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A critique of Roi Ferreiro's critique of Andrés Devesa's essay on the Spanish civil war and revolution, in which Guillamón derides Ferreiro for idealism and the use of elitist jargon, and for his failure to "perceive that the battle for revolutionary history is not just a bookish, theoretical and abstract question, but another battlefield in the class war between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat". Published in *Balance*, Cuaderno no. 34. Translated from the Spanish original in November 2013.

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## The theorization of historical experiences

Agustin Guillamón

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*History is one more battlefield among the many that exist in the class war. We must learn the lessons of the defeats of the proletariat, because they are the milestones of victory.*

History is one more battlefield among the many that exist in the class struggle. It is not just a matter of recovering the memory of the class struggles of the past, but also of fighting for history from the revolutionary point of view, that is, from the point of view of the defense of the historical interests of the proletariat, which can be nothing else than that of the **THEORIZATION** of the historical experiences of the international workers movement. Neither the economy, nor literature, nor cinema, nor politics, nor history, nor any other field of culture is neutral, nor can any of them ever be neutral, in a society that is divided into classes, because they comprise a ruthless battlefield.

We are speaking of the understanding and the defense of the historical interests of the proletariat, here and in Beijing, in New York, and in Senegal, everywhere. We are speaking of the historical interests of the proletariat of today, of yesterday and of the future,

until its extinction as a class. We are speaking of **our** (proletarian) history: **real and materialist**; as opposed to **their** (bourgeois) history: falsified and idealist.

It is not **only** about recovering the memory of those who were defeated in the civil war, nor is it just about paying homage to those who were victims of repression under Francoism, nor is it a matter of hanging plaques or building monuments, or of establishing places for meditation or memory, or even of refuting the ideological aberrations of the right (of the neo-Francoist school of historiography, or the Catalanist historiography of Miquel Mir), or fabricating constructs rationalizing the re-established democracy, as practiced by the left (the liberal type of historiography of Ángel Viñas, or the neo-Stalinist variety of Ferran Gallego). Nor is it about manufacturing proletarian supermen or idols, or of recording the court history of kings and nobles, overlooking the peasant rebellions; in the current version of the latter model, in the form of a comic book depicting the struggles of **good and heroic working class leaders** against **evil traitorous bureaucrats**, characterized by the absolute absence of the dull-witted and amorphous masses. Much more important than all these things is the fact that, in the end, they can all be summarized as justifying the murders committed in the war of extermination waged by the Francoists; or else in the sanctification and eulogization of the “glorious, heroic and terrible” defeat of the anti-fascists; and always, in the eulogy delivered concerning the repression of the revolutionaries, even if it is always more effective and the usual practice to underestimate or even deny their existence.

It is not a matter of worshipping old myths, whether they are named Nin or Durruti, or of raising altars where new heroes can be sanctified, whether Balius or Saint-somebody-or-another. It is more important to point out the mistakes they made, or to uncover their defects, which were those of the revolutionary movement of their time. The myth of Nin or Durruti is of no use to us at all, whereas their shortcomings and mistakes are useful, because they

letariat, which was undertaken in their times by Rosa Luxemburg, Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, Amadeo Bordiga, the editors of *Bilan*, Josep Rebull and Munis, among others. **NONE** of them was a historian; **ALL** of them were revolutionary militants who did not hesitate to **study and theorize the historical experiences of the revolutionary proletariat**, because for them the battle for revolutionary history was a fundamental battle of the class war. Because it was not just a matter of rationally writing history, based on the reality of the class struggle and on concrete human experiences, but also, and above all, it was about grasping, perfecting, extending, defending and consolidating revolutionary theory.

“There is a flagrant contradiction between the function of recuperation of historical memory, and the profession of the servants of Official History, who need to forget and erase the existence in the past, and therefore its possible existence in the future, of a fearsome mass revolutionary workers movement. This contradiction between the function and the profession is resolved by way of ignoring that which they know or should know; and this transforms them into fools. And for this same reason Official History is characterized by an absolute incapacity for rigor, objectivity and a comprehensive viewpoint. It is necessarily partial, and cannot adopt any other perspective than the class perspective of the bourgeoisie. It is necessarily exclusionary, and excludes the past, the future and the present of the working class. Official Sociology insists on trying to convince us that the working class no longer exists, nor does the class struggle; Official History has the job of convincing us that it never existed. A perpetual, complaisant and acritical present banalizes the past and destroys historical consciousness.

