

Living Anarchism

José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-syndicalist Movement

Chris Ealham

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Selected List of Acronyms

- CC. OO. Comisiones Obreras / Workers' Commissions
- CEAP Comisión de Encuesta, Archivo y Propaganda / Enquiry, Archives, and Propaganda Commission
- CGT Confederación General del Trabajo / General Confederation of Labour
- CNT Confederación Nacional del Trabajo / National Confederation of Labour
- CCMA Comité Central de Milicias Antifeixistes / Central Committee of Anti- Fascist Militias
- ETA Euskadi Ta Askatasuna / Basque Homeland and Freedom
- FAI Federación Anarquista Ibérica / Iberian Anarchist Federation
- FIJL Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias / Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth
- GAAR Groupes anarchistes d'action révolutionnaire / Revolutionary Action Anarchist Groups
- JARE Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles / Board of Aid to the Spanish Republicans
- JJ. LL. Juventudes Libertarias / Libertarian Youth
- MLE-CNT (Consejo General del) Movimiento Libertario Español-CNT / (General Council of the) Spanish Libertarian Movement-CNT
- PCE Partido Comunista de España / Communist Party of Spain
- POUM Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista / Marxist Unification Workers' Party
- PSOE Partido Socialista Obrero Español / Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
- PSUC Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya / Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia
- SEGUEF Sociedad de Estudios sobre la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo / Society for the Study of the Civil War and Francoism
- SERE Servicio de Evacuación de Refugiados Españoles / Evacuation Service of Spanish Refugees
- UGT Unión General de Trabajadores / General Union of Workers

Dedication

For four autodidacts: Gracia Ventura, a living example of human warmth; and Ornette Coleman, Charlie Mingus, and Gil Scott-Heron, musical geniuses and, in their different ways, revolutionaries.

Introduction

There are men who struggle for a day and they are good.
There are men who struggle for a year and they are better.
There are men who struggle many years, and they are better still.
But there are those who struggle all their lives:
These are the indispensable ones.

—Bertolt Brecht

This is a study of the life of José Peirats, of the human foundations of the anarchist movement, and of its twentieth-century history. It is then a study of the affective ties of kinship, friendship, and community that cemented this movement, the most powerful of its type in the world. It charts how the anarchists put into practice their core values of solidarity and mutual aid and the challenges they faced before and during the Second Republic, how they attempted the revolutionary transformation of society during the civil war, and how their plans were disrupted by exile during the dark night of Francoist repression; and, later, how they struggled to adjust to the new circumstances brought forth by the democratic dawn of the 1970s. Therefore, as well as the life history of an individual, this is a biography of a collective agent – the working class into which Peirats was born; it is a case study of the profound osmosis between the most radical section of the working class and the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT – National Confederation of Labour), a linkage that ensured that the life histories of *cenetistas* were inseparable from the organisational history of their trade union.

For Peirats's generation, the 'Generation of '36', who rose up against the injustices of Spanish society, the contours and vicissitudes of their lives were inextricably bound up with their activism. For this reason, anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist history is inseparable from Peirats's biography – his life was intimately and enduringly tied to his revolutionary stance, to the commitments that flowed from his subversive thought, and to the conflicts into which he was drawn. As Peirats noted in a letter to a comrade in 1970, at the age of sixty-two: 'I've done almost everything in the CNT: I've organised strikes, organised workers, spoken in assemblies, meetings, and given conferences, written articles, attended congresses, used pistols, and, sometimes, explosives; I've been in jail and collected lawsuits, mainly for libellous press articles [*delitos de imprenta*]. I know what it means to be naked and take a beating in a police station. I was the only secretary of the CNT in exile to enter Spain clandestinely when they were still shooting people.'¹ In short, his was a life of subversion and adventure, of permanent resistance to all authority due to his enduring commitment to the cause of the oppressed.

A biography of a figure like Peirats perforce means the reclamation of the historical memory of organised anarchism and its role in the twentieth century. My approach reflects the so-called 'particularist' perspective on social movements, which is concerned with the individual motivations and socialisation process of those who make up the movement and which focuses on

¹ Letter to José Fernández, 31 May 1970.

biography and collective biography as a means of teasing out the meaning of movement membership for the individual.² Such an approach will doubtless be judged by some as hagiography (an irony as I write as an English-born historian and Peirats was scornful of both the English in general and of ‘professional’ historians in particular).³ For some historians, my approach will be dismissed as ‘militant history’. These paragons of equitableness who triumphantly lay claim to a more ‘objective’ posture by virtue of having a position removed from what they designate as the ‘extremes’ of the political spectrum are either naïve or disingenuous, or both. Behind their claim of ‘objectivity’, those who criticise the history of the dispossessed as ‘militant history’ merily ignore their own ideological baggage and positionality, all too often hypocritically retaining a blatantly partisan defence of specific political positions, be it a militant attachment to social democracy, liberalism, or, in some cases, nostalgia for Francoism.

