



# On the uses of the political *chanson*: anarchist production before 1914

Gaetano Manfredonia

Gaetano Manfredonia

On the uses of the political *chanson*: anarchist production before  
1914  
2004

Retrieved on June 15, 2011 from [naasn.org](http://naasn.org)

Translated by Jesse Cohn

Gaetano Manfredonia «De l'usage de la chanson politique: la  
production anarchiste d'avant 1914», *Cités* 3/2004 (n° 19), p. 43–53.

Gaetano Manfredonia: Ph.D. in history, a lecturer at the IEP of  
Paris. He is the author of several studies on the anarchist  
movement, including *La Chanson anarchiste en France des origines  
à 1914* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997), and *L'anarchisme en Europe*  
(PUF, 2001).

the evils of industrial society. And ultimately, it is in the simultaneous coexistence of these two imperatives that we believe we must seek the primary originality of French anarchism at the *fin-de-siècle*.

# Contents

The <i>chanson</i> and the imaginary . . . . .	3
The <i>chanson</i> and libertarian identity . . . . .	5
The old and the new . . . . .	6
An idealized vision of their doctrine and their struggles . . . . .	8
Anarchism's dream of otherness . . . . .	10
Père Peinard: archetype of the French anarchist . . . . .	11
Pariahs and tramps . . . . .	12

ertarians were mainly recruited from trades that were artisanal in character. But this is not essentially because, as Pessin has rightly observed, the “*trimard*” defined first and foremost “a type of man”, namely that of the “total anarchist”: “Living out of doors, with the freedom to go wherever he likes, [signify] a rupture with one’s social assignment, with a function and an existence that have been determined in advance [...]”.<sup>16</sup>

The tendencies displayed by some comrades in favor of nomadism or the return to “natural” forms of life fit logically into any such assertion of a way of life radically at odds with the marketplace values that are triumphing in a rapidly industrializing France. Once again it is Paillette who best encapsulates this particular mindset of the libertarian movement of the time, writing:

Wanderers [*flâneurs*] like schoolboys,  
Artists rather than workers,  
We flee the stuffy atmosphere  
Of factories and workshops<sup>17</sup>.

Here, we are far from the mystique of the producer that it was still possible to detect among the militants of the First International and that can be found once again among the revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists of the CGT before 1914. In the imaginary expressed in the heroic period of song production in the libertarian movement (1880–1900), the anarchist does not think of himself entirely as a proletarian or as exploited but also as “insubordinate [*réfractaire*],” irregular, outside the norm. He is the one they always finger, one who refuses to submit to the constraints of marketplace society. While anchored in the extension of workers’ struggles of his time, he constantly seeks to combine the imperatives of independent working-class action to those of the individual’s revolt against

---

<sup>16</sup> A. Pessin, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> P. Paillette, “Les Enfants de la nature”, op. cit.

What does the *chanson* say? Much more than you think.

*Chansons* are an exceptional tool for the historian of political ideas, as they provide one of the most direct keys to the currents of thought or movements from which they emanate. All songs tell of their society, and political songs are no exception to this rule. It is unadorned and without consideration of opportunities that the songs tell us about the ideology of political forces. The song provides a sort of snapshot of the feelings that circulate among militants. It also provides an effective account of changes that may occur over time within the same current.

The production of *chansons* should be considered thus as a leading source that the historian can not afford to ignore. This is particularly true for the nineteenth century, given the close ties that the song has with contemporary popular culture and the exceptional importance as a tool for propaganda and agitation that the political right and left have granted. There is no single political group that is convinced of the power of inspirational songs and has sought to use as a weapon to gain the support of the masses or to educate them.

