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## Introduction

Now that what passes for French political thought and philosophy has fallen before the onslaught of what the historian Tony Judt calls “the Higher Drive,” we need more than ever to remember that things were not always this way. France was once the scene of lively and unbridled political discourse, aimed not at a university elite, but at the people, the ones actually suffering under the existing order. The main voices of this tradition, which we can roughly trace from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, hated this world and its injustice, and their main emotion, the motivating force of their actions, was their Great Anger.

The phrase “the Great Anger” appears in the context of the pages of the most unrestrained journal of the French Revolution, the “Père Duchesne” (Old Man Duchesne) of Jacques Hébert. The title of each issue of Hébert’s journal spelled out Père Duchesne’s emotion at that moment. And so we had “the Great Anger of Old Man Duchesne against the fucking slanderers of the ladies of Les Halles and the flower sellers of the Palais Royal.” But this phrase, the Great Anger, is also a description of a current in French revolutionary activity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, France didn’t lack for theoreticians of revolutionary action, but it also didn’t lack what can perhaps be called theoreticians of no theory, anti-theoreticians who believed that revolutionary action was the truest expression of revolutionary theory.

In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, there were thinkers who constructed theories that would serve as the basis for a better future, men such as Charles Fourier and Etienne Cabet with their utopian designed communities. There were also writers and activists who were moved not by a hypothetical beautiful tomorrow, but by the reality of a hateful today, one that had to be attacked in all ways and at whatever the cost. This is not to say that their viewpoint had no intellectual underpinnings or that it lacked roots in France’s past. The struggle against the existing order during this period passed through two mutually supporting areas of action: the fight against God and the

fight against those in power, the principles of which were laid out in the seventeenth century by an obscure country priest. Atheism being at the very heart of the Great Anger, its history actually begins with the first masterpiece of atheism, Jean Meslier's "*Mémoire contre la religion.*" This massive book, written in secret by this country priest, contained everything that was to follow: the contesting of God and of the social structure that depended on God as its ally and its support. The great nineteenth-century revolutionary conspirator Auguste Blanqui called one of his many journals "*Ni dieu ni maître,*" neither God nor master. And these twin evils had already been analyzed and theoretically demolished, and an alternative vision of the future was proposed by Jean Meslier. Meslier exerted a tremendous influence, one too frequently ignored, on the next generation of pre-Revolutionary thinkers, those of the Enlightenment. The philosophers of the Enlightenment were strongly influenced by the atheist priest, and they provided much of the intellectual armament for the coming generations of revolutionaries of the Great Anger.

The questioning of the old order by Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, d'Holbach, and others was essential in laying the foundation for the direct action of the people, who entered the scene with their attack on the Bastille, symbol of tyranny, on July 14, 1789. But the victory was taken from the people by various progressive factions of the nascent bourgeoisie, and it is at this point that the Great Anger makes its appearance as an active force. The *Enragés*, men such as Jacques Roux, Anacharsis Cloots, and Jean Varlet, fought the rampant speculation and starvation policies, which benefited the rich and harmed the laboring classes. After the liquidation of this group by the Jacobins, Jacques Hébert and his followers from the Cordelier Club, took up their fight. The *Enragés'* defense of popular interests, their opposition to religion, stood on no grand ideological foundation. Instead, theirs was a rage directed at those who had snatched the power won by the people's struggle. Their fight was to ensure themselves sustenance, to prevent the nouveau riche from starving them; and they expressed themselves, and their anger, in no uncertain terms.

The machine now set in motion rolled on for more than a hundred years. The fall of Robespierre in July of 1794, though initially applauded by some, was followed by opposition to the reactionary

Directory that replaced the Jacobins. The anger at the Directory took concrete form in the Conspiracy of Equals of Gracchus Babeuf and his followers in 1795. Here, in this early and abortive outbreak, we again see the confluence of the struggles against economic and political injustice with the struggle against God. Sylvain Maréchal, author of the Conspiracy's manifesto, had been—and would continue to be until his death—a militant advocate for a godless communist society, the same society called for by Jean Meslier whom he so admired.

Auguste Blanqui tied all of these strands together over the course of the three great French revolutions of the nineteenth century, those of 1830, 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871. Blanqui was less concerned with laying out a strict plan for the future communist society than with the blueprints for the organization that would bring down the existing order. Decades in prison did nothing to still the rage of "*L'enfermé*," "the Imprisoned," a rage directed not only at those in power, but also against those who had betrayed the fight, those too weak to stay the course, those all too willing to compromise. Ever optimistic, Blanqui believed almost any year was equally propitious for the final conflict; for him, the revolution was always the Thursday after next.

The Paris Commune of 1871 began in a burst of anger, that of the Parisians who had been defeated by the Prussians in Napoleon III's war against Prussia. The workers of Paris refused to surrender their cannons to the republic of Adolphe Thiers, which had fled Paris for Versailles, replacing the fallen empire. The ensuing revolutionary seizure of power was proof that rage and humiliated pride can be the motivating forces for a true revolutionary struggle, one without any prepared plan or clear direction other than that of giving power to those who had been deprived of it. It was the genius of the French working class that led it to spontaneously find the forms for its power; but it was the same lack of a plan that prevented the Great Anger from maintaining its hold on that power. More importantly, it also poses the question of the viability of inchoate rage as a basis for the seizing of power. Later, Marxist theory and Leninist practice provided some answers to these questions.