I recognise unashamedly that there are many aspects of Peirats’s life that I find admirable. His lifelong struggle in the face of huge adversity to transcend the cultural deficit imposed on him from birth is just an example. I had first-hand experience of this in the hierarchical British society into which I was born. I was the first member of my extended family to set foot in a university. Schooled within a highly stratified British state education system, I bucked the trend among my classmates and was the solitary pupil in my school year to go on to university in Thatcher’s highly polarised Britain.

Peirats was a humble man and, despite suffering significant health problems from infancy, he was a passionate and energetic fighter until the last of his eighty-one years. Similarly, whether we agree with his ideals or not, Peirats’s tenacious defence of his beliefs and his readiness to risk his life and liberty in the pursuit of a collective project that he believed would benefit humanity strikes me as eminently laudable. Unsurprisingly, the sacrifices and tribulations of the dispossessed will prove elusive and unintelligible to those critics who fail to see beyond their own sense of privilege and snobbery.⁴

I do not wish to suggest that Peirats was a perfect individual or that he was a flawless anarchist. Like all human beings, he had his defects, his outbursts of rancour – at times, in debates, he could be abrupt. As an anarchist thinker, he did not evolve massively in the course of his life; for instance, there is little evidence he truly embraced the ‘New Left’ currents of the 1960s. So, while he was a lifelong defender of freedom, his views on homosexuality or feminism did not reflect the growing awareness of distinctive patterns of oppression. Yet, while being critical at times, my aim is not to berate a dead man for this or that foible but to understand what motivated Peirats and how the range of social, personal, political, organisational, cultural, and economic forces shaped and constrained his behaviour and his thinking.

Within Spanish historiography, in recent years biography has been skilfully deployed as a tool of historical enquiry.⁵ This is to be applauded, for biography, a genre that exists on the frontier of literature and, in some cases, psychology, presents specific challenges for a historian. I do

² See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 30–1.

³ In 1947, during his time in exile, the ship on which Peirats was travelling from Venezuela to France stopped in Southampton. The British authorities refused to allow Peirats to step ashore. He never forgave ‘the English bastards [*cabrones*] [who] didn’t even let me visit the port... Over there, the greatest ice is that which coats the heart of the English’ (letters from José Peirats to ‘Amapola’, 6 February and 9 April 1962).

⁴ Freddy Gómez, ‘La deuxième mort de José Peirats’, *À contretemps: Bulletin de critique bibliographique*, no. 38, September 2010, pp. 9–15.

⁵ Isabel Burdiel, ‘La dama de blanco. Notas sobre la biografía histórica’, in Isabel Burdiel and Manuel Pérez Ledesma (eds.), *Liberales, agitadores y conspiradores: Biografías heterodoxas del siglo XIX*, Madrid, 2000, pp. 17–47.

not profess to have transcended these pitfalls, especially since my work on the history of social movements has tended to focus more on collective psychology rather than that of the individual. Yet social history has much to contribute to the older field of biography, since it is clear that life histories and experiences form part of broader histories of social groups. The study of a man like Peirats, whose existence and ideas were so heavily submerged within a movement, provides us, therefore, with an opportunity to move beyond the reconstruction of specific events in the life of an individual in a way that, following the suggestion of Isabel Burdiel and María Cruz Romero, takes into account ‘the reinterpretation of social structures, understood as interactive networks, [and] resituates the role of individuals and their attitudes in the processes of historical change.’⁶

The chapters that follow, therefore, chart the story of a man who was sucked into the vortex of Spain’s turbulent twentieth century. Chapter 1 addresses the formative childhood influences and family experiences that set Peirats on the road to rebellion and which contributed to mould his later life and world-view. Chapter 2 considers his youthful politicisation: like much of the Generation of ‘36, Peirats was radicalised and politicised during the 1920s dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, becoming an intransigent rebel. Chapters 3 and 4 assess the pre-war Republic, when Peirats came of age as an activist, rebelling against the injustices of Spanish society during the 1930s, channelling his militant energies into the educational, paramilitary, political, and syndical organisations of the libertarian movement. In Chapter 5, we will see Peirats join the rest of the Generation of ‘36 to rise up to defeat the military *coup* of July 1936 and participate in the exhilarating months of revolution, what for the participants was a sublime summer of liberation. This is also the history of a revolution that failed, and we will witness Peirats rallying against those within the anarchist movement that he believed were betraying their ideals and the project of social transformation. The year 1939 and the definitive Francoist triumph in the civil war led to a long winter of obscurantist reaction – a time of defeat, despair, and diaspora as the dictatorship set about cleansing society of Peirats’s insurgent generation, who paid the price for daring to challenge the agrarian and industrial oligarchies in jails, in concentration camps, in exile, and in the grave. This, along with the struggles and divisions of the anarchist movement in exile, is explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