## The *chanson* and the imaginary

We believe, however, it is not possible to properly study the political song if viewed exclusively as a means among others (posters, leaflets, brochures ..) available to activists to mobilize the masses. This simplistic approach is very wrong to bring those who adopt it inevitably to consider the production songwriter as a simple reflection of the ideology of a current. So it’s no surprise that we find mentioned in the stories devoted to the socialist movement and worker songs that illustrate the feelings of workers and socialist groups studied, the stories devoted to the nationalist currents of songs detailing the nationalist point of view and so on. Almost always the song is used to describe the stances and ideas of a political

force committed without trying to go beyond a literal interpretation of the text without even looking at whether, in addition to its propagandizing role (mobilizing and/or educating), other uses were possible or conceivable<sup>1</sup>.

Just as superficial, to us, seem attempts to write histories “through the song” or “sung histories” of a particular episode in the history of France (the French Revolution, the Commune, the Third Republic, etc.) For here, too, the song is a pretext for giving an account of events that we know from elsewhere.

In both cases, we see a genuine under-utilization of this source, which remains of secondary interest to the historian, often merely as a way to strengthen his arguments rather than to deepen or possibly challenge them. The song, however, does not simply neutrally reflect a given political and social reality; rather, it tends to reinterpret it according to the militants’ hopes and expectations. By the images it projects, it selects and distorts as much as it describes. One could even say that the song genre is naturally inclined to exaggerate, sometimes to a ridiculous extent, the distinctive features of a political current or the feelings of those who identify with it. That is why, beyond the stereotypes and ideological burdens that entirely pervade it, the song, much better than any other written source, captures the interiority, the idea that militants are able to form of themselves and their cause. Because of this song, especially when it is the direct expression of militants, provides access to what might be called the imaginary of a political current, that is to say, not only its ideology but also its hopes and dreams.

But these imaginary representations, far from duplicating other forms of political expression, give the possibility to better understand how a community, in the words used by Baczko, “chooses [*désigne*] his identity in the process of elaborating a self-

---

<sup>1</sup> On these points, see two very stimulating works by Louis-Jean Calvet: *La production révolutionnaire : slogans, affiches, chansons*, Paris, Payot, 1976, and *Chanson et société*, Paris, Payot, 1981.

of otherness, to symbolically affirm the uniqueness of its situation and to mark thereby the distance that separates him from other exploited proletarians.

If an anarchist is primarily a man of the people who defines himself by his class situation above all, he does not think thereby to be eternally enclosed in this situation. Unless he can overcome it immediately, he will seek an opportunity to escape from it by idealizing a lifestyle at odds with the living conditions of the time or the capitalist mode of production. Again, the song allows us to grasp the profound aspirations of the comrades. Always inclined to exalt those who refuse to be kept down by the factory or office, not worrying about tomorrow, they hail the figure of the unattached vagabond. Nothing in common, however, between the condition of a vagabond by choice and that of the traditional tramp [*clochard*] or beggar [*mendiant*]. The anarchist, although he may be led to live day by day, remains a rebel, an untamed. As pointed out in a song by Paillette:

Far from us the vile beggars,  
Submissive and supplicant;  
If we live by our wits,  
It’s to fleece the old world.<sup>14</sup>

If one day find a comrade should be obliged to beg, it is with “dagger in hand” that he would approach passerby<sup>15</sup>.

“Independent and proud,” such were the adjectives used to describe the preference be an anarchist. The figure of the tramp garners favor to the extent that it corresponds, in the libertarian imaginary, to a lifestyle that is chosen rather than suffered. Memories of the guild [*compagnonnage*], still very strong at that time, may also explain these preferences. Let us not forget that before 1914, the lib-

---

<sup>14</sup> P. Paillette, “Les Enfants de la nature”, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> *Le Poignard à la main*, handwritten text reproduced in a police report of December 1892 (Ad Loire, 19 M 5).

and direct, is that of every day. A language which, according to anarchists, makes a stark contrast with the rhetoric abstract and foggy rhetoric used by politicians or intellectuals to fool the masses. It is to popular common sense that they appeal in order that the workers should cease to be “suckers” and follow their advice:

Then don't be so stupid:  
Instead of voting,  
Bash them in the face!<sup>13</sup>

Denouncing exploitation, the anarchist identified with the exploited class whose suffering and hopes he espouses. Struggling to “the proletariat in the face pale,” he justifies in advance the “fires of St. John for the villains as” Jacques “in the world are ready to ignite. The miseries of the proletariat are his own, and every time a proletarian suffers, he suffers with him. Thus, in the songs, there is an almost total identification between him and the people. When he speaks, it is the people who speaks through his mouth.

