“Agrarian Anarchism” in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War

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Anarchism is a very polarizing and emotional topic. The historiography about anarchism in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War in the 1930s is often very biased and resembles more political debates than sober analyses. It is even very political if the events in Spain of 1930s are called “Civil War” only, and not “Revolution.” As most of the monographs or articles published on Spanish Anarchism have been written by anarchists themselves, many of them contemporaries of the struggles, anarchist violence is disproportionately little discussed. Many examples of anarchist collective's successes seem “apparently arbitrarily” chosen. One historian even mentions that anarchists joined the Republican government only in a footnote while condemning the “cruel and methodical assault” of “Communist and Republican forces.” Some anarchist historians deduce “historic truth” from anarchist principles.

How did contemporaries and historians perceive “agrarian anarchism” in Spain in the 1930s? What were its long-term outcomes? An analysis of the literature reveals that the Anarchists’ success was more indirect than direct. It had its most influential effects with the publication and distribution of its goals among the population. At the end of the 20th century for example, models of welfare, workers’ rights, equality, and mutual aid are present and realized to a larger extent in Europe's societies than they were at its beginning. For a long time, primary sources have been underused for the coverage of this topic. Jerome Mintz’s *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas* and Michael Seidman's *Agrarian Collectives during the Spanish Revolution and Civil War* took the first steps to bridge the gaps anarchist's memoirs and the non-availability of primary sources during the rule of Franco left open. This article focuses on the period of collectivization and the role of agrarian anarchism in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War.

Potential for “Agrarian Anarchism” in Spain

Rural Spanish society in the early twentieth century was still characterized by feudal structures. Agrarian problems and the psychology of peasants and landlords remained “much the same as they had been in 1600.” Economic and social power was monopolized in the hands of few. A majority of the population, a large one in the Andalusian south, were economically impoverished landless seasonal laborers, the *braceros* or daily-contract workers called *jornaleros*, both at the mercy of their landlords, the *patrons*. The landlords controlled the amount of cultivated land and with it the unemployment. The higher the unemployment was, the lower the wages could be.

Most of the landlords had no relation to their land and often did not live on it. They also were detached from their land cultivators, whom they treated “less than animals.” The amount of uncultivated land even rose in the early twentieth century and further contributed to the undernourishment of an estimated one-half of the Spanish population on the eve of the Civil War. The high rate of illiteracy and its accompanying economic and cultural disadvantages contributed to the “wide gulf between rich and poor” too: a gulf that included social, economic, and also cultural aspects with a deep sense of alienation from both sides.

The owners of the large landed estates, the *latifundarios*, did not play the role of *patrones* as intermediaries to the state, and, as we will see, governmental institutions could not fill this gap. There were several reasons for this: “the state” was to a large extent considered foreign in the parts of impoverished Spain simply because it was Castillian. Another reason to question the necessity of its institutions was the fact that for example in Andalusia villages had run themselves without them for a long time. The introduction of capitalism with its implications for the landless proletariat, high expectations and high disillusionment with the “land reforms” of 1835, 1931, and 1934 were additional reasons for cutting the last ties between the landless and the state. The introduction of the *Guardia Civil* in the late nineteenth century, one of the few elements of presence of the state in the countryside, is another factor that contributed to the peasants alienated view towards the central government which had “countermanded *campesino* custom and brought about a reign of disorder and injustice [sustaining] the idle, unproductive rich and [protecting] them in their exploitation of the workers.” The *Guardia Civil*, considered a “natural enemy” of the peasants, became as such a “recruiting officer” for Spanish anarchism.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Church steadily lost its influence on the poor and became a church of the middle and upper classes. The feelings of peasants, the *campesinos* towards the church were very negative; their dislike not necessarily meaning that they also had abandoned religion. This alienation opened a gap into which Spanish anarchism

could jump. The “religious phraseology” of some of its incarnations and millenarian elements let some scholars declare it a religion itself.

Agrarian Collectives in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War

When Bakunin's emissary Guiseppe Fanelli arrived in Spain in 1869 to spread anarchism the “seed was deposited in fertile soil.” “Chronic social upheaval” since the second half of the 19th century had developed a tradition of resistance and a quasi-natural affinity to anarchist's “direct action.” Was anarchism “imported” into the countryside?

