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ANARCHY AND CULTURE:
FERNAND PELLOUTIER AND THE DILEMMA
OF REVOLUTIONARY SYNDICALISM¹

“nous voulons que l’émancipation du peuple soit l’œuvre du peuple lui-même.” (*L’Organisation corporative et l’anarchie.*)

Advancing under socialist banners, the labor movement in Western Europe won such success by the end of the nineteenth century as to produce a deep moral and intellectual crisis in European socialism. Internecine quarrels over revisionism, participationism, and anti-political syndicalism reflected the malaise of a “revolutionary” movement that each year bound itself more closely to the system it had vowed to destroy. For socialist theoreticians, the crisis was cognitive or “scientific” – it had to do with issues of adequate historical analysis and prediction – but for the theorists of French revolutionary syndicalism it was essentially a moral crisis. In their eyes the socialist parties had already failed because they were the instruments for manipulation and betrayal of the workers by leaders whose ambitions could be gratified through the capitalist establishment. They identified a practical and moral alternative to political socialism in the revolutionary general strike prepared and carried out by autonomous proletarian organizations. Such organizations were necessary to the idealists of the general strike if their programs were not to degenerate into a strictly verbal revolutionary Couéism and they therefore put great stock in the development of militant working-class associations. Among these, the Bourses du Travail, which flourished from 1895 to 1901 under the dedicated direction of the anarchist intellectual, Fernand Pelloutier,² seemed the most promising.

Fernand Pelloutier came to revolutionary syndicalism out of a background of provincial republican politics. As a youthful journalist at Nantes he moved left from the radical republicans into the camp

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of a paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association, December 1962.

² The only full-scale published biography of Fernand Pelloutier is by his brother Maurice Pelloutier, *Fernand Pelloutier, sa vie, son œuvre, 1867-1901*, (Paris, 1911).

There is an excellent dissertation, as yet unpublished, by James C. Butler, *Fernand Pelloutier and the Emergence of the French Syndicalist Movement 1880-1906*, Ohio State, PhD Dissertation, 1960.

of the orthodox Marxists, and then, with his close friend Aristide Briand, broke with the Guesdists over the issue of the general strike and turned toward the commitment to anarcho-syndicalism that was to define the rest of his short career.¹ During the 1890's he played a leading part in the growth and consolidation of the French trade union movement; and in the successful struggle to separate it from political socialism. He was one of those middle class martyrs to the ideal of proletarian freedom and self-respect, dying of a tubercular condition in his early thirties, after some ten years of tremendous labors in agitation, pamphleteering, journalism and most of all in consolidating the Bourses du Travail into an effective national movement. When Pelloutier became secretary of the national Federation of the Bourses du Travail in 1895 there were 34 Bourses made up of 606 syndicates, five years later shortly before his death there were 57 Bourses with 1065 syndicates.

During Pelloutier's tenure the Bourses expanded their range of action far beyond that of the labor exchange which was their original function. Each Bourse was a federation of all of the trade unions in a locality willing to cooperate across craft or industrial lines. The heart of each Bourse was, wherever possible, some permanent location – a union hall which was to be the center of working class existence, and to provide a great variety of services including a mutual benefit society, a job information and placement bureau, a system of financial assistance for travelling workers, a strike chest, a program of propaganda for organizing the unorganized, a sort of bureau of labor statistics, and education courses, periodic conferences, and a library.²

The growth and vitality of the Bourses du Travail aroused the enthusiasm of the various theorists of revolutionary syndicalism not only because they were self-directed working class organizations more or less uncorrupted by socialist factions and ambitions, but because they seemed to provide the institutional nucleus for the construction of a new order out of the ruins of the old. Georges Sorel thought that Pelloutier, recognizing that socialism could only be based on “an absolute separation of classes and on the abandonment of all hope for political reconstruction of the old order,” had helped to establish the means for the final break “with the imitations of the bourgeois tradition” through the organization of autonomous proletarian institutions: the Bourses du Travail.³

¹ See C. Chambelland, “La Grève générale, thème de la pensée de Fernand Pelloutier et d'Aristide Briand,” *L'Actualité de l'Histoire*, No 18, (May, 1957), and No. 19, (Oct., 1957).