## Pariahs and tramps

The comrades, in addition, evince no *a priori* negativity toward the “lumpenproletariat”. Quite the contrary: many witnesses attest to their desire not to reject any of the exploited. Those employed in illegal forms of production, as well as the unemployed, will always be considered as a reservoir of potential energy and rebellion, even after the syndicalist turn of the movement. The sympathy they have for society's forgotten people, however, is not motivated by adherence to their way of life but by a deep sense of identification with the status of outcasts rejected by everyone including their own. The anarchist, in his own way, also feels himself to be a social outcast, which allows him to forcefully express another facet of his dream

---

<sup>13</sup> [F. Brunel] *Faut plus d'gouvernement*, Paris, [1889].

representation” how he “expresses and imposes certain shared beliefs”<sup>2</sup>.

We must not forget that when one sings, it is not only for others but also for oneself. At the same time it seeks to mobilize, the song effects a labor of differentiation vis-à-vis others and identification between members of the group. It is not directed exclusively to external parties to be conquered but also to militants for whom it reaffirmed the validity of the common struggle to be carried out. It helps keep alive the sense of group membership and encourage participation in its system of values. Just as the color of the flag or other distinctive signs, it constitutes a powerful means to create and strengthen the feeling among the militants of belonging to a single school of thought, and this feeling, whether it is in idealizing or in directly establishing a number of real or imaginary frames of reference, is shared by all. Often, the songs are only written and sung for the militants themselves. Therefore, they must be regarded as a privileged means of expression for the political cultures that they support and to which they give structure.

## The *chanson* and libertarian identity

This use of the song seems particularly fruitful for the study of anarchism. The production of songs, especially in the years 1880–1900, plays a crucial role in constituting a libertarian identity by spreading, both among the public and among comrades, a certain image of anarchism and of the anarchists who will ultimately embody it. In these compositions are asserted, in a manner that is very direct – or naive – the images and representations that, in the eyes of the comrades, simultaneously justify their dream of otherness and allow them to think as a distinct group within the labor movement.

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Baczko, *Les imaginaires sociaux*, Paris, Payot, 1984, p. 32.

Anarchism in France only really took off after the return of the former Communards. In the early 1880s, however, the proven comrades are only a tiny fraction of a labor movement that is still recovering after the bloodletting of the Commune. Furthermore, the existence of a plethora of socialist and/or revolutionary sensibilities and schools of thought that are close to libertarianism (Blanquists, communalists, Fourierist) poses pressing problems of identity for this rather young movement, placing its militants in a somewhat adversarial position. On the one hand, it is vital for anarchists, if they want to emerge as a political force in its own right, to mark, by any means, including symbolic means, their difference vis-à-vis other Socialist factions. On the other hand, to legitimize their ideological and tactical choices in the eyes of the masses, they cannot renounce inscribing their activities in line with the already strongly established tradition of social struggles in France (the French Revolution, the silk workers' revolt, the insurrection of June 1848, the Commune). They are concerned to appear as a new and innovative force and, at the same time, as the most authentic representatives of the proletariat that has been fighting, since "the great upheaval of 1789," for "the advent of the Social Republic"<sup>3</sup>

Anarchism, from its inception, is thus faced with the equally compelling need to develop distinctive signs of its own and constantly refer to the past. A daunting task if ever there was one — difficult to surmount in terms of doctrine, but the militant *chanson* will perform the task admirably.

