

Anarchism or anarchisms? The history of a heterogeneous revolutionary deployment, 1930-1938

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ABSTRACT

This research embarks upon a study of anarchism during the Second Republic and the Spanish Civil War, while it also falls within the framework of the latest and most important historiographic contributions to this subject. It examines the distinction between anarchist militancy and membership in the Single Unions of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT); the decisive and highly significant ties between the members and the local and regional spheres, especially in the Catalan-speaking countries and even Spain-wide; the role played by the press in the movement, which set great store by their ideological aversion to politics and simultaneously the meaning that the so-called libertarian “groupism” had to the FAI members, as well as to the members and anarcho-syndicalist leaders of the Single Unions. Finally, the study upholds that the anarcho-syndicalist leaders and/or anarchists belonged to “affinity groups” that were defined according to the jobs they assigned themselves, but with the assumption that they could join or belong to more than one group according to militant “friendships” and specialisations, which could be strictly union-related and could also include anarchist or open cultural “action” – the latter including theatre, newspapers and *infra-littérature*. However, it should be noted that the heterogeneity of the forms of membership did not imply the existence of numerous “anarchisms”, since unity was ensured through varied forms of solidarity and coordination, and even through the so-called “honour trials”.

KEYWORDS: anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism and libertarian movement, unions and anarchist groups, labour movement, culture, anarchist propaganda

The morphological – if not ideological – heterogeneity of individual and collective memberships in the libertarian workers’ movement opens up the necessary multiplicity of perspectives in a study like this one which aims to fall within the framework of the historiographic contributions offered in both recent and not so recent examinations. The subject has clearly become enriched almost day by day as social historiography has absorbed some aspects in the history of anarchism from a less ideological and/or political perspective or a more sociological and yet critical and innovative perspective. In the late 1990s and especially the 2000s, this attitude has shown visible shifts, and in recent studies on the prominence of violence in Spanish politics, non-militant perspectives have been included of the “revolutionary cleansing” that uncontrolled groups of anarchists and control patrols exercised especially in the Catalan rearguard during the early months of the Spanish Civil War. As a recent journalistic article said, this is a

“very sensitive aspect that had never appeared so clearly before the public eye”.¹ What is more, the subject of “anarchism and anarchists” seems to be open now to analytical examinations that deal critically with Catalan history. Although we cannot bill these contributions as totally new, they have not been prominent or very characteristic until now.²

At least we should break here and in this specific case, the option so often adopted in previous surveys of the issue to avoid the intra-history of anarchism or the weight of anarchist historiography itself in these studies. In other subjects, particularly setting aside the timeline of the Civil War, this would be impossible if the perspective were that of considering these events as if they had occurred within a bell jar and apart from political life. In any event, the reference to a bell jar is certainly not the most appropriate one. Historians who sympathise with anarchist membership or who are directly libertarian tend to include a single perspective from the outside or from politics: that of the government repression against anarchists and their organisations. In 2008, dovetailing with the publishing initiatives that accompanied the historical commemoration of the Tragic Week of 1909, José Luis Gutiérrez Mo-

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lina, an author known for his previous contributions to the history of anarchism in Cádiz, published *El Estado frente a la Anarquía*, a study on the persecution and famous trials brought against anarchists in different periods in contemporary Spanish history.³ This was a global episode that the author still regarded as unknown by the public at large despite the extensive literature already published on it, and therefore as a good example of the repetitive weight of these perspectives (the inclusion of the controversial and highly journalistic “Scala case” was, in fact, the most visible new feature).⁴

JUST A POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE ANARCHO-SYNDICALIST WORKER MOVEMENT?

In 1930 – perhaps in response to the abrupt end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the onset of the latest crisis in the monarchy of Alphonse XIII, or dovetailing with it – the concerns of the main anarcho-syndicalist members or leaders in Catalonia’s CNT converged with those of the prominent leaders on the Catalan political left. Both were questioning the future of the Single Unions, which remained dismantled until that very summer as a result of the political and legal decision dating from the spring of 1924. Without the capacity for worker mobilisation and organisation that the CNT had achieved at the regional level after the creation of the Single Unions in 1918, the future of leftist politics and the creation of broad support among workers and farmers – depending on the case – was a looming question not only in Catalonia but also and by extension around the Catalan-speaking lands in Spain.⁵ Despite this, counter to all predictions, even those of the anarcho-syndicalist members – which were more optimistic – the CNT re-emerged like a phoenix from its own ashes after August 1930. However, it was not until at least 1919 that the Single Unions once again achieved the membership numbers among workers that the economic boom of World War I had yielded, not then nor during the months of euphoria that came in the wake of the proclamation of the Republic – the anarchists’ so-called honeymoon with the regime that brought down the monarchy. All three factors – the economic boom, the change in union organisation and the impact of union mobilisations that spread beyond the edges of the cities – yielded spectacular growth in the number of workers affiliated with the Catalan chapter of the CNT in 1918-1919, as well as the chapters in Valencia and the Balearic Islands. If we accept the information from the CNT itself as accurate, this membership surpassed the percentages of the working population in the main industrial counties of Catalonia in 1919 and even included an influx of non property farmers. In 1931, however, membership in Catalonia was clearly under the levels in 1919, and it never fully recovered from the crisis that the so-called “leaden years” and the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera unleashed successively and inexorably.⁶ On Mallorca, the Republic signalled a true moment of expansion for the CNT’s Single