For anarchists such as the major historian of the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), José Peirats, this question is easy to answer: the CNT was the “muscle and the brain” of the first agrarian revolution in Spain. Collectivization was besides being part of the “peasant subconscious” also the “natural outcome of many decades of anarchist propaganda,” and Spanish anarchists had an “excessively urban orientation” as well as urban origins. The importance of urban anarchist propaganda has to be put in perspective. Especially in the countryside, “theory” was not very popular. Indeed, illiteracy was high. For example, in the Andalusian village Casas Viejas in 1932, the socialists reportedly had the “most educated and intelligent people.” The CNT had those who couldn't read or write. The CNT propaganda has also been criticized to be very unbalanced and “relying on the peasant's ignorance of the existence of other points of view, hoping to win them over while keeping them essentially ignorant.”

For some anarchist historians it was to a lesser extent because of propaganda but more because of the appeal of free association and autonomy that anarchism had for Spanish workers and peasants; emphasizing that workers, not intellectual theoreticians shaped the movement and the initiative of peasants was *the* crucial element.

An answer to the question where the anarchist initiative in the Spanish countryside derived probably lies in between “peasant” and “urban intellectual.” A quote from Buenaventura Durruti describes the link:

> *Mais creio que o proletariado espanhol aprendeu mais com as experiências práticas que os anarquistas lhe proporcionaram a ocasião de viver, do que através de todas as publicações que estes editaram e que aquele não leu.*

Anarchism spread through the countryside less because of the pamphlets and more because of the intermediaries who delivered them and their philosophy to the villages. The crucial role in the development of agrarian anarchism of those *obreros conscientes*, the men “who had ideas,” cannot be underestimated. Losing them meant losing almost everything for the anarchist movement. Because of their ethical standards and lifestyle, avoidance of alcohol, tobacco, or gambling, and the millenarian elements of the agrarian anarchism many historians referred to them as “apostles” who “converted” the peasants.

In “personal traits, style of life, and techniques of preaching” they resembled the “friars of old” but through them “salvation would come not through charity and mystical faith, but through social revolution and knowledge.” Tragically for the movement those carriers of Anarchism, people like Jose Olmo, Anselmo Lorenzo, Isaac Puente, or Fermin Salvochea, were very few and there was a “sharp division” between them and other members concerning the commitment to the cause. Most of the “ordinary” peasants who joined the anarchist movement for whatever reason, be it land, education, or just the tradition of conformity, did not want to avoid the amenities of the village's coffee house or the fiestas. If anarchist activists and theorists were the lighter to the bomb in the Spanish countryside, the *obreros conscientes* were the fuse.

When and how did Spanish Agrarian Anarchism expand? First declarations of anarchist communism, *comunismo libertario*, are recorded before 1936 but with the rightist's coup in July 1936 the declarations and collectivization of land initiating from the local level increased significantly. In some villages two separate collectives were established, one consisting of CNT members, the other one consisting of members of the CNT's most important rival, the socialist trade union, the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT).

The coverage of collectivization until late 1936 is very difficult to answer. Most anarchist historians' publications claim 90% of Catalonia was collectivized. Other accounts refer to “three quarters” or “more than one half” of the land area of the Republic. Recent research offers a different view. Perhaps only 18.5% of the land in the Republican zone was collectivized. In combination with the low percentage of the population involved it can be concluded that collectivization was a “minority phenomenon even in the Republican zone.”

Anarchist historians enthusiastically report increases in production in the collectivized areas. According to Deidre Hogan, harvests had increased by up to five times. But the numbers vary widely. They have to be put into perspective of the significant regional differences, the inclusion of formerly uncultivated land, the statistical problems that will be discussed below, and most of all, the short time during that most of the collectives existed, none exceeding two years.

Most anarchists argue the peasants joined the collectives voluntarily. Some admit that sometimes the “creative initiative …had been stimulated by a libertarian militia unit.” Other historians question the level of voluntariness. Collectivization occurred “both spontaneous[ly] and unwillingly” and at least some “urban militants …imposed their idea of

libertarian communism or socialism."

The role of individualists in the period of collectivization is rather easy to answer for the majority of anarchist historians: rights of "individualists" who chose not to join the collectives were respected and in "some" cases they even were provided with food and supplies in exchange for their products. On the other hand, they have to concede that due to "practical problems and subtle social pressures," many had to abandon their villages or join the collectives. One of the "practical problems" was the abolition of money in most of the collectivized villages. With no money and no access to the coupons that replaced it, or with the exclusion of the barter economy which also has been introduced to some places, it was impossible to acquire necessary goods.

The destruction of collectives started in 1937. In the summer of 1937, the Aragon collectives, for anarchists the "wonder of the revolution," were dissolved by the Republican government although they had been legalized by the latter in January 1937. The attack on the collectives was initiated by the communists in the Republican Government and the Catalan *Generalitat*. The fact that the anarchist members of the government would and could not do anything about it contributed further to radicalization and polarization in the anarchist movement. The "anticollectivist campaign" of the communists was a culmination of conflict between them and the anarchists that almost led to a civil war inside the civil war. In August six hundred CNT militants were killed in Aragon fighting against the break up of the collectives.