² Pelloutier wrote the classic history of the Bourses du Travail, Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, (Paris, 1902).

³ Georges Sorel, *The Decomposition of Marxism*. Translated in I. L. Horowitz, *Radical-*

Pelloutier's place in the history of the French labor movement is secured by his practical contributions to the development of the Bourses rather than by the enthusiasm he aroused in the armchair ideologists of the general strike or by his own contributions to anarcho-syndicalist doctrine. However an examination of the doctrinal foundations of his brand of syndicalism helps to situate it in French social history and illuminates the ambiguities of his commitment to the self-emancipation of the workers. Pelloutier was a middle class intellectual who believed that for the workers to shatter, and transcend, the capitalist order they had to liberate themselves from the iron vise of bourgeois culture. His radical critique of this culture owed a great deal to its nineteenth-century French critics including the tendency to draw upon the intellectual stock of the culture for the rationale that condemned it.

Pelloutier, of course, was not interested in formulating some completely new revolutionary ideology and explicitly placed himself in the cranky and paradoxical tradition of moralistic radicalism, articulated in the writings of Proudhon¹ and carried on, with reference to the practical example of Pelloutier himself, by the school of Sorel. He once described Proudhon as the least utopian of all the socialists precisely because he established morality as the criterion, not only for social action, but for any science or metaphysics, whereas "so-called scientific socialism" had to contrive sophistic arguments that would permit it to arrive at its utopian ideals by induction.²

Pelloutier's own refusal to separate theoretical from moral considerations was at the base of his repudiation of socialist political alternatives. He perceived parliamentary socialism as an ignoble avenue of social mobility, and revolutionary socialism as either a rhetorical facade for unrevolutionary ambitions or an academy for future authoritarians. The answer to these corrupting alternatives lay nowhere but in the working class itself – in its solidarity and its revolutionary will. He left Proudhonian channels at the point where he accepted for the working class the moral obligation to be revolutionary in a literal as well as a metaphysical sense – where he asserted the liberating role of "la violence, enfin, qui seule peut mettre un frein à

ism and the Revolt against Reason, (New York, 1961), p. 160; Georges Sorel, Preface to Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, p. 26.

¹ Pelloutier's colleague and disciple Paul Delesalle wrote in the anarchist journal *Les Temps Nouveaux*, Du 23 au 29 Mars, 1901, on the occasion of Pelloutier's death, "Fédéraliste et communiste – anarchiste convaincu, il aimait à citer et à évoquer Proudhon qu'il connaissait à fond."

² A. Dufresne et F. Pelloutier, "Proudhon Philosophe," *La Revue socialiste*, Vol. XXX, Oct., 1899, pp. 482-485.

la violence et qui est l'arme naturelle de tout être fier et digne."¹

The voluntarism of the idea of progress as moral change is obvious, particularly when the regeneration is not to be confined to the hearts of individual men but realized through the very process of collective revolutionary action. However, Pelloutier did not conceive of the liberation of humanity as completely contingent upon the revolutionary will of the oppressed. Like most contemporary revolutionaries he mingled exhortations to bring down the capitalist system with predictions of its inevitable demise. Notwithstanding occasional expressions of contempt for "economic laws" so often wrong in the event, he was convinced that the inner contradictions of capitalism inexorably pointed to its extinction.

The economic theories which provided Pelloutier with this conviction were out of the common stock of a century of French radicalism. Although he occasionally borrowed the Marxian terminology of contemporary socialism, his essential conception of the nature and direction of capitalist development was that of the perversion of the exchange function through the illegitimate transformation of money from a neutral standard of value to a valued commodity.