Unions in both absolute and comparative terms, but always in clear competition with the socialists of the UGT, which was the largest non anarcho-syndicalist union.⁷ Likewise, the Single Unions in Valencia were also reorganised in 1930-1931, and taking advantage of the preceding union tradition, the Valencia chapter ranked just behind its Catalan and Andalusian counterparts, coming in third place in Spain.⁸

The vitality and hegemonic capacity of the Single Unions managed to capture the political attention of the Catalan political left during the years of the Republic, and since the waning years of the Franco regime it has captured the attention of historiography, and especially studies on the Catalan labour movement as the undoubtedly pioneer in Spanish social history. However, the crisis that besieged the paradigms and convictions of the history of the labour movement in the 1980s was clearly reflected in the studies on the anarcho-syndicalist labour movement, which choose to diversify perspectives that until then had mainly entailed the political history of the workers’ organisations.⁹ Those in Catalonia and in Madrid who called for a revamping did so under the confessed influence of the cutting-edge work by British Marxist revisionist Edward P. Thompson, yet also under the tentative influence of the *People’s History* being spearheaded by Raphael Samuel at the *History Workshop Journal*.¹⁰ However, here the issues yet to be examined were so numerous that there arose no manifest desire to abandon the stereotype of the political history of the workers’ movement, and what replaced the excessively militant studies of the past was a history equally committed to anti-Francoism yet more grounded in university research and especially coming from fields that were professionalised or on the road to professionalization. Until then, the political history of the Single Unions or the CNT was compiled by framing it within the history of the union headquarters and workers’ political parties, which I aim to summarise in this essay with the obstinate reference to the political history of the CNT and the UGT or PSOE and other workers’ political parties.¹¹ After that, however, attention will be shifted to the analysis of the militants and members with the clear intention of distinguishing between both historical realities. While the militants could be identified by their anarchistic ideological positions, the members were characterised by joining the CNT’s Single Unions because they thought that their presence and claims were what placed this workers’ union in the best position to defend the working-class interests and aspirations of Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands. Without delving much further, the libertarian leaders themselves were in charge of pointing out that membership in the Single Unions was not incompatible with other political positions, and that “since 1931 the workers of Catalonia could divide [and in fact did divide] their preferences between the CNT unions and the ERC of Macià and Companys or other more or less reformist and/or revolutionary political sectors”.¹²



Figure 1. Miners being led under arrest after the anarchist uprising in Alt Llobregat on the 22nd of January 1932.

We have already noted that rank-and-life membership in the CNT dropped over the Republican years. For example, in 1931 the unions of the Catalan CRT only managed to get their membership up to two-thirds of what it had been in 1919, and by 1936 it had less than half the members it had in 1931.¹³ In Valencia, the reorganisation and resumption of the CNT's union activities also started in the summer of 1930 with the goal of expanding the presence of the Single Unions to the towns where they had not existed until then. In 1931, even though the reorganisation had been and would continue to be slower than in Catalonia, the CNT in Valencia had working-class membership that would rank it third in Spain behind the chapters in Catalonia and Andalusia. However, there was also a decline in Valencia that by 1932 would be equivalent to one-fourth of the worker members that the Single Unions claimed to have in June 1931, when the extraordinary CNT Congress was held in Madrid.¹⁴ In both Catalonia and Valencia, worker membership in the CNT continued to drop as a result of a complicated process which included, in diverse forms and influences, the economic crisis of the 1930s, the tactical and political divergences among the unions and, unevenly among all of them, the

complicated process of anarchist insurrectionism and government repression. The CNT Congress held in Madrid in June 1931, followed by the Congress of the Catalan Regional Confederation of Labour (CRT) in August and the Valencian equivalent in December, captured the tension among the more moderate anarcho-syndicalists, who were in favour of reinforcing the expansion of the confederal unions, and the more radical anarchists, who upheld a revolutionary insurrection which people almost immediately associated with FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation). The tension broke out in 1932, and the CNT split off after the December 1932 uprising in Alt Llobregat. The Barcelona Mercantile Union and other similar organisations, which had been expelled in August of the same year, sided with the communists of the BOC, and the Local Federation of Sabadell spearheaded anarcho-syndicalist Opposition Unions with the support of the towns Mataró (Joan Peiró), Badalona, Igualada, Manresa and Valls. In the region of Valencia, the bulk of the opposition was in the cities of Valencia and Alcoy.¹⁵

In contrast, the anarchist militants, though not the union members, remained unharmed or even became radicalised during the same years, 1932-1933, when the anar-

chist groups at the helm of the CNT were breeding an insurrectionism parallel to the hardening of the strictly union struggles. What is more, this insurrectionism also ran parallel to the retreat of the more moderate anarcho-syndicalist options which would force the creation of a minority Libertarian Union Federation in view of the anarchist insurrectional challenge. The dissent between the two factions, the so-called “*trentistes*” (from the Group of Thirty) and the radicals identified by Catalan society as “*faistes*” (FAI members), did not change the possibilities of anarcho-syndicalist hegemony in the Catalan workers’ movement, but it did serve to reveal the importance of anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist “group” membership, one of the issues that has yet to be fully studied even today. Not too long ago, upon the centennial of the creation of the CNT, a famous Catalan newspaper noted that “the story of libertarian practice remained pending” despite the extensive literature available on the history of anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism.¹⁶

