

REVIEW ESSAY

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ANARCHISM, REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR IN SPAIN: THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL HISTORY*

The Spanish Civil War continues to captivate the attention – and inventiveness – of contemporary minds; it was a source of literary inspiration, and in only a few decades has become a field of study in which the flood of new books seems endless. Although Francoist myths and simplified and ideological versions dominated till quite recently, it is obvious that the influence of Anglo-American historiography since the 1960s, the end of the dictatorship, the opening up of new sources and the appearance of studies of local history have dispelled some of the main Francoist myths and have introduced new arguments into historical research. Of course there are still remarkable gaps. But one has to recognize that, nevertheless, it is difficult to find another period of contemporary Spanish history which has aroused so much reflection and confrontation of ideas.¹

With some significant differences, studies of anarchism during the civil war have followed a similar development. Leaving aside the Communist accounts and the Francoist books (both, for different reasons, very anti-anarchist and lacking any rigor), it was the anarchist militants themselves

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¹ The work of Herbert R. Southworth, despite the criticism to which it has been subjected, opened up the way in this respect. See *El mito de la cruzada de Franco* (Paris, 1963). A general guide to sources may be found in Juan García Durán, *La guerra civil española: Fuentes (Archivos, bibliografía y filmografía)* (Barcelona, 1985). Two recent collections of essays representative of the last historiography on various problems raised by the Civil War are Paul Preston (ed.), *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931–1939* (London, 1984); and Martin Blinkhorn (ed.), *Spain in Conflict, 1931–1939. Democracy and Its Enemies* (London, 1986). The fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war was the occasion for many colloquies and conferences, with very uneven results. See, for example, Josep Fontana *et al.*, *La II República: Una esperanza frustrada. Actas del Congreso de Valencia Capital de la República (abril 1986)* (Valencia, 1987); and Santos Juliá (ed.), *Socialismo y guerra civil* (Madrid, 1987).

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who, from the beginning, assumed the task of narrating that revolutionary struggle. The main reason for this seems very clear: the context was for them unique, ardently desired for a long time, without precedents and, therefore, an occasion worthy of recognition. Those accounts, almost always written from exile, relied on few records, lacked critical analysis and were written with some or much bias. Not only anarchist bias, but also bias in favor of the personal positions defended by the author in the movement. This is of course in some sense logical: the war had had a tragic and gloomy end and exile was not only a good time for reflection but also offered a good opportunity to clear oneself of possible guilt for that past. The books by Horacio Martínez Prieto and Juan García Oliver, two opposite poles of the same movement, illustrate that phenomenon perfectly.² However, not all the accounts of the civil war written from exile were memoirs or superficial accounts. Jose Peirats's book, for example, was an institutional history, well informed, and it has been very useful for later works – in fact, it has sometimes been their very basis.³

Until the last years of Francoism – Franco died in 1975 – it was very difficult for the analysis of anarchism to escape from the premises framed by militant interpretations. The first professional historians to change these premises came from abroad. Following the steps of authors such as Franz Borkenau and Gerald Brenan, who had tried to give a political and social dimension to the war, some works appeared in English in the mid-1960s and they were to have considerable influence on civil war studies. They shared several traits: high literary quality, good use of primary sources, a good combination of empirical rigor and reflection, and, most of all, a renunciation (at least seemingly) of partisanship so as to be as objective as possible.⁴

² Horacio Martínez Prieto, *El anarquismo español en la lucha política* (Paris, 1966); and Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos* (Barcelona, 1978).

³ Jose Peirats, *La CNT en la Revolución española*, 3 vols (Paris, 1971). At the same time, César M. Lorenzo. Horacio Martínez Prieto's son, wrote the first serious reflection about power, one of the riskiest subjects in the anarchist literature. See César M. Lorenzo, *Los anarquistas españoles y el poder, 1868–1969* (Paris, 1972).