"Le signe d'échange se prête à l'accaparement et à la capitalisation parce qu'au lieu de rester signe, c'est-à-dire équivalent fiduciaire et toujours exact des produits, il devient à la fois valeur, c'est-à-dire marchandise, objet de trafic, et instrument indispensable du travail."²

The subordination of production to the accumulation of the perverted value represented by money enables those who possess it to exchange it for a "quantité supérieure de travail (d'où le plus-value, le sur-travail, l'usure sous toutes ses formes.)" So the surplus value of labor is conceived as that portion of created wealth siphoned off by the possessors and manipulators of the medium of exchange whose successful machinations have guaranteed "L'augmentation inversement proportionnelle et toujours croissante de la richesse et de la misère et de leurs conséquences: l'autorité et la servitude."³

This venerable notion of the illegitimate use of money as the original economic sin was the commonplace of nineteenth-century French anti-capitalist polemic. It reflected lower-class preoccupations in a pre-industrial society where not only the peasants and petty

¹ Fernand Pelloutier, *Les Syndicats en France*, (Nancy, 1921), p. 4.

² Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Organisation corporative et l'anarchie*, (Paris, 1896), p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

proprietors but the town workers longed for easy credit as the crucial economic reform and where the usurer remained the popular personification of capitalist rapacity. Although social and economic changes during Pelloutier's lifetime made these doctrines increasingly archaic they continued to serve him as the theoretical foundation for his polemic against all economic reforms within the framework of the capitalist state. He argued that all apparent benefits granted to the workers by opportunistic governments or wrested from the capitalist by direct action were wiped out by prices that inevitably rose to compensate for any diminution of profits. Indeed whatever augments, "pour une cause quelconque, la puissance d'achat, aussitôt augmente dans une proportion égale, la valeur des produits achetés."¹ Since money is the counter in the endless competitive bidding for the fruits of labor, those who have more of it will always be able to bid up the price of goods to their advantage. And this is the way that "L'argent permet à ceux qui la détiennent de rejeter sur les autres le poids des réformes désagréables," and that is why genuine social equality waits upon the liquidation of the money economy and why "... au lieu de tenter de modifier la société actuelle ... il n'importe que de la détruire."²

Thus his analysis of the economic process reinforces his voluntarist political ethic:

"l'exploitation ... sera toujours maîtresse du champ social tant qu'on ne l'aura pas frappée au cœur, que conséquemment, il ne suffit pas de chercher à refréner ses mauvais instincts; qu'il les faut supprimer en la supprimant elle-même."³

The demand for the root and branch destruction of the source of evil was of course a common plank in the orthodox platforms of Pelloutier's peaceable socialist contemporaries. The logic of capitalist economic development could only be confuted by the elimination of capitalism. Yet even such an activist as Pelloutier realized that the immediate regeneration of the victims of capitalism would not be guaranteed by its destruction. He once remarked that he was not so foolish as to believe that a "moral transformation would proceed at the same pace as the social transformation,"⁴ – evil would not disappear overnight but better institutions would provide the conditions

¹ *Les Temps Nouveaux*, Du 14 au 20 Sept., 1895. cf. Fernand Pelloutier et Maurice Pelloutier, *La Vie ouvrière en France* (Paris, 1900), p. 126ff. where Proudhon is cited to the effect that the cost of any public amelioration is always born by the consumer.

² *Les Temps Nouveaux*, Du 14 au 20 Sept., 1895.

³ Fernand Pelloutier, *Les Syndicats en France*, p. 5.

⁴ Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Art et la révolte*, (Paris, 1896), p. 22.

for its disappearance. The unarticulated but truly painful question for Pelloutier was not so much will the proletarian revolution guarantee the moral transformation of the workers, as, can they sufficiently transform themselves in the debasing present to will the regenerating future?