Despite the fact that the “groupism” of anarchist militants – practically virgin territory – has always been regarded as directly and exclusively related to FAI, we should recall that groups were the basic organisational unit of the heterogeneous libertarian mosaic.¹⁷ Therefore, we shall not attempt to determine whether the rising confederal anti-republicanism stemmed from the FAI leadership or from its action groups – in 1931, *Los Solidarios* had not even joined the Anarchist Federation, although Joan Peiró did belong – or whether, to the contrary, it came from a spontaneous union radicalisation common to a time of economic crisis and imperceptible improvements in workers’ conditions which the arrival of the Republic had fostered. Nor shall we attempt to sketch a



Figure 2. Joan Peiró. Leader of the syndicalist splinter group of the CNT which was against the FAI’s insurrectionalism. He rejoined the CNT in August 1936 and served as the Minister of Industry in the government of the Republic between November 1936 and May 1937.

who’s who of anti-Republican anarchist insurrectionism.¹⁸ The goal is simply to point out that the so-called anarchist “affinity groups” were the key piece in the libertarian mosaic since before the creation of FAI, and that “groupism” came transversally or vertically, depending on the case, at all levels of membership, obviously in the members of the Iberian Anarchist Federation and the Young Libertarians but also among the most veteran and famous CNT leaders and, during the Second Republic, in the insurrectional or “confederal defence” committees, one of the most noteworthy and, for obvious reasons, less public or visible new organic developments in the period. Despite the fact that the importance of the National Committee was argued because of its superiority to all the cells or committees mentioned above, its functioning was always tied to “group” hegemonies exercised in certain territorial realities, and often in Catalonia.

However, the breadth and variety of the movement membership did not prevent this reality from gaining ground on the “micro” level, often disconnected and fractioned and of course far from the uniformity that is taken for granted in the histories of anarcho-syndicalist unionism and the implicit unionist political projects never recognised as such because of the ideological weight with which – as we shall argue here – apoliticism predominated in anarchist historiography. What is more, what we shall call here the “apolitical contagion” exercised by this historiography has also had other important effects, such as ignoring the “macro” and “micro” dynamics of the anarchist militants. On a “macro” level, it has been assumed that apoliticism exclusively trusted the strength of the “primitive rebellion” which British Marxist historian Eric J. Hobsbawm studied in comparison with other social movements in the Mediterranean.¹⁹ As is obvious, one thing is that the so-called “primitive rebellion” characterises the militancy of Andalusian anarchists, and another is that there was no further overall plan than the millenarianist destruction of the state and the subsequent elimination of its repressive forces. In effect, the frenetic and obsessive pace at which CNT regional chapters were created reveals much more than the desire to take advantage of the synergies of the pre-existing non-socialist and/or Republican union cells in Catalonia or Valencia. And, in fact, the CNT regional chapters proved the existence of a territorial scheme that primarily obeyed federally-inspired objectives and were a true revolutionary political undertaking.

The re-founding of the Catalan CRT in 1918 had marked the start of an expansion of the Single Unions all over Spain. However, it also marked the onset of the construction of a territorial whole made up of regional units that were supposed to cover the entire state. The difficulties in the process meant that they only partly benefited from the economic boom of World War I, and the economic and political crises of the so-called “leaden years” would leave this unfinished. Thus, by the time of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, only the regional chapters in

the Mediterranean arc remained – the one in Andalusia, which predated even the Catalan Regional of the CNT, the one in Spain’s eastern coast or Valencia and the Balearic Islands – along with the CNT’s Regionals in northern Spain – Galicia, Asturias, the North and Aragon.²⁰ This was a process that resulted from anarcho-syndicalist political decisions and as such was complemented after the proclamation of the Second Republic with the creation of the Central CNT Regional and its counterpart in the Canary Islands.²¹ Even though the start of the Republican period has been studied from other perspectives, it is clear that the anarcho-syndicalist leaders also felt the need to complement the CNT’s territorial presence around the country and to use this means as a specific response to the Constituent Republican Courts: faced with bourgeois democracy, the revolutionary alternative of apolitical workers. Indeed, the Regionals were considered the *andamio* or alternative framework capable of replacing the democratic state in a truly federal sense, far from its coercive power. What is more, union regionalisation was the expression of a future corporate, not democratic, society in which production and distribution would be shifted to the hands of the manual labourers, the organisational base of the CNT.

It is the weight of the “micro” reality in the libertarian movement that carves out a prominent historiographic niche in the studies by the expert in the history of social urban planning, José Luis Oyón, who has posited the existence of historically successive and therefore shifting industrial “red and black belts”. In Barcelona between the World Wars, these industrial belts were based on the active connection between the anarchist “group” and members or between these realities and those of the neighbourhoods or villages on the outskirts of the main urban nucleus.²² However, this aspect is never captured by a historiography that is fond of explaining the anarchist militant realities based on what are regarded as decisive influences from anarchist “patristics” – a discourse grounded on “traditions of thinking compiled in theoretical texts by renowned authors as ‘prophets’ of the movement” – which the anarchist militants used time and time again as a means of repositioning a revolutionary “doctrine” that might cover all the possible or even imagined situations and needs. In effect, the social historiography of anarchism has banished sociological arguments and instead brought strictly ideological and political ones to the fore. However, one thing is that worker self-teaching or anarchist historiography is grounded on “patristics”, and another is that the historiographic explanations of the confederal project must be limited to them. Indeed, historiography’s “patristic” contagion has managed to ignore the fact that the weight of activist protests in the most dilapidated working-class neighbourhoods in the urban centre and small towns near the city in the late 19th and early 20th century would become the bases of Catalan anarcho-syndicalism from the start of Internationalism and especially after the creation of the CNT in 1910.