“The historians of the bourgeoisie have to rewrite the past, just as Big Brother did repeatedly. They need to conceal the fact that the Civil War was a class struggle. Whoever controls the present, controls the past; and whoever controls the past, decides the future. Official History is the history of the bourgeoisie, and today it has the mission of granting mythic status to nationalism, liberal democracy and the market economy, in order to convince us that they are eternal, immutable and insurmountable.”

Meanwhile, the battle for history today takes place through the theorization of the historical experiences of the international pro-

teach us something. The myths of yesterday are the chains of today; to reveal their errors allows us to advance beyond the point where they failed.

To think about or to write history is as important and as simple as to draw the lessons of the Spanish War, which pertain to the revolutionary alternative of the proletariat, in 1936. To put it another way, it is a matter of *theorizing the historical experiences of the proletariat*. Why? Because the proletariat can only learn from its own experience and its own struggles, since it has no other school than the historical laboratory. Marxism is nothing else than that: the theorization of the historical experiences of the proletariat, and of its existence as an exploited class in capitalism. Although it is possible that some people may think that Marxism is the sacred writings of a brilliant individual who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than his method of analysis.

#### **What lessons can we learn from the civil war?**

1. The capitalist state, both in its democratic as well as its fascist form, must be destroyed. The proletariat cannot make any deals with the republican (or democratic) bourgeoisie in order to defeat the fascist bourgeoisie, because such a deal **already** implies the defeat of the revolutionary alternative, and the renunciation of the revolutionary program of the proletariat (and of the proletariat's own methods of struggle), in order to adopt the program of anti-fascist unity with the democratic bourgeoisie, for the purpose of winning the war against fascism.
2. The revolutionary program of the proletariat consists in the internationalization of the revolution, the socialization of the economy, the establishment of solid foundations for the suppression of value and wage labor on a world scale, control over the war and the working class militias by the proletariat, the councilist organization of society and the dictatorship of

the proletariat over the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois social layers, in order to crush the inevitable armed response of the counterrevolution. The principal theoretical achievement of The Friends of Durruti was to affirm the **totalitarian** nature of the proletarian revolution. It is totalitarian, that is, **total**, because it must take place in every domain: social, economic, political, cultural ... and in every country, abolishing all national borders; and it is also **authoritarian**, because it militarily confronts the class enemy.

3. The absence of a party capable of defending the historical program of the proletariat was decisive, because it allowed all the working class organizations to assume the bourgeois program of anti-fascist unity (the sacred union of the working class with the democratic and republican bourgeoisie), with the exclusive goal of winning the war against fascism. The revolutionary vanguards that did arise, did so too late and ineffectively, and were crushed in their attempt, which was only vaguely outlined, to present a revolutionary **alternative**, capable of breaking with the bourgeois **option** of choosing between fascism and anti-fascism.

Ferreiro's critique of Devesa<sup>1</sup> is therefore very interesting with regard to certain fundamental issues (leadership), but on some occasions takes a turn towards what we can only call idealist terrains. Furthermore, we confess we cannot understand this: what are we to make of the part where he says that authority "is a social expression of the prevailing subjectivity as a whole, and of its process of

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<sup>1</sup> Andrés Devesa's article, "España, 1936. El fantasma de la Revolución conjurado", can be found at the blog: [fcuatrocincouno.blogspot.com](http://fcuatrocincouno.blogspot.com); click on the chronological entry for "mayo 2006". For an English translation, see: [libcom.org](http://libcom.org).

Roi Ferreiro's critique of Devesa's article, entitled "Apuntes críticos al texto 'España, 1936. El fantasma de la Revolución conjurado' de Andrés Devesa", can be found (in November 2013) online at: [proyectocai.zymichost.com](http://proyectocai.zymichost.com). For an English translation, see: [libcom.org](http://libcom.org).

on the extinction of wage labor, the law of value, national borders, and all states along with their armies and police. And all of this only amounts to the contemporary implementation and depiction of what Marx had **already** written in *The German Ideology*: "the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." That is, whoever possesses economic power dictates **their** history, which is accordingly falsified and idealized, and is always the official and predominant history. This **official bourgeois history** is believed to be and claims to be, furthermore, the only valid history, and thus displays its elitist professional scorn and ignorance concerning the history of the proletariat. Especially its **professional ignorance**, with certain rare exceptions.

