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The People Armed and the People's Army

A film review of Land and Freedom

Rony Quickenden

18 February 1999

"The civil war was never a romantic story. The idea that war has something romantic about it also serves a political function and obscures or covers up that which has occurred in reality."

Ken Loach

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During the 15 years or so that my interest in the Spanish Revolution has been developing, I often dreamt of seeing a full cinematic treatment of the hopes and achievements of the revolution and the tragedy of its defeat : a film which would tell with a human voice the unknown stories of people who were not afraid to fight and carry through that which we could only theorise about to make their new society. Land and Freedom may not quite be that film.but it comes close indeed.

Ken Loach is known for his harshly realistic works of social criticism, having established his reputation with the acclaimed and controversial "Kathy Come Home,""Kes," and "Raining Stones." He has the kind of political and technical perspectives

demanding by a subject with themes as complex yet universal as the Spanish Civil War. In this film he succeeds in bringing to bear a previously underplayed element in his work ; human warmth and joy. For this is not a bleak exposition of political theory, nor a war film of Hollywood heroics but an exploration of some of the achievements and failings of the revolution through the experiences of a mixed group of men and women in a militia section.

Telling the story as a sequence of long flashbacks a young girl discovers her deceased grandfathers past while going through his belongings, bringing the issues into the here and now, reminding us of how many people of the 'older' generation have their own extraordinary stories left untold. Loach brings to the subject several original and effective film making techniques. Above all he uses players who are largely unknown, some of whom are indeed not professional actors at all. He brings extra freshness by encouraging them to improvise as much as possible with a minimum of formal direction, and furthermore insisted on shooting the scenes chronologically, enhancing the actors commitment to their character, unaware of the next turn in the story. He has also used players whose regional and national backgrounds match those of their characters, so that the dialogue of English, American English, Castilian, Catalan, French, and German is delivered as naturally as possible. All of this works superbly well for me, and reaches a peak of realism in the debate scene where peasants and militia discuss collectivising the newly acquired land they have just liberated. This could easily have been shot as a dry conflict of theories or as a traditional Hollywood clash of egos, but instead we feel that these people really mean what they are saying, in all their awkwardness and embarrassment. In this context the two leads Ian Hart and Rosana Pastor add greatly by being suitably low key and creditably 'ordinary,' but also being capable of showing great strength and determination.

cult to maintain in the face of the escalating conflict and mismanagement behind the lines as the war at the front became a sloggish match between conscripted armies. Above all the nature of the revolution was being altered as the earliest gains were eroded at first insidiously and then quite openly, by a range of conservative elements in the republican camp. The successes promised if the CNT- FAI submitted to militarisation and central control were as illusory in the military and economic field : Communist efficiency was not particularly efficient after all. In these cases the film is sympathetic with a vaguely antiauthoritarian position, but stops short of explaining the CNTFAI role, which would have been a real innovation, a real contribution. Loach himself has said that in the making of the film Trotsky's influence was indispensable, but that of the anarchists and libertarian communists merely amount to 'other influence.'

"Land and Freedom" has attracted a good deal of attention in Spain itself, some ex POUM members even considering a relaunch of their party. Speaking with Spanish people it is noticeable that the Franco years and the subsequent move towards consumerism, have succeeded in leaving young people with only a limited interest in, or knowledge of the period. Indeed the actors/actresses in the film frankly admitted that the events portrayed in the film were new to them.

The Spanish Revolution and Civil War can be seen as a political laboratory, in which one can glimpse the kind of world that each of the political groupings were working towards. "Land and Freedom" spotlights events which form some of the crucial lessons of the period, and in an accessible way raises some issues which are of deep significance to the question of how human beings organise themselves and their world, and for that alone it is extremely welcome.

To say all this is not to give the impression that the film is free of faults or compromises. It seems that in the making a major consideration was how much knowledge could be assumed on the part of the audience. Plainly very little, but it seems reasonable to suppose that most viewers would either have read or heard of Orwells 'Homage to Catalonia '. It is perhaps this line of thought which led to the central reliance on the POUM as the way of exploring the non — Stalinist revolution in the film (Loach himself is a Trotskyist and although the POUM had formally split from Trotsky, this may also serve to explain the POUM's attraction for Loach). Furthermore, the POUM can be described as a ' workers party against Stalin' as the script says, whereas focusing on the much larger and more relevant CNT-FAI would necessitate much usage of the dread term 'Anarchist.'

