They explore facets of anarchist communism, the dominant ideological strand within the broader movement in the three decades leading up to the Great War—the other major current being anarchist individualism. Together, they testify to the dynamism of anarchist historiography, in terms of its thematic scope and methodological questionings. Alexander McKinley's book focuses on the anarchists and the French Revolution—how they appropriated this legacy which was one of the key ideological forerunners and founding myths of anarchism, but also a potentially cumbersome reference, precisely because of its violent associations. Vivien Bouhey walks in the footsteps of Jean Maitron, the pioneer of anarchist historiography in France, and ambitiously covers the same period as Maitron (1975) in the first volume of his epoch-making *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France, 1880–1914*. Finally, John Merriman's *The Dynamite*

Club retraces the ideological and geographical wanderings of Émile Henry, one of the most notorious and enigmatic anarchist terrorists of the period.

While their subject matters are not necessarily novel, these works explore—not always convincingly—new ways of dealing with the movement's complex history, especially through the notion of networks and the broadened scope of transnational history. Such approaches prove very promising for a better understanding of a movement whose champions are so often depicted in a very simplistic way, as sheer enemies of any form of constructive concerted action; conversely, the ongoing debate about anarchist organisation means that pre-WW1 anarchism lends itself extremely well to the use of such new concepts in the field of social and political history.

Out of these three relatively recent works, McKinley's *Illegitimate Children of the Enlightenment* is the least innovative with respect to methodology. This study of the ideological manipulations and appropriations of the French Revolution by the French anarchists one century later, based on thorough newspaper readings, is rooted in both the history of ideas and the studies of symbolism and sociability pioneered by the French historian Maurice Agulhon (1989) two decades ago. McKinley writes extensively about the anarchists' interpretations of the key episodes of the Great Revolution and usefully contrasts them with views propounded by the Republican establishment fought by the anarchists or the other left-wing parties of the period. Other passages examine the militant practices enacting these interpretations—through the use of songs or Bastille Day demonstrations for instance—relying on substantial archival research.

McKinley's investigation addresses all the key issues connected with the uses of the French Revolution but his analyses could often be taken further. For instance, while the uses of the revolutionary Carmagnole against the far more ambiguous Marseillaise are well examined, little is said about the preference for May Day over Bastille Day, and the ideological implications of such choices. The general importance of the Commune is downplayed, which is a shame as examining the contrasts between interpretations and celebrations of 1789 and 1871—the bourgeois and the proletarian revolution respectively—would be an excellent way to evidence the specificities of the anarchists' political and historical culture. McKinley conducts an in-depth investigation which, however, would have benefited from more

extensive readings of the writings of Agulhon, Maitron, and other historians of the Third Republic on political rituals and the politics of memory in this period. It is especially revealing that no mention is made of Pierre Nora and the *lieux de mémoire*: it is surprising that McKinley does not exploit the extensive literature on collective memory, highlighting the status of the French Revolution as a controversial *lieu de mémoire* for all the political movements of the period and within them, and especially around the time of the 1889 centenary. The anarchists were no exception: they both identified with this tradition and rejected many of its aspects (not least its consecration of the bourgeoisie), and their symbols and rituals were defined accordingly.

Illegitimate Children of the Revolution also fails to do justice to its promising title and the really pertinent notion of illegitimacy, by not questioning how representations of anarchism are often twisted so as to delegitimise the movement—a process often started by the anarchists themselves, who so relished posing as outlaws and *en-dehors*, that is to say deliberate outsiders. In this perspective, it would be interesting to restate in what respects anarchism does indeed derive from Enlightenment philosophy, before studying the anarchist endeavour to reclaim this tradition. The heated debates on violence within the anarchist movement, which were often mediated by reflections on the *Enragés* of 1893, are hardly mentioned, implying that the French anarchists wholeheartedly embraced their legacy and the idea of violence as a whole, when it was in fact a bone of contention among the companions. McKinley highlights interesting links between Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and anarchist internationalism, or on the unheeded role of the anarchists as pioneers of modern social history, heralding Mathiez, Lefebvre, Bloch and Febvre, and their 'desire to explore and develop the history of the common and unexplored people of France' (p. 3). There are many interesting insights in the book, but it falls short of being a compelling study in ideological genealogy and political myth-making.

Vivien Bouhey will certainly not be accused of insufficient familiarity with any French-language source: his substantial book is an ambitious study of fin-de-siècle anarchism and revisits much of the same material as McKinley through the prism of personal networks—the book's caption is '*Contribution à l'histoire des réseaux sous la Troisième République*'. It is an abridged (491 pages!) version of his doctoral thesis, which usefully contained a vast quantity of transcribed

departmental archives about local anarchist circles between 1880 and 1914. Bouhey's starting point is an aborted academic debate from the 1970s, between Jean Maitron and Joël Berthoud, over the ever-contentious issue of anarchist organisation: Maitron's view (which eventually prevailed) was that anarchist organisation did exist but, in conformity with the movement's ideological rejection of formal parties and hierarchy, was loose and flexible. Berthoud, on the other hand, argued that there was a solid, semi-permanent organisation, which played a significant role in the organisation of anarchist terrorist attacks. Bouhey undertakes to prove the latter right; this attempt to bring to light the reality of anarchist organisation underpins his study of the movement's history between 1880 and the First World War, whose themes and chronology remain traditional otherwise. He distinguishes between the 1880s, the time of anarchist emergence and consolidation, then the early 1890s, a period of violence and isolation, and finally the period between the mid-1890s and the First World War—the time of reinvention and fragmentation.