As the "**Manifiesto Combate por la historia**" said ten years ago:

"With the ignorance, omission or minimization of the proletarian and revolutionary connotations that characterized the period of the republic and the civil war, Official History manages to turn the whole thing upside down, in accordance with the task imposed by its principal popes of re-writing everything, and thus to consummate the expropriation of historical memory, as one more act of the general expropriation of the working class. Thus, in the final accounting, it is historiography that writes History. If, in the process of the disappearance of the generation that lived during the war, the books and manuals of Official History ignore the existence of a magnificent anarchist and revolutionary movement, within ten years they will dare to say that this movement **did not exist**. The mandarins firmly believe that what **they** did not write about **never** existed: if history questions the present, they deny it.

battles, class consciousness is created, and the process of transformation of the class into a party (antagonistic to the party of capital) is furthered.

Therefore, **Devesa's analysis** is a good critique of official history and how it has mystified the revolutionary process in Spain in 1936, above all by way of the fascism-democracy dialectic. **Ferreiro's criticisms of Devesa** are pertinent and necessary, especially with regard to Devesa's "reductionist" focus on "leadership", which erroneously explains the revolutionary failure by the "betrayal" of the leaders. Ferreiro's analysis, however, does not perceive that the battle for revolutionary history is not just a bookish, theoretical and abstract question, but another battlefield in the class war between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

**Existence precedes consciousness. Without a theorization of the historical experiences of the proletariat there is no revolutionary theory**, nor any theoretical advance. Between theory and practice there is a lapse of time, as long as that of a counter-revolutionary stage that lasts decades, but this does not imply an absolute and irremediable separation between theory and practice. Revolutionary Marxism is a method of analysis of social and historical reality that transforms the arms of critique into the critique of arms. **REVOLUTIONARY THEORIES PROVE THEIR VALIDITY IN THE HISTORICAL LABORATORY.** The party of the proletariat is not just a program, but its defense by individuals, motivated by **revolutionary necessity and passion**, organized in vanguards or groups that advocate different tactics.

Perhaps Devesa and Ferreiro could accept that the history of the workers movement in Spain today is a battle against the official history of the liberal-Stalinist mandarin, or the neo-Francoist commercial demand. This battle for history will only end when classes have disappeared, after the victory of the proletariat, which will then coalesce with humanity. What began as a **battle for the history** of the proletariat, can only culminate as the **history of the battle** for communism and the abolition of all classes, contingent

formation by way of psycho-social interaction, by way of praxis"? No one understands this, it seems to have been written in Sanskrit. And if it does say what I think it says, it is a tautology.

Nor do I understand what he means by "the historical constitution of proletarian subjectivity". What does he mean when he says that "our problem is not '*the domestication of memory*' (Devesa), but the domestication of our spirits"? I do not understand this enthusiasm for the use of the word "domestication", whether affecting the memory or the spirit. What we are dealing with here (from the point of view of a materialist and historical worldview) is a single class war, which can be fought on diverse battlefields, among which we have to choose, among so many choices, without renouncing any of them, to fight on the battlefield of the history of the revolutionary working class movement. I do not understand this business about domestication, which sounds like things that were done during the Neolithic era: the domestication of the dog, of the horse, of the cow, of the donkey, etc. Domestications of an idealist type, whether of the memory or the mind, are totally incomprehensible and alien (with the permission of Dietzgen) for a materialist atheist, which is how Ferreiro identifies himself.

Roi digresses concerning a fundamental question, which he poses with clarity, but which he does not answer correctly. This question is that of class consciousness and the constitution of the class as a party. Ferreiro says, in his own variety of modernist and elitist jargon: "... the revolutionary consciousness that develops in this struggle for an authentic revolutionary movement ... begins with a minority.... Thus, the need and the problem arise of how to constitute this minority as a force capable of overcoming this self-alienation of the masses and therefore also the problem of how to organize it. Consequently, between the recognition of the problem and its resolution an entire process of the development of consciousness intervenes, both in its aspect of recognition of the prevailing reality as well as in its aspect as a creative projection of subjective needs, creating forms of activity that are consistent

with their conscious goals. And here lies a key problem: this development cannot be undertaken during the revolutionary high point without becoming an easy target for the counterrevolutionary forces. There is not time, then, for this maturation (note the case of The Friends of Durruti, to give one example), even assuming that the evolution of subjectivity would have proceeded far enough to take this step.” There can be no doubt that this minority that Ferreiro is talking about is what Marxist theory calls “the organization of the revolutionaries” or “the party”. And Ferreiro is undoubtedly correct in his critiques of Devesa, but not in his own conclusions.