Success or failure of the collectives in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War is hard to judge because of important reasons as for example the short time of collectivization, the war conditions, inner conflicts, and the statistical uncertainties and problems before, during, and after the Civil War. The collectives remained "*Stückwerk*": "something unfinished, only realized in parts." What problems did they and Spanish anarchism face?

There was a "quarreling multitude" of anarchist groups in Spain at the end of the 19th century. At one extreme they were "little more than Republicans" and at the other "embattled, individualistic terrorists." There were at least two major strains of anarchism in Spain at that time: Anarcho-Syndicalism on the one hand and radical anarchism, more violent and strictly non-hierarchical, on the other. The differences went along many cleavages.

First, strong regional differences and conflicts were apparent in Spain of the 1930s (and remain in 2000). The domination of very large landed estates, *latifundia*, was at its worst especially in the south. In Andalusia landless seasonal laborers, the *braceros*, rather than small proprietors, made up the majority of the population. The rivalry between Andalusian and the more urban, industrial, and anarcho-syndicalist Catalan anarchists can be recognized as a major problem the anarchist movement never could overcome. Many Catalan anarchists miraculously turned into communists when those were seen as stronger and more effective in the fight against the Castilian fascists. Regional differences between the movement in the *sierra* and the movement on the *latifundia*, the former contributing tenacity through the solidity of the *pueblo*, the latter instability through "poverty of social forms among the *braceros*," also account for frictions in the Spanish anarchist movement.

Both urban and rural "anarchisms" were "two different things" and the movement was unable to bridge the gap. The anarchist's ties to the countryside were "not as close as they thought" and because they were busy themselves in the cities, and with other external enemies they lost more ties through the years of the revolution and Civil War. While the workers used strikes in the cities, rural anarchists engaged in "propaganda by deed" seizing their pueblos and declaring autonomy. One specific tragic outcome of the coordination problems between the cities and the countryside were the events in Casas Viejas in January 1933, where one side did not know what was going on with the other one and peasant anarchists died as martyrs without any of the help from their urban comrades they hoped to get.

There were also problems within urban anarchism. In his *Homage to Catalonia* George Orwell describes Spain in the early 1930s to be suffering a "plague of initials." Some of the plaguing initials referred to anarchists groups. The FAI, the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* a clandestine group within the CNT founded in 1927, its members younger and considering themselves "pure" anarchists—with the violent implications of that—worked against the moderate and conciliatory elements within the CNT, especially after the latter's entrance to the Popular Front and the government. CNT moderates also had to fight on a second "anarchist front" against interventions of the AIT, the International Workers Association, which saw basic anarchist goals betrayed with actions of the former and tried to control the revolution in Spain as far as possible.

Besides the conflicts between the various peculiarities of Spanish anarchisms, they and their historiography had and has some basic problems in common. One of them is the inherent utopian component, which is especially important to historians right of center left on the political spectrum. Anarchist historians' rhetoric that describes the "beautiful dream" strikingly resembles depictions in utopian literature. There were "always enough volunteers for the less desirable tasks," "decision-making within the collectives was fiercely democratic," and refugees were absorbed "with an admirable spirit of solidarity," as was the "voluntary provisioning of the fronts …another aspect of collectivized solidarity." The collectives were palladiums of "harmony" and "co-operative exchange," its administration was "gradually evolving," the collectivized villages were "picturesque …as if they were cut out from a Goya painting." Although even some anarchists recognized attempts to reach the "sky without a ladder," with a "naïve detachment from [the] surroundings," Casas Viejas was

surely not the only village where the goals of the revolutionaries were "far from a super natural millennium or a patent utopia."

Another basic problem where theoretical impetus and practical implementation are far from being identical was the position of women in the Spanish anarchist movement. Despite having Frederica Montseny as a leading icon, the position of women in the anarchist movement was still characterized by discrimination: a fact that one of the leading figures of anarchism worldwide, Emma Goldman, had to experience on her own. The policy of the CNT "barely scratched the surface of sexism."

On the contrary, for one anarchist historian the situation was the following: "egoism *still* [was] deeply rooted in human nature, *especially among women*."