This was a question of more than tactical significance. Pelloutier was well aware of the practical difficulties in organizing the workers against the system that devoted huge resources to deluding them as to their true interests and their real enemies. Nor were all radical solutions acceptable to an anarchist deeply committed to the self-emancipation of the proletariat. Even if the working class found the resolution to rise out of slavery this was no guarantee that it would rise to freedom. Pelloutier is often praised for recognizing that revolution was not enough – that the promise of the new order would depend upon the quality of the men who constructed it.¹ In the very speech in which he admitted that institutional change might proceed more swiftly than moral change, he also said:

“Et tant qu’il restera dans l’esprit des hommes l’ombre d’un préjugé, on pourra faire des insurrections, modifier plus ou moins les inutiles rouages politiques, renverser même les empires: l’heure de la Révolution sociale n’aura pas sonné!”²

One might argue that “prejudice” could only be eliminated after a political revolution had destroyed its institutional context, but for Pelloutier the moral and intellectual preparation for the genuine social revolution could not be postponed until the present iniquitous political order had been destroyed. The working class had to begin in the present to make itself worthy of the future despite the efforts of its exploiters to deepen the ignorance and reinforce the prejudices which were the conditions of their survival. The answer to this dilemma lay at hand in the French antecedents of Pelloutier’s social thought and was in essence, the self-education of the working class outside of, and against, the deadening and manipulated culture of capitalist society.

When Pelloutier identified the sources of Proudhon’s socialism in the “revolutionary metaphysic of 1789,”³ he was referring to the

¹ E.g. in Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France (1880-1914)*, (Paris, 1955), pp. 281-282; G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, Vol. III, *The Second International*, Part I, (London, 1960), p. 336; Edouard Dolléans, *Fernand Pelloutier*, (Paris, 1937), p. 21; Jean Prugnot, “Avant Propos,” in Georges Sorel, *Lettres à Paul Delesalle*, (Paris, 1947), pp. 87-89.

² Fernand Pelloutier, *L’Art et la révolte*, p. 7.

³ Fernand Pelloutier, “Proudhon Philosophe,” p. 467.

tradition that supplied the premises for his own brand of anarcho-syndicalism. Like so many French ostensible materialists or even "orthodox" Marxists he did not really believe that ideas were epiphenomenal but that they were the motors of social progress. He confidently asserted "la tendance fatale de l'humanité vers la nouveauté des idées et des vues, source du progrès."¹ Therefore the education of the masses as the very condition of their revolutionary consciousness was always his central concern. Even the meagre education doled out to the workers to date had produced that fund of aspirations labeled socialism.² However, public education under the aegis of the State could only become another method of conditioning the masses to their servitude because the State in all of its manifestations was the classic instrument of social and economic exploitations.³

To some extent Pelloutier would perceive the revolutionary education of the proletariat in the very conditions of its existence. With the Marxists, he was confident that the logic of capitalist development would reveal to the workers the outlines of their plight and their genuine interests:

"Par malheur pour le capital, le prolétariat ouvrit les yeux plutôt qu'on ne l'avait cru tout d'abord. A force d'expériences funestes, il s'avisait un jour que le remède au mal social n'était ni dans les révolutions politiques ni dans les luttes nécessaires, mais incohérentes contre les iniquités de chaque heure ... il commence à percevoir la nécessité d'une révolution sociale, c'est-à-dire d'une transformation économique complète."⁴

However Pelloutier did not believe that the working class would attain the appropriate knowledge and resolution to undertake the necessary revolution merely through a passive assimilation of the objective facts of life under moribund capitalism. Because the system which degrades and brutalizes the worker will never afford him the institutional means of a genuine education he must himself construct organizations through which "il puisse réfléchir sur sa condition, dégager les éléments du problème économique, se fortifier en savoir et en énergie pour se rendre capable de l'affranchissement auquel il a

¹ Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, p. 55.

² Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Art et la révolte*, p. 8.