## The old and the new

All those years of song-production is under the sign of both requirements constantly bringing the militants to involve new elements of the libertarian doctrine for past references, even reinter-

---

<sup>3</sup> B. Malon, *La troisième défaite du prolétariat français*, Neuchâtel, 1871, p. 6 et p. 11.

present him as a creator of new values for all humanity. The activists are represented in the guise of young lads and proud, fighting bravely against the bourgeois class and buying their courage or cowardice of the proletariat baggy crushed by the yoke employers. Prometheus of modern times, the anarchist can not, however, be confused with the Nietzschean superman. "Proud and untamed, it does not crush the others, but he dreams of living in harmony with itself and its environment. He defines himself as a "natural" being a "child of nature" which acts simply as being guided by his reason than his "real" instincts including love and goodness will prevail:

Simple in our tastes, our manners,  
We love songbirds,  
The woods, meadows, fruit, flowers,  
The living water of old fountains.<sup>12</sup>

## Père Peinard: archetype of the French anarchist

The "Promethean" dimension of the anarchist struggle is also tempered by the simultaneous coexistence of another series of images where the comrades are presented as embodying the most complete expression of common sense. The militant, a Prometheus of supreme revolt by day, is for the rest of the time a "good bugger" who knows his rights as he knows his trade. He thinks like a good "guy" with sound logic. The model of his kind, the one who best summarizes this state of mind, is Pouget's Père Peinard, a character with whom any "prolo" could identify. Through him, they are no longer untamed rebels, after all exceptional beings, who speak, but the "populo" itself, that is to say, everyman. His language, frank

---

<sup>12</sup> P. Paillette, "Les Enfants de la nature", in *Tablettes d'un lézard : extraits*, Paris [1888].

cial revolution. The songs are tending to take a series of representative episodes of the struggle against the authority to make the highlights of the epic libertarian. The violent repression that came down on this movement during the period of attacks (1892–1894), especially, contributes to providing a true comrades martyrs who ends up taking precedence over the dead of the Commune.

## Anarchism's dream of otherness

But it is through the idealized image that the militants give themselves that it is possible to reach the deepest springs of the anarchist imaginary. That, anyway, the songs that their dream of otherness, by which they want to mark the distance that separates the old world, expressed with greater force and clarity.

The anarchists are a kind of point of honor to stand still in the guise of insurgents, lawless, having rejected all of the old society. As Paul Paillette stated, in his “Profession de foi”<sup>11</sup>

I'm a bohemian, a rebel  
I've cut off all: Country, Family,  
And the old society disgusts me,  
I'd sell it for a crust.  
I could become a bandit,  
My grandfather was a royalist.  
I burnt my letter of credit,  
I'm an anarchist.

The comrades, however, say they long to be ready to die for a good cause, never seem to be afflicted by serious metaphysical problems. Even when they commit illegal acts, they remain a “perky mood. The image of the anarchist who emerges from these songs have nothing in common with that of a nihilist, but they

<sup>11</sup> *Échos anarchiques*, Paris, « L'Avant-Garde cosmopolite », 1887.

pret them in their own way if necessary. The old and new are intertwined here, which is a key feature of the late twentieth century anarchism.

As advocates of a doctrine marked by the seal of radicality, anarchists think of themselves in their songs first and foremost as “breaker[s] of images,” wiping the slate clean of all the values and beliefs of the past. Everything, “statues, emblems, mirages,” is destined to fall under the “heavy stick” of the comrades.<sup>4</sup>

Their goal, according to the dominant insurrectionary vision of social change, is to destroy all the workings of a social order that is judged to be iniquitous. A negative vision, but certainly one that is considered essential to enable the emergence of a new world. None of the symbols of “archist” society is spared by the iconoclastic libertarians, starting with the false idols that represent God to them and their country. The comrades relish declarations of atheism and/or cosmopolitanism. Thus, in *Le Père Duchesne*, they invited the audience to put “the Good God in the s—” while in the *Réponse du laboureur* they asserted that they did not “love their fatherland”<sup>5</sup>