In reality, class consciousness is a product of the class struggle, determined by the antagonism of material interests, and the development of this consciousness proceeds in parallel with that of the class struggle. The party (or more precisely, the various parties, groups or vanguards of the party of the proletariat) cannot arise in a counterrevolutionary period. The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing. The party is a dialectical product of the development of class consciousness and therefore an active factor in this process. The party arises as a necessity in the development of class consciousness. Although the party and the class are related organically, and are complementary, they are not identical, and must not be confused with each other. The party is the highest expression of the consciousness of the proletariat, in both its historical and political dimensions. The party of the proletariat is **only** one part of the class, and precisely that part which carries out the clearest analysis of the situation. Or, expressed in even simpler terms: the party is nothing but the necessary organization of the revolutionaries; and for that very reason, in a revolutionary situation different organizations, tendencies or affinity groups of the proletariat appear, which in their totality constitute the party of the proletariat, in **antagonistic** struggle against the party of capital and the state (which is also constituted by different groups and organizations).

part of class consciousness itself, and is defined as the theorization of the historical experiences of the proletariat.

The proletariat, in order to be victorious, needs an ever-higher level of correct consciousness of reality and its process of becoming. Only with a **critical consciousness**, elaborated in the rigorous study of the experiences of past struggles, can the proletariat advance towards its goals. The commemoration of the deaths of its militants, or of the massacres suffered by the proletariat, can never be, for revolutionaries, a religious act, or one of homage and individualist memory. **THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO LEARN THE LESSONS OF THE BLOODY DEFEATS OF THE PROLETARIAT, BECAUSE THESE DEFEATS ARE THE MILESTONES OF VICTORY.**

The proletariat is thrown into the class struggle due to its very nature as a class of exploited wage laborers, without the need for anyone to teach it anything; the proletariat fights because it needs to survive. When the proletariat constitutes itself as a party, confronting the party of capital, it needs to assimilate the experiences of the class struggle, in order to draw consciousness from them, and obtain strength from historical conquests, both practical as well as theoretical, and overcome the inevitable errors, critically correct the mistakes committed, reinforce its political positions by way of the awareness of its insufficiencies and shortcomings and complete its program; and finally, to resolve the unresolved problems of the moment: it needs to learn the lessons that history itself teaches us. And this education can only take place in the practice of the class struggle of the various affinity groups and/or formal parties.

There are no separate and distinct economic or political struggles, in their own watertight compartments. Every economic struggle is at the same time, in today’s capitalist society, a political struggle, and also a struggle for class identity. The critique of political economy, as well as the critique of official history, the critical analysis of the present, sabotage and a wildcat strike, are battles in the same class war. In all of them, and in each particular one of these

Ferreiro the revolution failed in 1936 because there was no party, which is not entirely correct, because the party itself is not an undetermined element. The revolution failed in Spain in 1936 because the antagonism between the Iberian proletariat and bourgeoisie was not intense and conscious enough during the 1920s and 1930s to **cause the emergence** of the party of the proletarian revolution and to make possible the councilist organization of society. The weak revolutionary minorities that did arise, did so too late and ineffectively; the committee-governing bodies were incapable of coordinating their efforts and presenting themselves as a valid revolutionary alternative. On the other hand, this weakness of the Spanish proletariat was due to the fact that the world revolutionary process, which had begun in 1905, had already been defeated internationally in the 1920s.

Ferreiro tells us that “it is not a matter of *knowing* history, but of *making* history”, and once again says that theory and practice must not be separated. But when Ferreiro says that it is not a matter of knowing history, but of making it, he is separating theory from practice. Who *makes* history for the current generations, other than those who *write* it? Ferreiro is speaking, of course, of **active engagement** in history, **separating action from theory**. Ferreiro does not understand that knowing, disseminating and extending the knowledge of revolutionary history, refuting the fallacies and distortions that are written by bourgeois historiography, revealing the **authentic** history of the class struggle, writing from the point of view of the revolutionary proletariat, is already in itself a form of combat for history. It is a battle that forms part of the class struggle, like any wildcat strike, or *The Communist Manifesto*, the occupation of the factories, a revolutionary insurrection, or *Capital*. The proletariat, in order to appropriate its past, must combat the Stalinist, Catalanist, liberal and neo-Francoist views. The proletarian battle to know its own history is one battle, among many others, in the ongoing class war. It is not purely theoretical, or abstract or banal, because it forms

The fundamental difference between the political choices of **materialists and idealists** resides in their differing conceptions of the party and its functions. **For the materialists the party is an active factor in history, but it is also the product of history** (Marx). **For the idealists** the party is an active factor for the transformation of society and history, practically without any connection to the actual social and historical situation; **the party is above all else the will of its militants** (Trotsky). Hence the essential determinism of the materialists and the voluntarism of the idealists.