⁴ The contemporary account of Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (London, 1937), was published in Spanish in 1971 (in Paris). *The Spanish Labyrinth*, by Gerald Brenan, had to wait twenty years before a Spanish edition appeared (Paris, 1962). Examples of that Anglo-American historiography on the war are Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1961); and Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931–1939* (Princeton, N.J., 1965). On anarchism see Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage: the Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1961) (published later in more extensive versions under *The Spanish Revolution*, 1971, and *The Civil War*, 1991); and John Brademas, *Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en España (1930–1937)* (Barcelona, 1974). An entirely different way of approaching those events, from the perspective made possible by oral history, may be seen in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War* (Harmondsworth, 1981). A good critical analysis of that Anglo-American historiography was provided by Santos Juliá, "Segunda República: por otro objeto de investigación", in Manuel Tuñón de Lara et al., *Historiografía española contemporánea* (Madrid, 1980), pp. 295–313.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that this kind of historiographical analysis did not provide the key to understanding the evolution of the anarchist movement and its relationship with wartime society and politics. For that it was necessary to revise the main lines of militant historiography and provide new methodologies. Such a task has basically been carried out by young Spanish historians who have based their research on new arguments, new material and previously unknown sources. The methods chosen have been manifold, seldom coordinated, and stem from two main sources of inspiration: the ideological approach, and the analysis of socio-economic and political aspects of the revolution.⁵ In most cases, we chose local history as the vehicle of analysis and we broke with the optimistic versions of the civil war that the anarchists had promulgated. The main problem with this historiography, which appeared in the 1980s, is that it has not yet produced a good synthesis between the remarkable amount of data generated by local research and the theoretical framework implicit in some general books.

In summary, in the last two decades the emergence of professional historical analysis of anarchism and the civil war have greatly improved the accounts conveyed by militants. The gaps are still large and I will return to them later. But one point must already be clear: this re-examination and break with clichés about anarchism has not been paralleled by a similarly rigorous revision of the ideological stances and practice of the other political movements and trade unions in Republican Spain. We lack still serious research on communism, and with regard to socialism – on which we know almost everything there is to about its origins, for instance – almost nobody has gone into its history during the civil war. Negrin, probably the most significant man in this context, has been studied only in the last five years and, then, by an English historian. With a few exceptions, the general history of socialism, for its official historians, ends in July 1936 and starts again after Franco's death.⁶ This is an issue that requires reflection and

⁵ For the first see Xavier Paniagua, *La sociedad libertaria: Agrarismo e industrialización en el anarquismo español (1930–1939)* (Barcelona, 1982). For the second see Luis Garrido, *Colectividades agrarias en Andalucía: Jaén (1931–1939)* (Madrid, 1976); Aurora Bosch, *Ugetistas y libertarios. Guerra civil y revolución en el País Valenciano, 1936–1939* (Valencia, 1983); and Julián Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución en la sociedad rural aragonesa, 1936–1938* (Madrid, 1985). A combination of both may be found in Walther L. Bernecker, *Colectividades y revolución social. El anarquismo en la guerra civil española* (Barcelona, 1982). See also the compendium of research on peasant collectives in Julián Casanova (ed.), *El sueño igualitario. Campesinado y colectivizaciones en la España republicana* (Zaragoza, 1989). In English see also Graham Kelsey, *Anarchosyndicalism. Libertarian Communism and the State: the CNT in Zaragoza and Aragon* (Amsterdam, 1991).

⁶ One of the exceptions is the already cited work *Socialismo y guerra civil*. The best book available about the period is, however, that by Helen Graham, *Socialism and War: the Spanish Socialist Party in Power and Crisis, 1936–1939* (Cambridge, 1991).

makes it possible to argue against those who claim that, on the Spanish Civil War, there has been a real historiographical debate.

