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Introduction: New approaches to Spanish anarchism
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Danny Evans

The University of Leeds

James Michael Yeoman

University of Sheffield

Abstract

This article introduces the themes of this special edition, presenting the case that the history of Spanish anarchism needs to be situated within a broader, international history of the left. This view helps to disrupt the image of anarchism as 'exceptional', without losing sight of its specific manifestation in Spain. It proceeds to outline the five articles that make up the remainder of the edition.

Keywords

anarchism

Spain

exceptionalism

transnationalism

localism

Labour history

history of ideas

Scholars of the Spanish anarchist movement can often find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, they are aware that the movement they study was, at a number of points in its history, by far the largest and most durable expression of anarchist ideology in the world. The participation of this movement in the Spanish revolution and civil war meant that, from 1936 to 1939, the implantation of anarchist ideas and practices was of a depth and scale that remain without parallel. On the other hand, stressing this claim too strongly plays into explanations of the movement which regard it as an historical abnormality, often tied to ideas of Spanish exceptionalism (Brenan 1943;

Hobsbawm 1965; Elorza 1973). The notion that ‘Spain is different’, while persistent in the historiography, has consistently been undermined in recent decades by scholars who have stressed the ways in which their subject fits within broader analytical trends (overviews of Spanish exceptionalism in Payne 2008; Townson 2015). Furthermore, any emphasis on the uniqueness of the Spanish case risks undermining the work undertaken to make labour and anarchist history transnational (van der Linden and Thorpe 1990; Berry and Bantman 2010; Hirsch and van der Walt 2010). Attempting to negotiate between these positions raises questions of approach and focus. For example, how does one acknowledge the specific development of anarchism in Spain, without suggesting that it was the only place where this process could occur? Conversely, how does one stress that anarchism in Spain was not an anomaly, while avoiding the suggestion that it was equally strong elsewhere, which it demonstrably was not?

This special issue attempts to answer these questions by situating Spanish anarchism within a range of international perspectives. It takes the position that the development of anarchism in Spain was significant, but not bounded solely by its own dynamics, nor those of Spain. Thus it proposes that Spanish anarchism should not be treated in isolation from the study of other anarchist movements, nor broader trends within labour history and the history of ideas. Instead, we suggest that the anarchist movement in Spain both owed a great deal to international processes, and in turn had a significant impact upon them. In cases where direct interaction did not take place, we aim to show that comparison between anarchism in Spain and other movements is possible and worthwhile. In short, we seek to challenge the notion that Spanish anarchism was ‘exceptional’ by putting it back into the context of an international left, including other anarchist movements but also looking beyond them. Doing so will undermine the essentialism that permeates studies of Spanish anarchism – both favourable and critical of the movement – by stressing the unique characteristics of the movement while denying that it was fundamentally distinct from all other expressions of socialism or the labour movement as a whole.

This perspective has been somewhat neglected in recent historiography. While the exceptionalism of Spanish history, and anarchism specifically, has been largely refuted, most scholars of Spanish anarchism continue to focus their investigations within the national boundaries of the movement. Indeed, as with Spanish historiography more broadly, the prevailing tendency has been to move inwards, towards micro and local-level histories (Freán Hernández 2011). While invaluable in providing the focus and detail needed to understand the workings of the movement, over-emphasis on context-specificity can neglect national and international factors crucial to local development and stifle opportunities for comparison. Such an approach can also inadvertently maintain the premise of exceptionalism, making every pueblo exceptional and understandable solely in its own terms.

Conversely, the study of anarchism outside Spain has been stimulated by the turn to transnational labour history. A range of recent works have explored the interactions of anarchists and anarchist movements across national borders, acknowledging the role of international processes within specific national and local contexts (Levy 2010; Bantman and Altena 2015). Yet, aside from works which examine international anarchist terrorism (Bach Jensen 2004; Herrerín López and Farré 2009) the Spanish movement is rarely fully incorporated into comparative or transnational studies, which is striking

given its significance to the history of anarchism in general (notable exceptions include Moya 1998; Sánchez Cobos 2008; Turcato 2009; Nelles et al. 2010; Baer 2015). This may be due to the imbalance of scale between the Spanish movement and its contemporaries – while anarchists were a minority within most labour movements, in Spain the anarchist movement compared favourably to other sections of the left in terms of influence, size and longevity. The hesitancy to engage with this imbalance is understandable, as examining the international connections between small, disparate groups and individuals poses a different challenge to analysing the international influences of, and upon, a mass movement. Likewise, the discrepancy between the durability and size of organizations such as the CNT, and its (anarcho)syndicalist contemporaries may challenge the validity of comparative study.