³ M. Pelloutier, Fernand Pelloutier, pp. 48-51. As an impeccable "libertarian" Pelloutier criticized the suppression of church schools by the state, see e.g. *Bourses du Travail de France et des colonies*, viii^e Congrès National (Paris, 5-8 Sept., 1900), pp. 112 ff.; Fernand Pelloutier, "La Fédération des Bourses du Travail de France, ses congrès," *Le Mouvement socialiste*, Vol. IV, No 45, (15 Nov., 1900), p. 625.

⁴ Fernand Pelloutier, *Les Syndicats en France*, p. 10.

droit.”¹ Such institutions would not only help the worker to understand what sort of future he should desire but could help him to “élaborer dès à présent les éléments d’une société nouvelle,”² – they would not only show him how to shape his destinies but train him to be worthy of them. And these institutions already existed – as the Bourses du Travail, for Pelloutier the chosen instruments for the work “d’éducation, morale, administrative et technique nécessaire pour rendre viable une société d’hommes libres.”³

Under Pelloutier’s aegis, the educational possibilities of the Bourses were given an emphasis never repeated by his successors.⁴ The various technical and educational courses, the periodic conferences, the statistical services, the libraries, the never to be realized projects of labor museums were not for Pelloutier peripheral, but essential, functions of the Bourses.⁵ Libraries, he felt were particularly promising agencies for introducing the workers to the discoveries of the human spirit so long denied them. He proudly described the intelligent eclecticism of the bibliothèques of the Bourses where volumes by Marx, Saint Simon, Darwin and Kropotkin were found side by side in a fraternity of genius with those of Chateaubriand, de Maistre, and Lammenais. Not all of the militants were ready for this rich diet but even those whose literary interests had to be “artificially aroused” could benefit from the novelists closest to them in age and social orientation.⁶

Pelloutier, who was the product of a classical French education, conceived of a cultural heritage that transcended class boundaries as well as the narrow limits of propaganda and indoctrination. The

¹ Fernand Pelloutier, *Les Syndicats en France*, p. 11. As Goetz-Girey observes, Pelloutier, in theory at least, transforms the essentially gradualist notion of workingclass self-education and self-help into a revolutionary mystique. Robert Goetz-Girey, *La Pensée syndicaliste française*, (Paris, 1948), p. 56.

² Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, p. 160.

³ Fernand Pelloutier, *Le Congrès général du parti socialiste français 3-8 décembre 1899 – précédé d’une lettre aux anarchistes*, (Paris, 1900), p. viii.

⁴ Edouard Dolléans, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier*, Vol. II, 1871-1936, (Paris, 1948), p. 119; Jean Maitron, *Le Syndicalisme révolutionnaire: Paul Delesalle*, (Paris, 1952), pp. 27 ff.

⁵ Pelloutier conceived of a museum divided into as many sections as there were trade unions, each of which would provide exhaustive information on the materials, techniques, costs, wages, profits in the production of various goods. Absorbing this knowledge, the worker could not but realize that all ameliorative efforts such as strikes, mutual aid societies and labor legislation could no more end pauperisation than a dike of sand could contain the sea. In demonstrating to the workers the impossibility of a peaceable transformation, “cet muettes leçons ne seraient-elles pas plus éloquentes que les vaines clameurs révolutionnaires à quoi s’essouffent les orateurs d’estaminet?” F. Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, pp. 114-115.

⁶ Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*, pp. 111-113.

aesthetic quality of the worker's existence had both moral and practical relevance. His present cultural possibilities were crucial conditions of his political and social future.

“De même que l'art bourgeois fait plus pour le maintien du régime capitaliste que toutes les autres forces sociales réunies: gouvernement, armée, police, magistrature, de même l'art social et révolutionnaire fera plus pour l'avènement du communisme libre que tous les aides de révolte inspirés à l'homme par l'excès de sa souffrance.”¹

The ruling groups bitterly resist any measure to enlighten or purify the tastes of the masses because they know that the appetite for liberty, and the development of the intellect, proceed together, and that resignation is bred from ignorance. Not only have they enlisted priests, mystics and obscurantists to persuade the worker that his salvation is not to be found on this earth, but they have bribed venal artists and writers to supply him with debased and salacious entertainment that inspires rut instead of reflection. And how much more dangerous than capitalist exploitation itself is the work of its cultural accomplices.