After these brief remarks on historiography, I am going to focus on three issues which reflect my interpretation and research about the period, and I shall conclude with some notes about what is to be done in the future.⁷

First, until the outbreak of the civil war, anarchosyndicalism had become increasingly significant as a social movement of protest against the existing order, but it never went as far as to create a rational plan of action capable of being taken seriously as a real alternative. The circumstances of the military uprising forced the anarchist movement to change the methods and tactics which had been used in the previous decades and, of course, they had no way of foreseeing what was a new kind of outcome: a military uprising having nothing in common with the classic *pronunciamiento* of the nineteenth century. July 1936 was a first in that it was bloody and cruel from the beginning; this was a true *coup d'état*.

But what I'd like to emphasize here is the mistake made by many anarchists – and later by historians – in believing that, with the destruction of the prevailing legality and the change of ownership, the revolution was accomplished. Events proved, however, that such a transformation was not to be. On the one hand, the emphasis put since the beginning on revolution led anarchists to neglect the international scope of the civil war. Given that the conflict soon began to rely upon foreign aid (and not upon the initial arms available to each side), the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) became isolated and became unable to compete in that terrain with the Communist Party.

On the other hand, the crisis of the State – rendered evident by the *coup d'état* – gave so much strength and influence to the CNT – and trade unions in general – that they could no longer perform only a purely subversive role. On the contrary, they had to choose methods never tried before. One of them, participation in central government, has attracted the attention of many analysts. Leaving aside the details (and the discussion of whether or not that resolution was inconsistent), we shall attempt to focus on the main issue.

Second, although revolutionary change meant, in almost all Republican Spain, an intense break with the past, social revolution did not lead to the

⁷ What follows is an abridged summary for the argument I develop in my book *Anarquismo y revolución en la sociedad rural aragonesa* and in other works such as “Anarquismo y guerra civil: Del poder popular a la burocracia revolucionaria”, in Juliá, *Socialismo y guerra civil*, pp. 71–82; “Anarchism and Revolution in the Spanish Civil War: the Case of Aragon”, *European History Quarterly*, 17 (1987), pp. 423–445; “Las colectivizaciones”, in *La guerra civil. Historia 16*, no. 16 (1986), pp. 42–62; “Guerra y revolución: la edad de oro del anarquismo español”, *Historia Social*, no. 1 (1988), pp. 63–76; and “España, 1931–1939: República, protesta social y revolución”, in Julio Valdeón *et al.*, *Revueltas y revoluciones en la historia* (Salamanca, 1990), pp. 135–150.

takeover of centralized power (which, for many, is a necessary condition for a real revolution). In the last few years there have been two basic explanations for why this was the case: those who think that trade unions cannot take power because that is not their function (arguing, in other words, that that is the task of political parties);⁸ and those (including myself) who believe that at least in the Spanish Civil War the syndicalists did not take power because they could not (these arguments stress structural factors and the adverse conditions under which trade unions operated). My explanation focuses on two points. First, the collapse of the means of coercion by the State was not complete because important sections of the army stood firm by republican legality (and, of course, without their helping the Republic the military uprising would have succeeded in a few days). Revolutionary takeover entailed using the same means used by the rebel military to overthrow the existing legal government, i.e. armed means. And that would have meant the end of the Republic. Almost nobody really backed that alternative, and those who did stood alone. Second, in Spain the main industrial centers (Bilbao and Barcelona) did not coincide with the main political center (Madrid).⁹ The division into factions pervaded everything in Republican Spain: political, military and territorial. Given the available resources, the conquest of central power (Madrid) was not on the agenda. From Barcelona the CNT had no chance of reaching Madrid with weapons. And in Madrid, since both united working-class action and the revolutionary destruction of republican legality were impossible, the only option left was a government with bourgeois republicans who were soon joined by representatives of all political parties and trade unions (including the CNT) from the “campo antifascista” (antifascist coalition).