Figure 3. Tram that was collectivised by the CNT in Barcelona’s Plaça de Catalunya.

The abusive historiographical recourse to “patristics” has preferentially chosen the contributions from the so-called anarchist “prophets” such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and Nettlau, just to cite a few examples, and the programmatic texts issued by the Single Unions have conferred on them a rather conjunctural testimonial role, when in fact they concealed potential meaning on the territorial definition of the union project that sought to replace the state with a kind of corporatism led by the Regional unions of the CNT. Corporativism was grounded upon the organisation of the production and distribution of goods, but also on the cultural aspects of society as a whole.

However, the fact that the most immediate local community, namely the neighbourhood or town, would be the basic scenario of anarchist militancy did not exclude the members from being divided into other territorial levels. Along with this territory, or inserted within it, there were others, such as that of the union, seen wherever the CNT offered its labour representation and protest services. The memoirs of Peirats show that the neighbourhood was the territorial base of his affinity group, even when he stopped living there and had to return there to meet with his colleagues and work on the activities underway. He therefore developed union membership spanning Tor-rassa, Sants and Hostafrancs, and, depending on the time and demands, insurrectional revolutionary activity always took place through this varied met of knowledge that could be simultaneously local and union-based (he seemed to walk most places, particularly when he went for insurrectional actions).

THE PRESS AND ANARCHIST “MUCKRAKING”: COORDINATION AND PERMANENT BILLS OF INDICTMENT

The three main scenarios of the anarcho-syndicalist and/or anarchist “group” militancy – union, cultural affinity and action, which were also directly represented in the decision-making cells or most important committees of the CNT – might be and have often, in fact, been quite far



Figure 4. Buenaventura Durruti, head of the militias.

from the members of the *Sindicatos Únicos* and from the more novice and inexperienced cells of the militancy.²³ However, this was no problem for youth accustomed to long distances: if they walked to get to work, they could also walk to attend the union assemblies held nearby. Even going to Madrid for a national congress might hold fascinating charm regardless of whether they had to represent the organisation.²⁴ Still, the difficulties in coordinating the different realms of libertarian militancy derived from the organic, non-political structures of the movement and went beyond mere physical distance. What is more, there was the traditional anarchist aversion to any kind of centralised organisation, such as the kind preached by the Stalinist and anti-Stalinist communists.

The desire to solve this problem was addressed in several ways. Individually, there was what historian Anna Monjo calls “individual pacts” and “solidarity agreements” which made up the unions’ rank and file as well as the different levels of anarcho-syndicalist militancy.²⁵ The militancy was grounded upon solidarity; “there were no solutions involving compromise, and friends could only be friends unconditionally”.²⁶ For these same reasons, solidarity meant control, and there were “honour trials” which derived from individual agreements, the “flip side of solidarity”, a reality only revealed by checking the internal CNT newsletters and several memoirs and oral testimonies of former militants.²⁷ The lack of knowledge on these trials is surprising because these mechanisms requiring compliance with union agreements or respect for individual relations of personal loyalty led to expulsion from the CNT unions in specific and exceptional cases; in other cases they generated different demands for “explicaciones” (explanations) from such prominent leaders as Durruti and Ascaso who had to clarify their behaviours regarded as not loyal enough. In fact, expulsion from the unions of the “trentistas”, the group of thirty leaders who signed the manifesto of August 1931 could and should be interpreted as a collective “honour trial”. Therefore, there

were not differentiated “anarchisms” but a move to impose a single, heterogeneous anarchism.

Even though the systems of individual control reached even such important anarchists as the aforementioned Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso, and even Joan Garcia Oliver, the lack of a political organisation made coordination among the different cells of anarcho-syndicalist action extraordinarily difficult, a fact that was harshly criticised by communist militants who had belonged to the CNT, such as Joaquim Maurín.²⁸ Since the origins of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, and especially since the resumption of Regional of the Catalan CNT at the Sants Congress in 1918, these difficulties were the ones that conferred priority on consolidating a true network of union spokesmen and newspapers which would contrast in name, scope and territorial presence with those of the socialists and especially raised the question or even doubts as to whether the press and unions were actually interchangeable realities – “six of one, half-dozen of the other”. The truth is that of the almost 900 workers’ newspapers and magazines which Paco Madrid’s thesis cites, the majority were publications that served as the voice of the CNT Regional or Provincial and county and local union organizations. Some depended also on Nacional Industry Federations.²⁹ Even though the magazines and newspapers with anarchist leanings might be the most prestigious and well-known, the fundamental organisational importance of the libertarian press did not reside in the newspapers of the Urales-Gustavo family or even in those of FAI; instead, it resided in these other union newspapers which covered complementary and often overlapping territorial areas, but which did not have guaranteed territorial distribution as broad as that of *La Revista Blanca*. In fact, the anarcho-syndicalist workers’ newspapers constituted a paper network aimed at functioning as coordinators among distant cells and replacing the organisational functions that the party shouldered in a communist and/or Leninist scheme.³⁰