“Déprimée le jour par son labeur, abruti le soir par les alcools impurs, les spectacles graveleux, la foule n'a ni le temps ni la liberté d'esprit nécessaires pour réfléchir sur son sort, et de là vient l'indifférence, la lâcheté avec laquelle ce peuple, qui fit 48 et 71, subit aujourd'hui les pires outrages. Le soufflet reçu, il le lave par l'absinthe; l'incertitude du lendemain, il l'oublie au café-concert; la virilité des insurrections, il la porte au lupanar.”²

In this very depressing picture one can discern Pelloutier's concern, not merely to enlighten the masses, but also to combat the debasing and cheapening of the very fabric of working-class life through the effects of a pervasive commercialized culture. Of course I may be guilty of projecting backward present concerns. We are still far, in turn of the century France, from the erosion of working class culture “in favor of the mass opinion, the mass recreational product and the generalized emotional response.”³ But the contemporary French worker's consumption of recreation, entertainment and culture in general was scarcely calculated to provide him with those nobler perceptions which were the conditions for a truly free society.

The reluctance of the masses to absorb the culture appropriate to

¹ Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Art et la révolte*, p. 26.

² Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Art et la révolte*, p. 26.

³ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, (Boston, 1961) p. 280.

their historical destinies posed not only a practical problem¹ for a revolutionary moralist such as Pelloutier but also a profound dilemma. As what the French call a libertarian devoted to the emancipation of the workers by themselves he could not conjure away unfortunate proletarian dispositions with reference to inadequate class consciousness in a given historical situation. As George Orwell once observed, the desire to “level up” the culture of the working class often includes an element of snobbish presumption as to what it should, but doesn’t want.² Pelloutier’s efforts to level up the French workingman certainly did not stem from some genteel condescension. Nothing would have been more repugnant to him than what Raymond Williams calls the “Fabian tone in culture ... leading the unenlightened to the particular kind of light which the leaders find satisfactory for themselves,”³ yet his assumption of a cultural “general will,” not necessarily equivalent to the sum of proletarian tastes, reflects the deeper dilemma of his anarchist political morality. That is to say – either the products of collective freedom of choice are not necessarily the True, the Beautiful and the Good, or, the worker was not actually free to make the correct moral decisions under capitalism. But if these decisions were the prerequisites for some genuine future freedom, was it necessary for some one, if not to impose, at least to urge them on the workers? Pelloutier hoped that the answer lay in a gradual voluntary assimilation of the cultural and educational possibilities of the Bourses du Travail, yet the affirmation of these possibilities had somehow to precede the workers’ recognition of them.

None of these remarks are meant to denigrate the purity of Pelloutier’s motives or the remarkable self-effacement of his devotion to the worker’s cause. But there is a final irony in the very dimensions of his contribution to the development of autonomous proletarian institutions. With his passing the Bourses movement seemed to lose its momentum and there were many who testified to the words of the militant syndicalist Pierre Monatte:

“Pelloutier, notre grand Pelloutier mort, en 1901, la Fédération des Bourses du Travail n’était plus qu’un grand arbre blessé dont chaque année une branche flétrie tombait sur le chemin.”⁴

¹ He carried on an obscurely heroic struggle to maintain a journal, *L’Ouvrier des deux mondes*, for the Bourses, but it could not attract sufficient subscribers to survive. He poured his life’s blood into the hopeless effort to keep it afloat, not only writing and editing most of every issue, but eventually personally setting it up in type.

² George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (New York, 1958), p. 194.

³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, (New York, 1960), p. 255.

⁴ Quoted in Dolléans, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier*, Vol. II, p. 52.