For all the ordinariness in Peirats’s life and the multiple similarities with the life histories of those of his generation, Chapter 8 explores his exceptional work as activist-historian and revolutionary writer, the ‘Herodotus of the CNT’.⁷ The writings discussed here, and indeed elsewhere in these pages, constitute a commentary on the evolution of the CNT throughout the twentieth century and reveal much about the shifting politics and internal culture of the movement. In exile, it might be argued that Peirats’s writings were an act of resistance against those that the poet Juan Gelman has described as ‘the organisers of oblivion’. Following the post-Francoist democratic transition, Peirats’s labours to document the struggles of the Generation of ‘36 dovetailed with his fight against the condescension and amnesia imposed by the ‘pact of oblivion’ (*pacto del olvido*) of Spain’s democratic transition in the 1970s, which marginalised the experience of the ‘defeated’ and limited the social horizons and political possibilities for real change. This is discussed in Chapter 9, which covers the final years of Peirats’s life, when, despite his rapidly

⁶ Isabel Burdiel and María Cruz Romero, ‘Los sujetos en el proceso revolucionario español del siglo XIX: el papel de la prosopografía histórica’, *Historia Contemporánea*, no. 13–14, 1996, pp. 150.

⁷ Francisco Carrasquer, ‘José Peirats, de los pocos que quedan’, *Polémica*, October 1989, p. 20.

deteriorating health, he remained actively committed to the defence of liberty, justice, and the recuperation of the voices of the ‘defeated’.

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A note on sources: A considerable part of this study is based on the Peirats archive in the IISG in Amsterdam, particularly his voluminous correspondence and his memoirs, *De mi paso*

por la vida – 1,500 pages of autobiographical writing.⁸ As with any source, the memoirs and letters have been assessed critically. Yet the reader must bear certain things in mind about Peirats. When he wrote most of his letters and his memoirs he had been labelled a ‘thief’ (*ladrón*) by the leadership of the Spanish anarchist movement in France. He was, therefore, more obsessed than most perhaps with his ‘truth’ and what others thought of him. We need to bear in mind also that there were exiles who outlived him (most notably his great nemesis, Federica Montseny, as did many of their children) and that his critics were those more than willing to show him up, so he was always very concerned with veracity. To prevent any misrepresentation, he kept copies of all his correspondence. For the same reason, his memoirs are refreshingly candid and reflect his abiding honesty, which, as will be seen in the pages that follow, was one of his core values – something acknowledged by friends and enemies alike. Equally, his memoirs are a very human document. An example is Peirats’s appreciation of adversaries inside the anarchist movement, such as Horacio Prieto or Buenaventura Durruti, with whom he clashed on several occasions. Despite this, he was able to acknowledge the personal qualities of these individuals.

Having read many anarcho-syndicalist memoirs over the years, I was struck by Peirats’s sincerity and commitment to the ‘truth’, even if it was, inevitably, his ‘truth’. This contrasts, for instance, with the overtly apologetic memoirs of some of his generation which are, to quote Julián Casanova, ‘odes to the personal honour’ of their authors.⁹ Certainly, Peirats was far from unconcerned with his ‘personal honour’, but it is my judgement as a historian that his memoirs are generally earnest, unlike the memoirs of Jacinto Toryho, an adversary of Peirats and prominent supporter of the anarchist movement’s civil war collaboration with the state. Like other collaborationists, Toryho later found it hard to justify the twists and turns of his wartime role, and this is reflected in repeated lapses and lacunae in his testimony. For instance, despite mapping the path of anarchist Popular Frontism, he writes of ‘the incredible co-operation of the CNT’ as if he was entirely removed from the process.¹⁰ Besides giving the impression that the Stalinist Partido Comunista de España (PCE – Communist Party of Spain) alone destroyed the 1936 revolution, Toryho also suggests that the only opposition to collaborationism with the state came from foreign anarchists, which, as I demonstrate in Chapter 5, is wildly at variance with the historical record.¹¹ In contrast, when it comes to Peirats’s often bitter discussion of his conflicts with the movement leadership during exile, for all his indignation, his general account is, nonetheless, entirely congruent with the main academic study on this period.¹²

Peirats employed a peculiar, *sui generis* form of pagination in his memoir manuscript, dividing it into ‘Volumes’ (*Tomos*) and ‘Books’ (*Libros*). Sometimes the pagination returns to 1 at the start of a new ‘book’, other times it is cumulative.¹³ In footnotes, the memoirs are referred to M(emorias) I(néditas) as T(omo)..., L(ibro)..., followed by the page reference, e.g. MI T. 2, L. III, 77. As regards his correspondence, the letters are cited as, for instance, ‘Letter to...’ or ‘Letter from...’. The full filing system for the Peirats archive is on the IISG website: <https://socialhistory.org/en>.

⁸ An edited version of the memoirs appeared as José Peirats, *De mi paso por la vida: Memorias* (Barcelona, 2009). Peirats’s manuscript was cut to make way for a rambling, sometimes insidious, 100-page introduction by one of the editors.

⁹ Julián Casanova, ‘Guerra y revolución: la edad de oro del anarquismo español’, *Historia Social*, no.1, 1988, p. 64.

¹⁰ Jacinto Toryho, *No éramos tan malos: Memorias de la guerra civil española, 1936–39*, Madrid, 1975, p. 214.

¹¹ Toryho, *No éramos tan malos*, pp. 284–5.