The fact that the 14th of April regime had been labelled a “republic of intellectuals” and “free-thinkers” has not managed to conceal the mobilising capacity of the press in the Republican years and how it managed to far outstrip the limitations of newspapers in the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.³¹ This fact is confirmed by the case of the anarchist and extreme Republican sectors that shared their insurrectionist tactics against the Republican regime, especially the ones nicknamed “wild boars” (*jabalíes* in Spanish), who were famous for feeding off themselves of newspapers and magazines. One Catalan journalist specialized in international politics recently called to mind the words of Ossorio y Gallardo, the conservative politician who declared himself to be “monarchic without the King at the service of the Republic”, when he rebuked the “wild boars” by saying: “You see, books those gentlemen have not read, but newspapers they have indeed.”³² In fact, the press in the so-called mass society was not only associated with the ability to generate consensus but also with the capacity to promote political,

social or cultural movements. Thanks to this conviction, the anti-Republican insurrectionalists tried to transform their newspapers – especially *Solidaridad Obrera*, nicknamed “Soli”, and the Urales’ *El Luchador* in Barcelona or *La Tierra* by Cánovas Cervantes in Madrid – into “paper parliament seats” during the constitutional stage of the Second Republic. But when the anarchist insurrectional attacks of December 1932 and January 1933 failed, they became veritable muckrakers which, just like the American journalists nicknamed thus in the early 20th century, stirred up real political dirt. But also the one which was the usual outcome of the well-known anarchist interpretative scheme based on the correctness of one’s own actions and the repressive thrashing that transformed “politicians” into amoral figures and political swines.

The reality of American muckraking was clearly far away in both time and place (with the intention of slandering them, Roosevelt defined the muckrakers as individuals who spent all day long stirring up muck). However, muckraking had been introduced, at least in the anarchist media, by the figure of Felipe Aláiz, the director of *Solidaridad Obrera* in 1932-1933 who, based on his militant interest in the history of journalism, concentrated on the capacity demonstrated by this group of American journalists and writers to denounce the corruption of the American monopolies and help to spread the worst side of Yankee capitalism from 1903 to 1910. In 1929, Aláiz had also been the translator of *Oil* (1927), a novel by Upton Sinclair published in Spanish by the Catalan publisher Bauzà. The anarchists’ following of this American writer was reinforced around the same time with *Boston* (1928), the novel that Sinclair wrote on Sacco and Vanzetti, the two anarchists executed in Massachusetts in 1927.³³

Despite its breadth and desire for coordination, the shape of the confederal journalistic structure did not ensure anarchist militants the gift of either ubiquity or revolutionary efficacy. Nor did “groupism” ensure the success of revolutionary, anti-Republican insurrectionism. In the winter of 1932, the uprising in Alt Llobregat, which had repercussions outside Catalonia, led to the deportation of the main anarchist leaders to the African colonies. In January 1933, the insurrection covered a wide arc from Catalonia to lower Andalusia, with key insurrectionist cells in the CNT Local Federation of Madrid and the Regional of Levante (Eastern Spain), however mainly with the events in Casas Viejas in Medina Sidonia. The insurrection along the axis of the CNT Regional of Aragon, La Rioja and Navarra and other branches on the 8th of December were prime among the tragic and excessive deeds, although they failed as uprisings. To the contrary, what did achieve was virtual coincidence among the anarchist groups and the circles of friends (*penyes*), groups of shift workers (*quadrilles*) and social gatherings (*tertúlies*) – the most common adult male forms of youth sociability – was the libertarian movement’s ability to hold onto its revolutionary capacity.³⁴ The libertarians allowed their members to keep in touch with the world of major events, yet they also



Figure 5. Joan Garcia Oliver, the soul of the Central Committee of the Anti-Fascist Militias of Catalonia, in August 1936.

fostered a fairly operative and consensual presence along with individual motivations which upheld solidarity and spread the conflict dynamics outward. In strictly historiographic terms, anarchist “groupism” is the factor that answers the questions posed many years ago by Joaquín Romero Maura on the revolutionary capacity that the libertarian movement maintained intact until the uprising of the rebel soldiers in July 1936.³⁵

ANARCHISTS AT WAR: APOLITICAL “GOVERNMENTALISM” AND IN-FIGHTING

The anarchists’ militant and revolutionary capacity was unknown when they got their start in 1936. First of all, the crisis in schisms and membership that the Single Unions had been suffering from since 1932-1933 had seriously diminished them, and the question was whether they actually influenced the movement as a whole and especially whether they fostered a hypothetical redress of anarchist insurrectionism. The call for general elections and the formation of the Popular Front and the Catalan Leftist Front soon erased any doubts. Without rectifying the apoliticism that kept them far from the polls, the leaders spoke out in favour of the release of prisoners and the opening of the CNT unions, which were still closed. What is more, the dispute over the schism was resolved in May 1936 with the return of the Opposition Unions of Catalonia and of the rest of Spain to the CNT, and in particular a steady period of expansion in the Regionals mainly in the Mediterranean arc. However, it was the anarchist response to the uprising of the rebel soldiers on the 19th of July 1936 that definitely clarified the situation. The libertarian movement not only still kept intact what its most prominent members called the “confederal defence”, in this case against the fascist threat, but they soon showed their willingness to dispute all the leadership in the direction of the war with the communists and republicans.



Figure 6. Carles Fontserè. *Llibertat!* (Freedom!) poster from 1936.