In *The German Ideology* communism is defined as “*the real movement that overturns the existing state of affairs*”; and revolutionary consciousness is situated in the existence of a revolutionary class, as a historical consequence of the exploitation of the proletariat in capitalism. The continuity of these ideas with the “Theses on Feuerbach”, in which it is said that “**it is essential to educate the educator himself**”, is also evident. In both works Marx had already rejected the “saviors” of the proletariat, all those who thought that communist and revolutionary consciousness is brought to the humble workers from outside the working class, by intellectuals and heroes that no one needs. In the best cases, the heroes are the fruit of the weaknesses, or the defeat, of the working class; the exaltation or sanctification of proletarian heroes only leads to the strengthening and consolidation of the errors and weak points of the workers movement, when what is urgent and essential is to identify these errors and weaknesses, study them, and eradicate them.

We therefore reject the messianism of the party, and deny it possesses a **leadership** role that has always led to **the substitution of the party for the class**. We emphasize the eminently **pedagogical, exemplary, historical, anonymous and universal** character of the party, which arises from within the proletariat, and which must assume, among other missions, the task of theorizing the revolutionary experiences of the class struggle, whether past or present.

The force of this consciousness, within the proletariat, is continually obstructed by the weight of the ideologies of the ruling class, which in all cultural fields, including that of history, has at its disposal all the resources of the state, of the universities and research institutes, of the press and communications media, of the publishing industry, of the career intellectuals, of the networks of publicity and distribution, bookstores, etc., **in order to impose, in the case of historiography, the official version of history as the only “authentic” history.** This constitutes an attempt to bring about a situation in which, **if historiography ignores something, then it is as if it neither exists nor has ever existed.** If academic historiography denies the existence of a revolutionary situation in Spain in 1936, a time will come, when the generation that lived during the civil war has died, when this will be an unappealable dogma, with the perverse objective of covering up the existence of an important episode of the revolutionary history of the proletariat. The same thing happens in all other ideological and cultural fields. In Spain there are two schools of bourgeois historiography that stand opposed to each other, but whose basic ideas coincide, that is, in their defense of the state and capitalist society. They are the neo-Francoist and neo-Stalinist-liberal schools of historiography. One could even further break down the study of this phenomenon into sub-categories such as Catalanist or Republican, always with due respect to the state and capitalist society. Some, the Stalinists and liberals, choose to defend democracy; others, such as the neo-Francoists, also make the same choice, but also justify the need for and historical value of Francoism. Both of them, in the case of grave danger to the democratic or state foundations, would advocate the resort to totalitarianism and repression of the proletariat, and are united in a single school of historiography of the **“democratic ideology, in defense of capitalism”**.

There will, of course, be differences with regard to nuances; and some, such as the liberal-Stalinists, republicans or social democrats would propose selective and temporary repressive measures; while

others, the neo-Francoists and fascists, for example, would impose permanent and generalized repressive measures. Both factions of capitalism, however, both the left as well as the right, coincide in their fundamental **democratic and counterrevolutionary** defense of the capitalist system, by way of the brutal repression of the revolutionary workers movement. It is furthermore quite possible that, in a not-so-distant future, as a result of unemployment and economic depression, and in response to this profound economic, political and social crisis, there will be a regime change of a republican character in which all the defenders of capitalism will take part, once the obsolete differences between Francoists and anti-Francoists have been overcome, due to the passage of time since the era of the civil war and the Francoist dictatorship, for the common goal of crushing the revolutionaries. This deviation of the **anti-capitalist** struggles of the proletariat into the channels of the **anti-monarchical** (1931), **anti-fascist** (1936), or **anti-Francoist** (1976) struggles is a frequently utilized resource, which often has a certain amount of effectiveness at first, at least in the ideological domain. The left and right of capital always complement one another, like a hammer and an anvil, to crush the proletariat.

The constitution of the proletariat as a class is a historical process of struggles, in which the proletariat can appear as a reserve force for the revolutionary bourgeoisie; or it can be a force for progress, in the struggle against the socio-political forces of feudalism; but it can also arise as a force that aims at the destruction of the bourgeois state, constructing its own organs of working class power; the Soviets in Russia (1905 and 1917), the councils in Germany (1919–1920) and the committee-governing bodies of Spain (1936–1937).

The disappearance of the proletariat in the classless society can only be a result of its constitution as a ruling class; but this will always be the optimistic hypothesis, that is often paired with the pessimistic hypothesis and a disastrous outcome: barbarism.

The history of the constitution of the class as party is the history of the formal parties, groups and vanguards of the proletariat. For