Rather than leaving the Spanish movement to its own devices, these disparities call for examination and comparison with different movements, such as social democracy and communism, which attracted comparable support in countries such as Britain, France and Germany. No single labour movement can be said to have had a ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ trajectory – all operated within national frameworks and had their own idiosyncrasies (Altena 2010). Comparing and contrasting Spanish anarchism to other movements, and revealing theoretical and material links between them, helps to situate the subject in a broader history of the left and the workers’ movement. What is sought is a new approach to Spanish anarchism, which does not regard the local, regional, national and international as separate spheres of investigation but as areas of intersection between the specific and the universal (Bantman and Altena 2015: 12–15). The phrase ‘acting locally, thinking globally’ used to summarize the approach of contemporary social movements is apt in this regard, in terms of both the professed strategies of the anarchist movement and the general approach of this special edition.

The first article, by Martha A. Ackelsberg, examines trans-Atlantic links at play in the development of anarcho-feminism, revealing the role of migrants and media in bringing the educationalist, emancipatory discourse of Spanish anarchism to Argentina and Cuba. Once established, these links helped to foster a radical discourse – if not always practice – which placed gender equality at the forefront of revolutionary ambitions. This relationship was reciprocal, as anarcho-feminism in the New World soon began to influence the outlook of the movement in Spain, despite the very different contexts in which these ideas operated. Thus, rather than a quasi-spiritual, localized expression of despair, this study reveals the highly adaptable nature of anarchist ideology, as well as its reliance on modern patterns of movement and techniques of communication.

In the second article, Assumpta Castillo Cañiz traces the historiographical trends associated with collectivization during the Spanish Civil War. Four intersecting themes – the specifics of the rural, of Spain, of anarchism, and of the Civil War – are shown to have masked the complexity of this subject and isolated it from both its own context and comparative study. The author argues for a revision of historical approaches to collectivization, seeking a more satisfactory examination of local dynamics in the context of broader national and international processes.

Danny Evans argues for a reappraisal of anarchist anti-fascism during the early years of the Spanish Second Republic. The historiography has tended to condemn the CNT in this period for its rejection of anti-fascist alliances with organizations to its right, a stance that reached its apogee during the

abstention campaign of 1933. The necessity for unity against fascism has been taken by historians to be the key lesson of the capitulation of German democracy to the Nazi Party that same year. Here, the author suggests that anarchists in Spain, although they arrived at a very different position, were highly attuned to developments in Germany, and the conclusions they drew should not be dismissed as the result of narrow-minded sectarianism. Not only did the positions they expressed chime with the experiences of several other observers of the rise of fascism, they also serve as a warning against complacency in our own time.

The history and transmission of ideas is the subject of the fourth article in this collection. In his study of the influence of Nietzsche within the Spanish movement, Francisco José Fernández Andújar demonstrates how ideas seemingly at odds with the basic principles of anarchism were modified into sections of the movement's discourse. This study challenges portrayals of anarchism as a dogmatic, uncomplicated body of ideas, which were rooted in Spain and impervious to contemporary international thought. Instead, the movement is shown to be highly aware of European intellectual trends, and willing to appropriate them into the broad and porous boundaries of anarchist ideology.

The final article argues for the incorporation of translocal approaches to anarchist internationalism, taking inspiration from contemporary social movement studies. James Michael Yeoman uses this approach to frame a study of an anarchist group who were part of a larger Spanish migration to South Wales in the early twentieth century. Examination of the networks sustained between Spain and Wales reveals how ideals such as internationalism struggled to find resonance within the day-to-day struggles experienced by members of the movement, often leading to isolation and dissolution. This study suggests that the Spanish anarchists of South Wales were far from being exceptional 'apostles of the idea', and as such their experience can be written into a broader history of migration during a period of heightened movement of people and capital.

As part of the preparation for this special issue a symposium was held at the University of Leeds in 2015. We are very grateful to those who attended and shared their thoughts with us, in particular to Richard Cleminson, who delivered a talk at this event. We were also lucky to be joined by Alfonso Lázaro, a member of the 'Títeres desde abajo' puppet troupe, currently facing charges of incitement to hatred as a result of a puppet show held in Madrid. The coordinators of this special issue would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to and solidarity with Alfonso, and add our voices to those calling for the charges to be dropped.

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Contributor details

Danny Evans completed his PhD at the University of Leeds in September 2016. His thesis focused on the opposition of radical anarchists to the reconstruction of the Republican state during the Spanish civil war. He is currently working on a project relating to the practice of anarchist exiles in Latin America in the post-war period.

Contact:

Danny Evans, Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

E-mail: smldev@leeds.ac.uk

James Michael Yeoman completed his Ph.D. at the University of Sheffield in February 2016. His work examines the development of anarchism in Spain over the turn of the twentieth century, with a particular focus on the movement's print culture. His first publication, 'The Spanish anarchist movement at the outbreak of the First World War' features in the collection *Shaping Neutrality Throughout the First World War* (Sevilla 2015).

James Michael Yeoman, Department of History, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover St, Sheffield, University of Sheffield, S3 7RA, UK.

E-mail: jamesmyeoman@gmail.com

Website: <https://sheffield.academia.edu/JamesMichaelYeoman>