On the 31st of July 1936, and later on the 6th of August, two different governments of the Catalan Generalitat were formed with only republican and communist participation. Both acted in parallel to the Committee of Antifascist Militias, and in August they mainly did this with the goal of redressing the violence of the Catalan rear-guard; since that same July and all of August, the so-called “revolutionary repression” against churches and priests, as well as against people regarded as disaffected, was exercised by uncontrolled individuals, by control patrols of anarchists and POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification) members, some of them directly dependent on the Investigation Department of the CNT-FAI itself. The reasons for this situation were personal enmities as well as old rivalries derived from longstanding social clashes. The necessary redress did not come until the 26th of September with the formation of the first government presided over by Tarradellas, which included not only councillors from the Republican parties and PSUC but also representatives of the CNT-FAI and POUM, the sectors most directly involved in the violence and therefore the ones regarded as the most able to stop it. Three councillorships went to the CNT, one to POUM, three to the ERC (Republican Left of Catalonia), one to the UDR (Union of Landholders and Other Farmers of Catalonia) and one to the ACR (Catalan Republican Action). It is also

clear that the inclusion of four anarchist ministers in Largo Caballero’s government of the Republic in November 1936 had a totally different meaning, since Largo himself was involved in the actions of the socialists and the more radical sectors of the UGT. Thus “governmentalism” was ushered in, unheard of for the anarchists who, despite their traditional “apoliticism”, were willing to accept it in order to secure their role and the revolutionary transformations underway since July 1936. In Valencia, long considered Madrid’s strategic rearguard and in this case also the triumphant city in its response to the coup by rebel soldiers, a People’s Executive Committee was created on the 22nd of July with participation by the Republicans and the CNT, as well as the UGT, under the presidency of a loyal military officer. The influence of this committee spread to the entire province, and it had aspirations of real influence over the region as a whole and a prominent role in the collectivisations.³⁶

The link between the uncontrolled individuals or groups and violence in the Catalan rear-guard is not a new issue. It harassed Companys since July 1936; Peiró issued denunciations against the “incontrolados” and demanded immediate redress.³⁷ And many years later, García Oliver denied any involvement of himself and of the *Comité de Milicias Antifeixistes* in the inauspicious doings of the CNT-FAI’s Investigation Committee. This was a committee created to keep watch over the “enemies of the revolution” which was in fact responsible for what García Oliver literally called blind “vengeance”, an opinion which other historiographic and militant testimonials have later debated.³⁸ No one today doubts the existence and actions of revolutionary cleansing groups in the summer of 1936 and even until May 1937, regardless of whether or not they were acting on behalf of the organisation. But what is new is the dimension that the issue has taken on after the recent publication of new studies on different testimonials that expanded on the “expropriating” experience of Durruti’s *Los Solidarios* when they went to the Americas in the 1920s.³⁹ The new examples imply an assignment to their expropriating experiences clear responsibility in the methods of the Catalan action groups that had served as the executors of worker “terrorism” and “revolutionary expropriation” since the “leaden years” of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and even during the Republican years. This has shattered the myth that the main actors in anarchist terrorism were immigrants from Aragon or the east coast of Mediterranean Spain who lived on the outskirts of Barcelona in areas like Torrassa, which was disparagingly nicknamed “little Murcia”.⁴⁰

What is more, it should be established that the formation of Tarradellas’ first government in September 1936 reflected the desire to institutionalise the social transformations underway since the start of the revolution. Undertaking collectivisations based on the revolutionary convictions of the worker’s organisations meant unquestionable recognition of the instruments of workers self-management.⁴¹ However, from the perspective of the

deeds, the collectivisations did not achieve a homogeneous organisation of the productive structures, and their leaders had to deal with a system halfway between “state intervention and communitarian autarchy”, marked by spontaneity and the lack of cohesion that the individual initiatives generated everywhere, in the field and in industry, in Catalonia and in Valencia. Spontaneity and a lack of cohesion were virtually consubstantial with the entire revolutionary process, but also adverse conditions when spearheading a balanced distribution of resources mainly because this distribution had to adapt also the needs of the columns that were struggling with the productive rhythms of the war industries and the consumption of rearguard urban nuclei which first received the onslaught of refugees. Everyone – anarchists, anti-Stalinist communists from POUM and communists from PSUC (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia) – praised the “constructive undertaking” of the revolution; however, everyone also mistrusted the other participants’ political capacity to ensure definitive victory. The Stalinist communists insisted that the lack of anarchist political control culminated in the pillaging and burning of convents or churches and properties, and that they would not help the antifascist war cause.⁴² In turn, the anarchists insisted that the communists’ political manipulation betrayed not only revolution but also the people’s revolutionary aspirations. In short, all the political sectors in the rearguard believed that they were the sole and true defenders of the revolutionary essence, and they thus aspired to lead the revolution alone or at most with the Republicans. While the anarchists and POUM members were in favour of prioritising revolution as an indispensable condition for winning the war, the communists and Republicans were more inclined to win the war first and then bring in the revolutionary transformations at the same time or afterward. This ideological clash was repeated time and again during the war (mainly during the crisis of May 1937); and after the Republican defeat in 1939 it became a debate that revealed its inexhaustible analytical sterility. The unfinished circumvolution was dealt with at times through the contributions of new archives or through the testimonials of unpublished documentary sources which have, nonetheless, never managed to transform its basic perspectives. The truth is that these quarrels have been the source of one of the most prolonged political and historiographic discussions on the history of the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps for this reason, in recent years there have been attempts to explore new perspectives and the so-called “egos history” has researched not only the weight of the interests of different collectives within all the social classes always regarded as rather homogeneous, but also the possible role of individual egoism in the aversion that some workers’ sectors showed in performing their jobs or capturing resources, an attitude that had such harmful consequences for the war economy and the climate of revolutionary ties and fervour.