These destructive accents could be multiplied at will should not be overestimated either. While expressing their radical difference vis-à-vis other political and social forces, the anarchists never give up claiming [*se réclamer*] or reclaiming [*repandre*] many references to the old world they want to destroy. The use they make in their songs of a symbol such as Marianne, for example, seems to be particularly significant. Instead of rejecting what will become one of the most consensual representations of a bourgeois and opportunistic republic, for a long time, they seek to enhance its subversive dimen-

<sup>4</sup> “Iconoclasie,” *Chants et poésies révolutionnaires*, Paris, L'Avant-Garde cosmopolite, 1887. For all the arguments surrounding the anarchist *chanson* prior to 1914, I would refer to my book: G. Manfredonia, *La chanson anarchiste en France des origines à 1914*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997, 448 pp.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132 and p. 176.

sion as the promise of justice and equality left unfulfilled after the French Revolution<sup>6</sup>

A similar discourse can be observed with respect to the red flag. If, from 1882–1883, the anarchists began to hoist the black flag as a sign of their radicalism, their penchant for the red flag does not disappear overnight. On the contrary, in the songs, red flags and black flags will long continue to coexist as two sides of the same emancipatory struggle of the proletariat. Overall, the study clearly shows the songs will deliberate on the part of anarchists to reclaim any part of the symbolic legacy of the labor movement while marking his distance.

## An idealized vision of their doctrine and their struggles

This need to develop a strong collective identity is all the more imperative that anarchism has never been a homogeneous whole. What strikes anyone looking at this current is the extreme diversity of ideological viewpoints and practices among militants. Thus at the beginning of the twentieth century Paul Eltzbacher was able to write, without fear of being disowned, that libertarian theorists differed on all key issues (philosophical, property rights, means of production) except that of the State, the only subject on which there was broad consensus<sup>7</sup>.

And yet, and this is not the least of the paradoxes, the anarchists have always tended to see themselves as a separate category of individuals, individuals with particular psychological traits. In 1895, for example, Augustin Hamon, in his *Psychology of the Anarchist-*

---

<sup>6</sup> See G. Manfredonia, “La République des anarchistes,” in *Dictionnaire critique de la République*, ed. V. Duclert and C. Prochasson, Paris, Flammarion, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> P. Eltzbacher, *L’anarchisme*, Paris, Marcel Giard, 1923, p. 388 [*Anarchism*, New York, Benjamin R. Tucker, 1908, p. 279].

*Socialist*, tried to prove that the anarchists, even of different nationalities, all had the same “particular psychological character,” the same “special state of mind”<sup>8</sup>

Today such a “sociological” approach might strike us as funny. Hamon’s attempt is nonetheless reveals the existence at that time a strong sense of identity which was based largely on the existence of a common state of mind, or, in the words of Alain Pessin about the existence of a community of reverie.

While it is impossible to fully meet the author when he states that “the multiform unity of the anarchist movement is founded in his reverie [...]”<sup>9</sup>

Many other factors must be taken into account, first the formation of a true anarchist political culture, based on practice in valuing individual autonomy and direct action of workers<sup>10</sup>

The existence of a common dream of a real imaginary or utopian libertarian does not contribute significantly less than that of individuals or social backgrounds from different countries should think of themselves as belonging to one family and one elective. Gold production songwriter, releasing a series of images, references and symbols common to all activists, will contribute greatly to establish the distinctive features of this imaginary. By using both the reason rather than sentiment, it lends itself admirably to this development work group.

Unable to agree on an ideology and a social one, the activists are first in the idealization of their doctrine that common vision of the world and their struggle, which they badly needed. Within a few years, we are witnessing the formation of a true “mythology” libertarian, starting with the millenarian belief in the rise in the near future of a world completely regenerated and purified through so-

---

<sup>8</sup> A. Hamon, *Psychologie de l’anarchiste-socialiste*, Paris, Stock, 1895, p. XVI.

<sup>9</sup> A. Pessin, *La rêverie anarchiste : 1848–1914*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1982, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Manfredonia, “Persistance et actualité de la culture politique libertaire”, in *Les cultures politiques en France*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1999.