¹² Ángel Herrero López, *La CNT durante el franquismo: Clandestinidad y exilio (1939–1975)*, Madrid, 2004.

¹³ José Peirats, *De mi paso por la vida* (herein MI).

Chapter One: A rebel youth

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.

—Albert Camus

1.1 La Vall d’Uixó

José Peirats Valls was born on 15 March 1908, in La Vall d’Uixó, in Castelló, the most northern of the three Valencian provinces, immediately south of Catalonia. La Vall was a small village, where the summer sun could send temperatures up to forty degrees.¹ Like most of Valencia at this time, La Vall was essentially agrarian, specialising in fruit production for the export market and in the production of hemp. The second child of Teresa Valls Rubert and José Peirats Dupla, José was born into the most impoverished sectors of society. His parents resided in Calvario Street, literally Calvary Street. Colloquially, this meant agony or torment and certainly there would be much of this in José’s early life and, indeed, beyond. While most of the Peirats Valls clan were agricultural labourers, José’s parents worked for most of the year as *alpargateros*, making espadrilles (*alpargatas*), the rope-soled shoes popular with urban and rural workers. Even though the travails of *alpargateros* were less physically demanding than working in the heat of the fields, they were still badly paid. His parents led a poverty-stricken existence and, like many other *valldeuxenses*, they were obliged to supplement their income by harvesting oranges in Burriana, some twenty-five kilometres away. The harvest was a major local event: José’s parents had met there, and his first memory was of a vast carpet of oranges, when he accompanied his family to Burriana.²

Peirats’s parents had six children, a number not uncommon at this time, when rampant infant mortality rates decimated poor families. Tragedy bore down upon José from a tender age: only he and his elder sister Dolores survived into adulthood; two of their younger siblings dying in La Vall, two more in Barcelona. The worst everyday hardships were offset by strong family and community networks. If someone experienced a spell of unemployment or ill health, working relatives or friends offered support. To a degree, popular reciprocity compensated for the underdeveloped state welfare system and, judging from José’s generally positive recollections of village life, his family was saved the deprivation and hunger experienced by the rural dispossessed of Andalusia.

Still, it would be wrong to paint a bucolic picture of the living conditions of the rural lower classes anywhere in Spain at this time. Castelló was largely bereft of educational provision, and

¹ The village was named after the river Uixó that runs through the hamlet. Alejandro Núñez and Vicent Enric Sorribés, *La Vall d’Uixó durante la Segunda República (1931–1936): Expectativas, enfrentamientos y frustraciones en un período de crisis*, La Vall d’Uixó, 2001.

² MI T. 1, L. I, 1.

the scale of mass illiteracy, especially among women, was comparable with Andalusia, a region often taken to epitomise cultural backwardness.³ Both José's parents were semi-illiterate, speaking only Catalan, the first language of valdeuxenses, who, like young José, were blissfully ignorant of Castilian, the official state language. This highlighted the *de facto* autonomy enjoyed by many villages and the limited reach of the weak central state; indeed, life developed there without any real contact with the state, very much in accordance with the federalist philosophy José later embraced.

La Vall d'Uixó had no history of the dramatic agrarian struggles that electrified the agrarian south. When José was born, the social structure of the village was largely undifferentiated – the population of around 8,500 inhabitants remained static for some decades. The main local divide was the river Uixó, which bisected the settlement and provided water for the more productive farmland in the lower part of the hamlet. Nevertheless, class fissures had begun to inscribe themselves on to these geographical divisions: the lower part (*abaix*) of the village was home to wealthier tenant farmers that sometimes employed farmhands and day labourers who, for the most part, resided in the upper zone (*dalt*) and were the Peirats's neighbours.⁴ But if village tensions resulted in occasional outbreaks of violence, these were largely related to local or family feuds, rather than deeper social antagonisms.

Yet, new political winds blew into La Vall. José's grandfather, Sento Valls, was a committed republican and self-proclaimed atheist who, later in life, separated from his wife, something that would have scandalised Catholic opinion and was most likely related to his extramarital liaisons.⁵ A municipal employee, Sento had a position of responsibility, working as the bell-ringer and bailiff (*alguacil*). He also ran the town jail, which meant that most of his children, including Teresa, were born in prison – a great irony when we consider José's later pursuit of the total elimination of repressive institutions, his own spells in jail, and his many visits to incarcerated friends and family members.⁶ For the times, Sento was a man of considerable culture – he played the flute and composed some poetry – and he exerted a strong moral influence over his children and encouraged their scepticism towards religion.⁷ His influence was later transmitted to young José by his mother and her brothers, Nelo and Benjamín, who moved beyond their father's republicanism to embrace anarchism and socialism respectively. Nelo, who emigrated to Barcelona, was a committed anarchist, while Benjamín, who also spent several years in the Catalan capital, helped found the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE – Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) in La Vall and was a leading figure in the village cooperative. Both uncles exerted a profound and enduring influence over the young Peirats, greater even than that of his parents. This was particularly true of Benjamín, an agricultural labourer who adhered to a strict moral code that was, in crucial respects, more anarchist than socialist, and which was rooted in a deep respect for his fellow human beings. José was particularly inspired by Benjamín's spirit of sacrifice, his un-

³ José María Jover, 'La época de la Restauración: Panorama político-social, 1875–1902', in Manuel Tuñón de Lara (ed.), *Revolución burguesa, oligarquía y constitucionalismo (1834–1923)*, Barcelona, 1993, p. 324.