Since its release last spring, the book has received substantial attention, both because it is seen as a welcome application of network theories to social history, and because of the rekindled interest in anarchism. On the other hand, Bouhey's work has already garnered some disgruntled criticism on the part of anarchist scholars, who have pointed out its unjustified use of religious and conspiratorial phraseology to refer to anarchist activists and their propaganda. Such lexical choices are contentious because they are borrowed from the movements' detractors and the spies' reports on which the work is mainly based, and therefore pervaded with the latter's negative views on anarchism as a dangerous fanatical cult rather than a credible political movement. Bouhey has subsequently had to retract himself on this point, inviting his critics not to take his use of words like 'secte', 'affiliés', 'société secrète', or 'comités occultes' too literally.

More problematic is Bouhey's attempt to prove the strength of anarchist organisation, centralised and structured through networks. This was already a topic of debate among the nineteenth-century anarchists, who rejected political parties and traditional representative politics in favour of a much more flexible mode of organisation. It is quite clear that Bouhey, taking unreliable archival material at face value, overstates the rigidity and centralisation of anarchist groups. This is especially regrettable considering the amount of conspiracy theories which have surrounded anarchism since 9/11. For instance, the book suggests

against the majority of existing evidence that the French anarchists exiled in London during the 'heated' period of propaganda by the deed did indeed partake in and even commanded the execution of terrorist attacks across Europe—when in fact most of these exiles were merely vegetating in the sinister clubs of Fitzrovia and Soho but indeed bragging about imaginary bombs and arson plots. When such attacks were carried out or attempted, they were concocted by provocateurs or by isolated individuals. Despite these flaws, Bouhey's work contains some useful information on topics like grassroots and provincial anarchist activism or anarchist antimilitarism and, just like McKinley's, it testifies to the enduringly fascinating richness of this period of anarchist history and the sources documenting it (not least the countless spies' reports held at Paris's Préfecture de Police and the Archives Nationales).

The most daring and satisfying insights are provided by John Merriman's brief biography of Émile Henry, the notorious and intriguing gifted young man who, in 1893, planted a bomb in Paris's Café Terminus—one of the most famous attacks in the series of high-profile terrorist coups carried out by anarchists in the 1890s. Henry came a long way from being admissible for the entrance exam into the Polytechnique to becoming a symbol of anarchist violence and despair after his execution in 1894. Through Henry's gradual alienation from society and mainstream politics, Merriman shows how anarchism developed as the culture of the en-dehors of the bourgeois Third Republic. The research underpinning the book is very thorough and makes for a rather thrilling narrative—Merriman went as far as to re-enact the itinerary possibly followed by Henry on the day of one of his suspected attacks. Henry's life also provides insights into the functioning of the anarchist milieu on a day-to-day basis. The reader is immersed in the French anarchist circles, with all their bustling propagandist activities and colourful characters. The focus then shifts to the international anarchist groups of London, where Henry briefly sought shelter in 1892, along with many French, Italian, German, Eastern European, and even Scandinavian anarchists. Merriman retraces Henry's exilic meanderings in London, where uneducated proletarians, forced to flee persecutions in their own countries, found themselves living and tried to pursue their own propaganda. This is a most welcome depiction of the very cosmopolitan nature of fin-de-siècle anarchism, and also a well-informed portrayal of the 'London groups' at the centre of so many imaginary plots (including those listed by Bouhey). Crucially, without pressing his point too much, Merriman suggests that the golden age of propaganda by the deed

may shed light on today's terrorism, not because of its transnational or network-based organisation, but mainly because it was a movement caused by alienation in a time of opulence and rapid social and industrial change, and also because it testifies to the limits of staunch state repression against this type of radical popular protest.

An unexpected outcome is that these three monographs also allow for a comparative perspective on academic approaches to the issue of anarchism, raising questions over their apparent national restrictions. It is especially striking that while the international nature of anarchism is well known, only Merriman, who is a distinguished *dix-neuviémiste* and a part-time resident of France, has the linguistic and cultural skills required to deal with it. The gap appears most blatantly in McKinley's monograph, which abounds with puzzling spelling or language mistakes ('sans culottes', 'Institute francais d'histoire social', 'propagande du fait', 'grandes hommes', 'ordre morale', 'guerre de la ravanche') and is short on French-language bibliographical references. Similarly, Bouhey stresses the utmost importance of the foreign outposts of the French movement, but remains focused on France, thus giving an overwhelmingly Franco-centric image of a supposedly transnational movement. This is actually characteristic of French anarchist and labour historiography and can be explained by a long tradition of 'revolutionary patriotism', with the belief in France's superiority as the beacon of revolutionary nations, as a result of which all international connections appear as insignificant. Merriman, on the other hand, strikes a very convincing balance between a national and international/transnational narrative and between French-language and English-language sources. Clearly, there is an increased awareness of the transnational nature of nineteenth-century anarchism—a 'transnational turn' observable in many other fields which, along with the current interest in terrorism, historical biography and network-based approaches, has opened up stimulating new vistas.

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