In addition to the problems of Spanish anarchism there are many examples of the collectives' specific problems. In contrast to anarchist propaganda, recent research hardens the evidence that prosperous collectives frequently refused to aid less affluent ones as well as the existence of a mutual antagonism between union officials and collectivists. Peasants were reluctant to provide information on revenues out of fear of expropriation. In the words of the CNT leader, Horacio Prieto, the collectives' autonomy became "permanent egotism." The wartime economy was struggling because of heavy inflation rates. In the first year of the war, the Republican *peseta* lost approximately half its value on foreign exchange markets and at the same time domestic confidence. The barter economy of the collectives especially excluded people working in the secondary and tertiary sector. Tensions heightened when failure of the transport network intensified leading to hunger and depression. Price and wage controls of the Republic had urban priorities provoking divisions between rural and urban interests in both the CNT and UGT. Members of agrarian collectives answered their feeling of discrimination by becoming black marketers and returning to subsistence. Confiscation was at least less likely with little or no surplus of agrarian goods. The fear of expropriation, price controls, inflation, and scarcity encouraged hoarding. In return, Republic officials accused the "unchecked egotism" of the hoarders for causing high prices and scarcities in cities and towns. Municipal authorities answered the hoarding with additional controls and inspections, as well as with confiscations of the stocks of collectives. During the war tensions between the Republic's police, soldiers and the collectives found additional intensification because of looting and confiscating of the former. "Towns hid what they possessed." As one contemporary observer reports, revolutionaries passed through the countryside not to liberate it, but "in order to rob those who throughout the years and throughout the centuries have been robbed by the very persons who have just been defeated by the revolution."

Most of the possible reasons for the failure of Spanish Revolution that have been discussed so far are missing from the list compiled by anarchist historians. One common conclusion of them on the main reason for failure of the Revolution is "external influence," more specifically interventions by the Republican Government and especially from "the communists." In the literature used for this essay, fascists with international help are rarely mentioned as one of the reasons.

Agricultural self-management was an "indisputable success except where it was sabotaged by its opponents or interrupted by the war." The "major obstacle …was the increasingly open hostility to self-management …by various political general staffs of Republican Spain"; without it, and without the "parasites on the villagers" and their protection by "corrupt officials and political parties," it would have "completely succeeded." The failures of the anarchist movement, then, are seen by anarchist analyzers as mainly caused by the supposed allies on the left, especially communists, and only to a lesser extent by internal conflicts, like the "urban orientation" or anarchist's absorption into the state's bureaucracy.

Conclusion

Theories and faces of anarchism in the Spanish Revolution were multifaceted; one common premise of anarchist theory was to remain apolitical: staying outside the political system. During the revolution and the Civil War this postulate was compromised through many events and actions of the CNT. Centralization of power, forced surrender of autonomy, and militarization led to the creation of an elite and bureaucratism, exactly what they had tried to avoid. The turn of the position towards "apolitical" is best described in the words of CNT leader Horacio Prieto: "We had to fight capitalism and the state previously, and we were therefore implacably apolitical; now it is our duty to guide and make the state moral. We must therefore be implacably political." Every anarchist Spanish did not share this position, of course. Some, especially the *faistas* of the FAI, censured Prieto's views as "utopianism." But, it was the view of the leadership of the largest anarchist organization. It can be doubted that the crisis of the Civil War was the only reason for this shift away from being radical "apolitical" in practice. In the perception of some anarchist historians, the effect it had was not less than the self-destruction of the CNT-FAI.

Anarchists themselves see many factors why the agrarian movement and the Spanish Revolution failed. The primary reason for most of them was the "external influence" of "enemies," either moderate anarchists, republicans, communists, Spanish, German or Italian fascists, and the destructive powers of the Civil War. The major "internal" determinants anarchist historiography provides are the isolation of the agrarian movement to few localities and the failure to resolve the conflict between the urban and rural movement. Only one anarchist historian admits the problems of a "forced birth" of the

“ideal society.” Many non-anarchists determine a large degree of sectarianism, inherent flaws of ideology, or utopian wishful thinking, expressed for example in the believe that capitalism would disappear together with the capitalists as major reasons for the anarchists' failures. Being apolitical will not work for a long time if there are very political ambitious groups around you, especially if despite the theoretical premise very political goals are pursued, violently or not.

Despite the loss in the Spanish Civil War the anarchist movement was not just a group of anarchists “playing at revolution.” “The movement seems to have failed—but not the ideas” : the résumé of Emma Goldman expresses the “residue in minds” the anarchist movement created. A residue of social successes from workers rights, equality to welfare that can hardly be expressed by numbers. A positive image of mutual aid and heroism that, detached from the “actual historic events,” influenced the Left in the rest of the 20th century.