⁴ Víctor García, Prologue to José Peirats, *La Semana Trágica y otros relatos*, Móstoles, 1991, p. 14.

⁵ MI T. 1, L. I, 19; García, Prologue, p. 14; José Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica del pensamiento libertario: Memorias y selección de artículos breves', *Suplementos Anthropos*, no. 18, 1990, p. 7; José Peirats, 'Sueños de una noche de verano', *Frente Libertario*, September 1971.

⁶ MI T. 1, L. I, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, L. II, 43.

shakeable faith in social progress, and his strict system of personal conduct and moral rectitude. His example of personal discipline was something that Peirats emulated in his own life.⁸

Certainly, José acquired more from the Valls, ‘people with character’, than the Peirats, ‘of limited mettle and somewhat startled’.⁹ There is no evidence of any political affiliations on the Peirats side of the family. José’s father was more sensual: he had a considerable talent for singing, which he joyously indulged at parties or *verbenas*, not always to the satisfaction of his wife. While José later developed a similar love of song (he would frequently sing in the streets on the way to work and at the request of friends at parties¹⁰), it is hard to discern any other direct paternal influences. As he later noted, his father was taciturn, withdrawn, ‘weak in spirit’, generally resigned to his secondary role within the family.¹¹ Teresa, the real force within the household, likened his father to an ‘entombed charred log’ (*tizón enterrado*),¹² whom she dominated, presiding over what José dubbed ‘an authentic matriarchy’.¹³ Despite her lack of formal education, Teresa was a remarkably confident, assured, and assertive woman, even when dealing with those higher up the social ladder.¹⁴ As Peirats later observed of her, ‘She had a powerful temperament. Her immense personality overcame all obstacles. She was the true axis of the family during the bad times, which were frequent during our childhood.’¹⁵

It was Teresa’s dissatisfaction with their miserable life in La Vall that impelled the family to migrate to Barcelona.¹⁶ In his letters to Teresa, her brother Nelo assured her of the abundant work for *alpargateros* in the Catalan industrial behemoth, of its superior quality of life, and, importantly, he offered to pay for the family’s passage north. Teresa quickly convinced her husband to accept the project and, testimony to the precariousness of life in La Vall, just a few days later José and his father left ‘with a blanket and a sack’ with their clothes for the port at Burriana en route to Barcelona.¹⁷

The cheapest way of reaching Barcelona was by boat, a veritable adventure for José, then just three and a half years old. He could not have appreciated that this was a journey into the eye of a social and political vortex, the beginning of an odyssey of discovery and struggle that would take him across two continents, two oceans, and six countries in the course of a life that resembled that of the *Quixote*: the idealistic dreamer, ever poised to confront injustice and tyranny throughout a semi-nomadic existence. Nor would he have grasped the irony that on his journey his main protection from the autumn night chill and sea winds was a red-and-black checked blanket;¹⁸ these were the colours of the CNT, the revolutionary union formed a year earlier in the city that lay ahead of José, a union whose future would soon become deeply entwined with his.¹⁹

⁸ Letter to José Agustín, 26 October 1969.

⁹ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 7.

¹⁰ MI T. 4, L. VII, 70.

¹¹ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, pp. 7–8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ MI T. 1, L. I, 19.

¹⁴ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 8.

¹⁵ Letter to Sara and Jesús Guillén, 18 April 1970.

¹⁶ Letter to Federico Peirats, 9 October 1986.

¹⁷ MI T. 1, L. I, 1–2; Víctor García, ‘Un retador nato: José Peirats’, *Polémica*, October 1989, p. 20; letter to Andrés Martínez, 23 February 1969.

¹⁸ MI T. 1, L. I, 1–2.

¹⁹ For the creation of the CNT, see Antonio Bar, *La CNT en los años rojos: Del sindicalismo revolucionario al anarcosindicalismo, 1910–1926*, Madrid, 1981.

1.2 Barcelona

Barcelona changed José's life irrevocably. He was overwhelmed by the contrast between the parochial, insular world of La Vall and the seething cosmopolitanism of his new city. Approaching the port of Barcelona, he observed 'the sea of houses' of the working-class districts hemmed in by the surrounding mountains and hills and the chimneys sprouting up from the city's industrial neighbourhoods, projecting black smoke into the sky. Ashore, the frenetic rhythm and noise of the port startled his senses, as dockers and carters unloaded ships and distributed produce on the quays. Flanked by trams and the few cars in circulation at that time, the new arrivals made their way to uncle Nelo's house, in nearby Cruz de los Canteros Street, in Poble Sec, an inner city neighbourhood nestled between Montjuïc mountain and the urban frontier of the Paral·lel, a long avenue that was home to a myriad of theatres, cafés, cabarets, and taverns and which epitomised the city's modernity. Eminently working-class, Poble Sec had a large Valencian population, consisting of an overwhelming majority of poor migrants crammed into overcrowded housing. With an illiteracy rate of over 50 per cent,²⁰ one historian described Poble Sec as a 'slum district'.²¹ Daily life for inhabitants was structured by the rhythms of industrial capitalism: before and after work, the streets were packed with workers making their way to and from the factories in the contiguous industrial district of Sants or the nearby La Canadiense, the city's most important hydroelectric plant.