According to all witnesses, revolutionary enthusiasm diminished with the arrival of the winter of 1936.⁴³ What has thus been revealed is that the revolution did not eradicate “personal” motivations from the rearguard and that, despite the constant entreaties of the most responsible leaders, this situation prevailed above and beyond more reasonable political reasoning.

The efficacy of the language of revolutionary institutionalisation remained in place with the increasing influx of new members in the Single Unions. In Catalonia, they had up to 1,200,000 members in March 1937, a ceiling that the CNT had never before reached, not even in 1919-1920, the so-called “red years” in Catalonia.⁴⁴ In Valencia, the CNT had more than 73,000 members in July 1936, approximately half of whom a few months later were farmers, following the traditional structure of Valencia’s economy.⁴⁵ And on the Balearic Islands, with Mallorca in the hands of the rebels after the Bayo Column’s failure the island became an aircraft carrier for Italy and the organisation only remained in place in Menorca.⁴⁶ This growth was used to ratify the anarchist war policy on both the front and rearguard, but without having to explain that in Catalonia this was one of the consequences of the decree on compulsory unions membership of August 1936. This measure also afforded such important advantages as the access to the popular dining halls which otherwise would be off-limits to those who did not carry a union card, an argument which seemed to justify the arguments of *egos* history.

Anarchist triumphalism was also one of the responses to the growing climate of clashes with the communists. The latter accused the anarchists of incompetence and disorganisation in the political operations of the rearguard, especially on the issue of food supplies, and the anarchists replied with the famous accusation that behind the discontentment of the working classes was the hidden hand of the Stalinist communists.⁴⁷ In fact Joan P[orqueras] Fàbregas – the CNT representative on the Economy Council of Catalonia, the Economy Councilor in September/December 1936 – insisted that the crisis that separated POUM from the Catalan government in December 1936 had been a “family feud that in no way affected them [the anarchists]”, even though “they were obligated to support their local effects”.⁴⁸

More directly derived from the war situation was the attempt to provide the unity of the libertarians by showing off the abbreviation CNT-FAI, together for the first time in the history of the movement. However, this addition was mainly a piece of revolutionary rhetoric. The war and the consequent reality of the two clashing Spains limited the scope of the CNT’s territorial base. Its National Committee had to divide its presence between Madrid and Valencia, and it later moved permanently to Barcelona when the capital of the Republic was transferred to this city. Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, “Marianet”, rose to the National Committee of the CNT in November 1936 and endowed it with a degree of shared prominence that was



Figure 7. Barricade on the Ramblas in Barcelona in front of the Teatre Principal after the “Fets de maig” (Events of May) 1937.

totally new, according to anarchist testimonies: “the Regional Committee of the CNT, the Local and Regional Committees of the FAI, the Peninsular Committee of FAI and the Young Libertarians (JJLL) Committees all met under his presidency”.⁴⁹ The first steps in promoting the Spanish Libertarian Movement – a joint platform of the CNT, FAI and the JJLL – would not come until May 1937, after the anarchists left the Spanish Republican government presided over by the socialist Largo Caballero. However, the organisational change that is still unknown is that the war opened up a process in which FAI adapted to the reality of Catalonia with the inherent rejection of the provinces as the state structure inherited from the monarchic Spanish *Restauración*. In the plenary meeting held by FAI in Valencia in July 1937, there are reports that the Catalans had been organised into new zones that corresponded to the new regions in the Catalan territorial division, and several months later, in October of the same year, this model was adopted, at least in theory, by the *Juventudes Libertarias* of Catalonia.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, not all the anarchists’ problems came from their clashes with rival sectors in the leadership of the revolutionary process. “Governmentalism” opened up the can of worms of the orthodoxy: the solution, at least in the discourse, was the insistence on “sacrifices” – often called “historical conscience” – that the war and particularly revolution demanded to the anarchists.⁵¹ The discourse on responsibility also entailed revolutionary fervour, which remained intact at least until the arrival of the winter of 1936 and the onset of the food and domestic fuel shortages. At the same time the news that the halt of the columns in Aragon had stabilised the front was offset with the news of the bitter defence of Madrid, where Durruti’s death in November 1936 enshrined one of the mythical figures in Spanish anarchism.⁵²

However, there had been problems involving authority and internal fragmentation since much earlier – the spring/summer of 1936. The fascist uprising had enabled the anarchists to prolong the security with which in May 1936 they had codified the reconciliation of libertarian sectors which, at odds since the years of the Primo de Riv-



Figure 8. Frederica Montseny, Minister of Health, at a rally during the Civil War.

era dictatorship, had consummated the rupture of the Single Unions in 1934-1933. However, there was a manifest difficulty in imposing joint revolutionary directions to the multiplicity of revolutionary situations and hegemonomies that the war had prompted and which were translated into new parcels of individual revolutionary power and numerous local revolutionary committees which exercised power discretionally. All of this made Manuel Cruells, a fervently anti-Stalinist defender of Catalan independence and thus an unconditional supporter of the anarchists, to reflect that “there are as many CNTs and FAIs as there are committees that were established”. As we can logically assume, these circumstances generated difficult and unsustainable situations. Therefore, it is obvious that another of the benefits that the anarchists expected to get from “governmentalism” was to redress of their internal fragmentation.