The third issue I would like to consider is that the parliamentary option, even for those who hoped it would bring them to power, had not worked out and, after its collapse (I prefer this term rather than failure), nothing was left but to resolve political and social conflict by other means. The State lost the monopoly of the means of coercion and failed to prevent the revolutionary process (sudden, violent, directed to destroy the positions of privileged groups) in those places where the rebel military were defeated. The revolutionary ideal, which always foresaw at the end of the road a major cataclysm followed by a new era of happiness, had to be changed immediately. The war imposed its own military logic and trade-unionist forms of protest became useless against it. From the beginning the revolution did not bring general welfare, but sacrifices, difficulties, and strong internal and

⁸ The best exposition of this thesis is provided by Santos Juliá, “De la división orgánica al gobierno de unidad nacional”, in Juliá, *Socialismo y guerra civil*, pp. 231–238.

⁹ This was also the case in Germany and Italy at the end of the Great War and some authors think that that explains the failure of revolution there. See, for instance, Dick Geary, *European Labour Protest, 1848–1939* (London, 1984), p. 163.

external resistance (nothing new when the “great” historical social revolutions are analysed).

So we turn again to the international character of the conflict. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, three Western democracies – Italy, Germany and Austria – had already surrendered to fascism. Under those circumstances, the civil war became a new link in the chain which led from Manchuria and Abyssinia to Czechoslovakia and to the outbreak of the Second World War. In such conditions, the Spanish Civil War could never only be a battle among Spaniards or between revolution and counterrevolution. For many citizens of the world Spain became the battlefield between the forces of democracy on the one side and reactionary and fascist forces on the other. And this was an uneven fight, because the intervention of fascist powers and the lack of support from Western Democracies tilted the balance towards Franco’s army. That meant not only the end of the revolution but also the end of the Republic and the end of the labour movement, its organizations and culture; the labour movement was systematically annihilated in a process more violent than that suffered by other European antifascist movements.

Before ending, let me make a few more comments about the historiography on revolution and civil war. The reader comes away from the copious bibliography on anarchism and revolution with the sense that, in spite of all the new roads opened by research in the last decade, we have not yet defined the terms for true historical debate. There is more description than reflection and we still lack a theoretical framework for the interpretation of social conflicts in the period.

Such an interpretative effort must also be followed by an enlargement of the field of research. Thus, we have hardly begun with those aspects that during the last decades have distinguished the new social history from the traditional history devoted to working-class movements. We still know very little about phenomena such as anticlericalism – in spite of its magnitude – popular protests against the inefficiency of food distribution (and against the new forms of power which emerged from the committees), women’s participation, the emergence of cultural alternatives and revolutionary educational projects and, finally, multiple expressions which contributed to the configuration of an exceptional daily life. Biography, for instance, with or without the important help of oral history, is an unexplored field. We have, of course, plenty of memoirs and several hagiographies (mainly on Durruti).¹⁰

¹⁰ On anticlericalism, see Bruce Lincoln, “Revolutionary Exhumation in Spain, July 1936”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXVII (1985) pp. 241–260. See the general interpretation of that phenomenon in Joan Connelly Ullman, “The Warp and Woof of Parliamentary Politics in Spain, 1808–1939: Anticlericalism versus ‘Neo-Catholicism’”, *European Studies Review*, XIII (1983), pp. 145–176. On Durruti see, for example, Abel Paz, *Durruti en la revolución española* (Barcelona, 1986).

A problem pervades all this: Spain, because of its history, is a country with hardly any tradition of social history and what we have had so far is the persistence of a political approach in the explanation of social movements. To revise that tendency and advance in other ways is the challenge we face. My proposition is to explore the connection between history and social theory. That does not mean the suppression of empirical research – as many historians might fear – but it does mean establishing a common ground of debate between the results of historical research and the better exponents of historical sociology (of which, as far as revolutions are concerned, we have more than a few).¹¹

¹¹ See the works of Barrington Moore, Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly. For a good, recent analysis see Rod Aya, *Rethinking Revolutions and Collective Violence. Studies on Concept, Theory and Method* (Amsterdam, 1990). I have discussed the need for a *rapprochement* between historical sociology and theoretical history in my book *La historia social y los historiadores* (Barcelona, 1991).