Both Orwell and Loach give sympathetic mentions to the Anarchists but neither give them the space which their numbers, power, achievements, and opposition to Stalinism would require. Technically, Loach blurs the line, giving the POUM red and black bandanas and using CNT songs in the soundtrack, but no attempt is really made to show what Anarchism or the POUM brand of Marxism really involves. However, to the films credit, the day to day realities of local decision making, egalitarian organisation, the position of Women and to some extent collectivisation are touched on, and there examples give the casual viewer a much more important lesson in what was achieved than dry analysis of the theoretical agendas of each group.

Some other compromises in the film have been picked upon as absurdities by some reviewers. The compression of time, the very limited geographical scope, and the difficulties experienced while crossing into Spain when the border was still open, have all received unfavourable mentions in the press. But there are small details which it has been necessary to compromise on in order to show a variety of experiences

and keep within a very low budget. Similarly troops of so many nations would not all have appeared in the same section, especially in a POUM militia unit. But the point here is to try and show the international dimension of the struggle (though its overridingly Spanish character is thankfully, recognised) and to convey the message of solidarity.

Having heard that the film contained very innovative and realistic combat sequences, I must say I found these a little disappointing. It is true that the improvised low tech and rather chaotic nature of the fighting was captured, along with some convincing loud explosions. However, the fear, confusion and tunnel vision experienced in combat was not realised, and the storming of a nationalist held village was filmed in a very traditional way. Using a hand held camera would have helped to convey something of the confusion and limited view open to the combatants as can be seen in recent news footage (Bosnia/Chechnaya). Loach used the hand held camera to give a more intimate feel to Blancas grief scene, so it would not have been out of place in the preceding combat sequences.

Politically, the central theme of the film is the betrayal of the revolution by the communist party and the crisis of belief which this induced. In 1936 the Communist party was a very small, even insignificant party which came to prominence due to the increasing importance of Soviet material, by recruiting disaffected bourgeois elements and by virtue of its reputation for discipline and efficiency. In fact, their agenda was fundamentally reactionary, as they fought to secure the privileges of private property and reverse the process of spreading collectivisation which the CNT-FAI, the most significant working class organisation in 1936 was promoting. It was important for the USSR to show that their form of Marxism was the only true revolutionary path, and so genuine libertarian successes could not be tolerated.

In this sense publicising the reality of the role of the Communist party in Spain was an important weapon for libertar-

ians, as the party did everything possible to distract attention from these events. Similarly, the Western democracies did not want their workers to be infected by the example of a successful revolution in Spain, with the result not only of the non intervention committee, but also that the revolutionary dimension of the civil war and the Communist reaction to it being very much downplayed. The establishment has preferred a view of history in which the extremists of Fascism and Communism fought each other in a far off foreign land. It is in this context that Loach's film should be seen, helping in some way to tell stories which have for too long been obscured or distorted by established interests.

In Land and freedom the conflict between the libertarians and authoritarians is mainly illustrated by the militarisation of the militias and the fighting known as the May days. These were struggles of great significance for the direction of the revolution in Spain and the workers movement in general. Similar issues had been fought out in Russia, the Ukraine, Germany and elsewhere in the period after WW1, but the more general divergence between these two strands of political thought, organisation and action are timeless themes.

In Spain, the struggle did not end with the 'Maydays,' Anarchist collectives continued to resist being brought under state or private control for years to come : many individuals were persecuted or killed for their libertarian work, for example the famous Italian Anarchist Camille Berneri. The conflict had other less clear aspects, such as the participation in the government of prominent Anarchists, compromising in order to avoid being completely sidelined by the increasingly powerful state apparatus. These themes are either not mentioned or merely hinted at in the film.

Overall, it is clear that ordinary people, only moderately organised and poorly armed made enormous social and military strides in the initial period following the Generals' rising. But the revolutionary spirit which drove the resistance was diffi-