José's father soon found work in the espadrille workshop of a childhood friend in Sants, where valldexenses were a sizeable minority.²² In keeping with prevailing patterns of working-class immigration, the Peirats arrived in instalments: once José and his father were settled, they were joined by his mother and two sisters. The family was now united in a city that was deeply divided and marked by conflict – the most recent being the 1909 urban uprising known as the 'Tragic Week' ('Semana Trágica'), a week of anti-conscription street protests punctuated by barricades, attacks on factories, and the burning of religious property.²³ Poble Sec was an important focus of the uprising, and insurgent crowds assaulted every religious building in the neighbourhood, from churches and convents to Catholic schools.²⁴ In the repression that followed, the security forces killed 104 civilians, injuring 125. Over 2,500 people, for the most part trade unionists and left-wingers, were imprisoned. Seventeen death sentences were passed, five of which were carried out in the nearby Montjuïc fortress, which cast a dark shadow over Poble Sec.

Working-class Barcelona was left traumatised. José was exposed to this collective trauma: he overheard his uncle talking with friends in the evenings about the colonial war in Morocco, the urban uprising, the prisoners, and the executions; he also heard satirical songs vilifying the authorities and politicians.²⁵ Uncle Nelo, who gradually fathered anarchist ideas in the mind of

²⁰ Jordi Monés, 'A la recerca de l'home nou', en Borja de Riquer i Permanyer (ed.), *Història, Política, Societat i Cultura dels Països Catalans, vol. 8: L'Època dels nous moviments socials, 1900–1930*, Barcelona, 1995, p. 313.

²¹ Joan Connelly Ullman, *The Tragic Week: A Study of Anticlericalism in Spain, 1875–1912*, Cambridge, MA, 1968, pp. 272 & 276.

²² Letter to Agustín Roa, 26 February 1967; MI T. 1, L. I, 5.

²³ Chris Ealham, 'La batalla per Barcelona durant la "Setmana Trágica": El xoc entre dos models urbans i dues maneres antitètiques d'entendre la ciutat', in Andrés Antebi and Pablo González (eds.), *Trágica, roja i gloriosa: una setmana de 1909*, Barcelona, 2010, pp. 30–53; and Dolors Marín, *La Semana Trágica: Barcelona en llamas, revuelta popular y la Escuela Moderna*, Madrid, 2009.

²⁴ Connelly Ullman, *Tragic Week*, p. 211.

²⁵ MI T. 1, L. I, 3.

his young nephew, communicated popular anticlerical myths to José, telling him how priests had used cannon to defend a church from attack.²⁶ At weekends, when the family escaped the city for the cleaner air of Montjuïc to make a paella below the fortress, Nelo told him of the sacrifice of Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, the anarchist educator executed after being charged with ‘moral responsibility’ for the uprising.²⁷ Through Nelo, José discovered new words like ‘trade unions’ and initials like ‘CNT’ – the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo periodically rented the Paral·lel’s theatres for meetings and rallies and had held its first national congress in Barcelona just weeks before his arrival.

Barcelona was the capital of Spain’s labour movement, which was shaped by a buoyant anti-state culture. From around the 1900s, the city’s long anarchist tradition laid the basis for a rising anarcho-syndicalist movement, which saw revolutionary industrial unionism as the best method whereby workers could seize control of the capitalist economy. There are complex reasons for the powerful lure of anarcho-syndicalism in the city.²⁸ There was a popular perception that the state, which possessed limited welfare functions in comparison with England and Germany, was a negative, repressive force in social life. This, combined with a conflictive industrial relations context, militated against reformist trade unionism and fostered direct action struggles. Since the advent of industrialisation, employers had been implacably hostile to any checks on their authority in the workplace; they opposed even a token union presence in the factories and rallied to destroy labour organisation by sacking militants wherever possible.²⁹ The ‘hunger pact’ (*pacto del hambre*) or ‘lockout’ – whereby union activists were excluded from the workplace – was another of their weapons. Yet the determination of local workers to improve living conditions ensured labour organisation endured the employer offensive. For elites and authorities alike, the ‘Red subversion’ of the ‘unpatriotic’ proletarian enemy within had to be crushed by the military, which played the role of domestic policeman. While some sections of the bourgeoisie viewed the central state as an anti-Catalan force, industrialists recognised the Madrid government was a vital ally in their struggle with local workers. The bitterness of the social war, and the scant prospects for moderation, saw the unions adopt increasingly radical and aggressive tactics – a situation that allowed for a strong influence of anarchist and later anarcho-syndicalist ideas. Barcelona’s unions were bolstered by untrammelled urban growth during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of thousands of migrants from the poor and depressed rural areas of Spain, by 1910 the city’s population was close to 600,000. Like the Peirats family, these newcomers came in search of dreams of what José later termed the ‘Catalan California’.³⁰ The limits of the ‘Barcelona dream’ were manifest: the vast wealth generated by local industry remained in the hands of the few and economic incertitude was the norm for the city’s workers, particularly the migrants.