Problems with supplies, the lack of unanimity regarding how to conduct the war and serious difficulties in the Catalan public order rarefied the political situation of the Catalan rearguard in 1937 and created the dynamic that led to the “Fets de Maig” (Events of May), a “minor” Catalan civil war within the larger Spanish Civil War.⁵³ The assault by forces in the public order on the *Telefónica* building controlled by the anarchists was one of the measures adopted to stop the gradual deterioration of the rearguard. The ensuing development of this armed confrontation is quite famous. Also famous is the fact that in October 1936, just a few months earlier, *Columna*

de Ferro, along with Durruti's Column – one of the most prestigious among anarchists – entered the capital of Valencia, thus proving that the most extremist anarchist sectors were willing to exercise blackmail regarding the “governmentalism” to the committees and the most prominent leaders of the CNT-FAI.⁵⁴ As is obvious, there were disputes between those who believed that “governmental” participation was a betrayal to the true meaning of the revolution – the confederal defence committees and control patrols that had survived, as well as heavily radicalised sectors of the CNT-FAI and the *Juventudes Libertarias*, along with groups or anarchist groups such as Jaume Badius's *Los Amigos de Durruti* – and those who, to the contrary, defended it based on earned responsibility: the CNT-FAI committees, *Consellers* in the Generalitat and anarchist ministers of the Republic.

The official anarchist sectors' response to the Events of May was immediate. On the very same day, their calls from the Regional Committees of the CNT and the Catalan FAI demanded that order be maintained and the clashes ended. The next day Garcia Oliver, the Spanish Minister of Justice, and “Marianet”, the Secretary of the CNT, arrived in Barcelona from Valencia, and on the 5th the Minister Frederica Montseny arrived. They all did what they could to remedy the situation. However, once the rearguard had been pacified, the new Republican government presided over by the socialist Negrín was formed without anarchist participation. The anarchists' departure from the Council of the Generalitat was not so immediate. In June 1937, in view of their constant vacillations – as they were then enmeshed in a process of internal revision – Companys decided to do away with them. In 1938, shortly before the Republican defeat, Segundo Blanco, an anarcho-syndicalist who represented the regional chapter of the National Committee in Asturias, occupied the Instruction portfolio in Negrín's Spanish government in a context that was already totally different to the one in 1936.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- [3] José Luis GUTIÉRREZ MOLINA. *El Estado frente a la Anarquía. Los grandes procesos contra el anarquismo español (1883-1982)*. Madrid 2008. By this same author: *Crisis burguesa y unidad obrera: el sindicalismo en Cádiz durante la segunda República*. Madrid 1994; *Casas Viejas, del crimen a la esperanza: María Silva “Libertaria” y Miguel Pérez Córdón, dos vidas unidas por un ideal (1933-1939)*. Córdoba 2008; *La Idea revolucionaria: el anarquismo organizado en Andalucía y Cádiz durante los años treinta*, Móstoles 1993; and finally, perhaps his most successful work: *La tiza, la tinta y la palabra: José Sánchez Rosa, maestro y anarquista andaluz (1864-1936)*, Cádiz 2005.
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- [7] Pere GABRIEL. *El moviment obrer a Mallorca*. Barcelona 1973; and by the same author: “Propagandistas confederales entre el sindicato y el anarquismo. La construcción barcelonesa de la CNT en Cataluña, Aragón, País Valenciano y Baleares”. *Ayer* (Madrid), no. 45 (2002), pp. 107 and forward. An evaluation of the territorial triangle made up of the CNT regional chapters in Catalonia, Valencia and Aragon in Juan Pablo FUSI. “El movimiento obrero en España, 1876-1914”. *Revista de Occidente* (Madrid), no. 131 (1974), pp. 204-237.
- [8] See Eulàlia VEGA. *Anarquistas y sindicalistas durante la Segunda República. La CNT y los Sindicatos de Oposición en el País Valenciano*. Valencia 1987, pp. 63 and forward.
- [9] The critical approaches to the history of the workers' movement used then are implicit in Juan Pablo FUSI. “El movimiento obrero en España...”, *op. cit.*, and in the thesis published by the same author: *Política obrera en el País Vasco, 1880-1923*. Madrid 1975. Also in his article “Algunas publicaciones recientes sobre la historia del movimiento obrero”. *Revista de Occidente* (Madrid), no. 123 (1973), pp. 358-368. From an especially critical perspective on communist historiography: Miquel IZARD. “Orígenes del movimiento obrero en España”. In: *Estudios sobre Historia de España. Obra homenaje a Manuel Tuñón de Lara*. Vol. I. Madrid 1981, especially pp. 295-297. And referring to Spain as a whole: José ÁLVAREZ JUNCO and Manuel PÉREZ LEDESMA. “Por una nueva ruptura en la historia del Movimiento Obrero”. *El País*, no. 137, 6-7-1982, and by the same authors, “Historia del movimiento obrero. ¿Una segunda ruptura?”. *Revista de Occidente*, no. 12 (1982), pp. 18-41.
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- [13] Eulàlia VEGA and Susanna TAVERA. "L'afiliació a la CRT de Catalunya...", *op. cit.*
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- [23] Josep PEIRATS. *De mi paso por la vida. Memorias*. Selection, editing and notes by Susanna Tavera and Gerard Pedret, prologue by Enric Ucelay-Da Cal. Barcelona 2009, especially chapters 2 and 4.
- [24] A very vivid narration of the "excursion" to attend the congress in June 1931 can be found in Adolfo BUESO, *Recuerdos de un cenetista*. Vol. II. *De la Segunda República al final de la Guerra Civil*. Barcelona 1978, pp. 25 and forward.
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