The next decades saw the final explosion of the Great Anger, its apotheosis and collapse as a form of confrontation with the established order, its definitive superseding by organized movements for change.

The executions, deportations, and bannings that followed the Paris Commune gave way to a series of strong mass movements that ultimately dominated the French left. The Marxists Jules Guesde, Paul Lafargue, and later Jean Jaurès drew to themselves vast numbers of working-class militants and took a significant place in French government and union organizations. At the same time, union organizations grew ever stronger, while mass anarchist organizations took on greater importance than ever. Alongside this rise in mass action, international anarchist congresses and journals were publishing recipes for the construction of explosive devices, placing the means for action and liberation in the hands of individuals.

Throughout this period there also remained the snipers, the irreducible negators, men like Zo d'Axa, whose journal "*L'endebors*" (The Outsider) expressed an opposition to everything and support of... nothing. There was also Emile Pouget, whose "Père Peinard" was a direct descendant of Hèbert's "Père Duchesne," written by workers and for workers in working-class French and advocating rebellion as an everyday act. There was no need to be member of a group or union to indulge in workplace sabotage, the subject of Pouget's most famous pamphlet. The righteous anger of the individual worker at the injustice of his lot didn't require the regimentation of a party to lead to struggle; such anger created its own framework, its own justification.

All of this came to a conclusion in the decades from 1892 to 1911, in the paroxysm of anger that was propaganda by the deed and anarchist illegalism. If mass movements, despite their growth and penetration, were unable to shake the foundations of the establishment, then the propagandists of the deed, Ravachol, Auguste Vaillant, Emile Henry, Santo Caserio would take a different path and directly confront the class enemy, with gun, knife, or bomb in hand. There was no need for a defined program when the acts—the assassination of the French president Carnot by Santo Caserio in 1894, the bombing of the Chamber of Deputies by Auguste Vaillant in

1893, Emile Henry's attack on the Café Terminus—were in and of themselves expressions of a program. The bourgeoisie's contempt for the lives of workers, most glaringly demonstrated by the massacre of striking workers at Fourmies in 1891, was met by a corresponding contempt for bourgeois life as demonstrated by Henry's bombing of a café or Ravachols' grave robbing and murder.

This individualist current, never in a majority (and indeed could it be?), produced figures of a stunning originality and rectitude. Particularly significant were Albert Libertad and those in the circle around his paper "*l'anarchie*"—Victor Serge and Emile Armand. At the same time, the works of the provincial philosophy teacher George Palante, gave individualism a markedly pessimistic, anti-political, and misanthropic form.

Its final outburst was in the form of anarchist illegalism, with bandits like Marius Jacob providing a social and political justification for their crimes in texts such as "Why I was a Bandit," while supporters of the movement wrote articles in defense—or at least exculpation of—the movement. Its most notorious avatar was the Bonnot Gang, a group of anarchists who unleashed a crime wave whose end brought down the curtain on the Great Anger.

Jules Bonnot himself, the leader of the gang, in the years before his death had renounced work and dedicated himself to counterfeiting and theft, particularly of automobiles and motorcycles. This culminated in the (perhaps accidental) killing of an anarchist comrade and the (certainly intentional) theft of thousands of francs the latter had with him at the time of his death.

The crime wave of Bonnot and his gang then truly took off, resulting in the robbing of the *Société Générale* on December 12, 1911, the killing of a policeman who had stopped them two months later, and further robberies in March 1912. The police pursuit became more heated, and two of Bonnot's associates were arrested on March 30. Nearly a month later the security forces found Bonnot and, in a furious gun battle on April 24, the assistant director of the security forces was killed. Bonnot, however, managed to escape. His hideout was discovered just four days later—at the home of an auto mechanic in Choisy-le-Roi—and he was placed under siege. The building was dynamited but Bonnot fought till the end, when he was mortally

wounded. On May 15 the last of his accomplices were themselves killed in another shootout. The Bonnot Gang, and with it the Great Anger, disappeared as a vital current of the French left.

The Great War was approaching, and despite the failure of French socialists to halt it, mass movements henceforth held center stage in the form of the Socialists, the Communists after the foundation of the French Communist Party in 1920, or the left-wing unions of the *Confédération général du travail* and the *Confédération général du travail unifié*. The strength of the mass movements, their ability to effect change and to express and defend the interests of the working class, covered over the individual voices of anger that continued to try to make themselves heard. Particularly in 1935-36, after the wave of demonstrations against French fascists in February 1934 and the strike wave and Popular Front victory of the spring of 1936, it seemed that the programs of these groups could be realized, that mass action could effect profound change. But they failed in their larger goals, those of achieving important ameliorations in the lot of the worker: paid vacations, greater job security, the French *état providence*—the welfare state. The remaking of society that had been the dream of countless thousands had died. The Great Anger which exploded again in May 1968 had, by the early years of the twenty-first century, mutated simply into the Great Indifference.