These first years in Barcelona were punctuated by economic insecurity and personal tragedy. This would have had an immense impact upon José, who was a very sensitive boy, well attuned to the sufferings of his parents, relatives, and neighbours. Like most working-class families, the Peirats moved in search of better or cheaper accommodation. After Poble Sec, they resided for

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–2; for Ferrer, see Juan Avilés, *Francisco Ferrer y Guàrdia: Pedagogo, anarquista y mártir*, Madrid, 2006.

²⁸ Chris Ealham, *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and counter-revolution in Barcelona, 1898–1937*, Oakland, CA, 2010, pp. 1–53.

²⁹ Antoni Jutglar, *Historia crítica de la burguesía catalana*, Barcelona, 1984, pp. 224–6.

³⁰ José Peirats, *Figuras del movimiento libertario español*, Barcelona, 1978, p. 89.

six years in Badalona Street, in Sants, a district which, like much of proletarian Barcelona, had high levels of tuberculosis, glaucoma, and other health problems related to poor diet and bad housing. Peirats was deeply affected by the deaths, in quick succession, of a baby sister and a younger brother.³¹ He was further shaken by the imprisonment of uncle Nelo, who was detained in a police swoop on Montjuïc as he foraged for snails and firewood on common land. In keeping with the arbitrary practices of the authorities, Nelo was interned for a couple of weeks, first in the Montjuïc military fortress, and later in the Modelo prison, Barcelona's main incarceration centre, before being released without charge. Members of the Peirats clan, José included, visited him in jail daily, bringing him much-needed food and cheer. The sight of his favourite uncle incarcerated surely nourished his growing awareness of the injustices surrounding him.

The environment within the Peirats household was relatively liberal. The unrestricted parental authoritarianism that stifled the developing spirit of many children at this time was largely missing. While there was a domestic hierarchy, it was not rigidly imposed: the views of the children counted and the parents did not simply impose their will in the domestic sphere, preferring to cultivate supportive and open relationships with their offspring. Despite their lack of formal education, José's parents encouraged him to nurture and frame his understanding of the world. For instance, his semi-literate father patiently helped him 'tie syllables together'.³²

Despite two adult incomes (Teresa also worked making espadrilles), the family remained poor and their clothing was second hand.³³ Significant sacrifices ensured the children received education, the great aspiration of most working-class parents at this time. Teresa especially was convinced of José's lively intelligence, and in 1913, aged five, he entered a council-run school. This proved to be an inauspicious initiation in the world of learning. The school contrasted sharply with his experiences in two key ways: firstly, teaching was in Castilian rather than his native Catalan;³⁴ secondly, the authoritarian pedagogical creed that 'words penetrate with blood', which relied on fear and 'blows and kicks' to instil obedience, clashed frontally with the relative freedom at home.³⁵ Several teachers were priests and devotees of a system of punishment that one of Peirats's contemporaries dubbed 'the prison-school'.³⁶ Pupils were routinely left thirsty and were denied toilet visits.³⁷ Like others of his generation, José clashed with this repressive authority structure and 'the despotism of the teachers' sealed his first rebellion: 'The abuses of those in control awoke in my rebel soul an overwhelming aversion to the school...'³⁸ I didn't like being hemmed in.³⁹ He started truanting, spending the daily school fee on sweets and gaining a different education in the streets. Along with other truants and street children, he pilfered fruit and vegetables from goods trains arriving at the nearby Magòria station. These antics earned

³¹ MI T. 1, L. I, 5–7; Peirats, 'Una experiència històrica...', p. 8.

³² Letter to José Fernández, 31 May 1970.

³³ Peirats, 'Una experiència històrica...', p. 9.

³⁴ Whilst in his autobiography Peirats refers to himself as a speaker of 'Valencian', the differences between it and Catalan were limited to accent and to a few words and were far fewer in number than the differences between American English and the English spoken in the British Isles.

³⁵ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

³⁶ Emili Salut, *Vivers de revolucionaris. Apunts històrics del Districte Cinquè*, Barcelona, 1938, p. 22; see also Maria Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931–1936*, Brighton, 2013, pp. 29–31.

³⁷ MI T. 1, L. I, 12.

³⁸ Peirats, 'Una experiència històrica...', p. 9.

³⁹ Freddy Gómez, *Colección de Historia Oral: El movimiento libertario en España (I): José Peirats*, Madrid, n.d., p. 13.

him a beating from the priests and, on more than one occasion, ‘extreme thrashings’ from his mother, who felt betrayed that he was squandering both his chance to get an education and the family’s scarce economic resources. Despite bearing his punishments stoically, he was hurt most by his mother’s description of him as a ‘bad son’.⁴⁰ His parents punished his disobedience further, sending him to a convent school in nearby Hostafrancs. This was at variance with the family’s prevailing anti-clerical spirit but, in an age when the clergy enjoyed a de facto monopoly over schooling, there were few secular alternatives. His parents were mistaken if they believed José would benefit from a more disciplined learning environment. Their rebellious progeny refused to bow to the harsher regime and, voting with his feet, he truanted again to free himself from the denigrating humiliations of the clergy, for whom he felt an enduring hostility.⁴¹

Around this time, at the age of six, José awoke one morning with intense pain in his left leg. Diagnosed initially by a local doctor as suffering from rheumatic pain, his condition deteriorated and days later he was hospitalised in the Hospital de Santa Cruz.⁴² His parents were devastated as José became sicker and lost strength. Physicians were incapable of providing an accurate diagnosis regarding his mysterious condition, which José himself later termed, mistakenly, ‘semi-poliomyelitis’.⁴³ It is highly likely he suffered from Legg–Calvé–Perthes disease (commonly known as Perthes), a rare condition that affects annually around 1 in every 100,000 children, generally between five and ten years of age and which can result in the deformation of the femur; over time, the cartilage becomes eroded and a hip replacement operation may be required.⁴⁴ One doctor proposed amputating José’s leg, although fortunately he was too weak to undergo surgery.⁴⁵ Equally fortunately, Teresa defied the drastic and, as time would show, wholly unnecessary measures proposed by the physicians, cursing them and removing José from the hospital. Since conventional medicine had apparently failed, Teresa yielded to the weight of popular superstition and sought ‘alternative’ treatment, taking José to a healer (*curandero*) in La Vall, who applied a poultice of punctured snails to his leg, gave him red wine, and advised him to stay away from the filth of the city.⁴⁶ Remarkably, José’s condition improved, although this probably owed more to the post-traumatic plateau that precedes the initial onset of Perthes disease. He remained in La Vall with his mother for several months – a stay prolonged by their poverty: having spent their scant savings on hospital bills, they only got money for their passage to Barcelona after José was well enough to work as a hawker, selling rabbit skins.⁴⁷

José was deeply marked by this illness. Besides being left with a limp and with one leg slightly shorter than the other, he faced intermittent pain that grew more intense from his late twenties onwards.⁴⁸ As a child, his suffering was also emotional. He was mocked remorselessly by peers and adults alike for his limp:⁴⁹ ‘I faced degrading comments until I was able to gain respect with

⁴⁰ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 9.

⁴¹ MI T. 1, L. I, 13; letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.; Peirats, ‘Una experiencia...’, p. 9.

⁴² Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 10.

⁴³ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 11 March 1982.

⁴⁴ This is a problem with the flow of blood to the head of the femur that has no immediate treatment. Over time, the head of the femur weakens, becoming deformed.

⁴⁵ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 11.

⁴⁶ MI T. 1, L. I, 7–9.

⁴⁷ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 11 December 1985.

⁴⁸ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

⁴⁹ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

my fists, receiving more than I gave.⁵⁰ The illness did not, however, limit his height or overall physical strength; although known to family and friends during his early years by the diminutive ‘Little José’ (‘Pepet’), he was average height for his generation. With blond, curly locks, he had an air of gentle innocence but, as he recovered in La Vall, he became an accomplished fighter. Taunted by local children due to his accent, which had assimilated new tones in Barcelona, he challenged his tormentors to physical combat (regardless of age, reputation, and size), taking on all comers and triumphing often with new tactics he had acquired in the streets of his adoptive city. On one occasion, he was confronted by the furious mother of one of his defeated rivals, who called him ‘a worthless Catalan’ and challenged young Peirats to find the courage to hit her. He duly accepted, striking her in the face, much to her horror.⁵¹ This youthful disregard for hierarchy reflected what he later described as his ‘disposition given to struggle and rebellion’.⁵²

There is further evidence of this disposition. After his return to Barcelona, he became enraged at the sight of an uncle physically abusing his wife and leapt at the adult aggressor, seizing him by the throat before being subdued by his father.⁵³ He therefore displayed an open resistance to adult, or any other, authority at an early age, especially when he perceived an injustice was being perpetrated. Nevertheless, he remained a sensitive child and the relative isolation occasioned by his illness encouraged a tendency towards introspection and reflection.

In Barcelona, at the time, industry boomed during Spain’s profitable neutrality in World War I. Not only were the benefits of the boom unevenly distributed, but the drive to feed foreign markets led to a subsistence crisis and a rampant inflation. It is estimated that the cost of living in Barcelona increased by 50 per cent between 1914 and 1919.⁵⁴ Amid growing poverty in the Peirats home, there were no presents at Christmas. The family was in debt with most of the local shopkeepers – a situation aggravated by José’s medical bills. (It is striking that, in the course of his unpublished memoirs, over 1,000 pages, the only direct reference to consumerism was during World War I, when José and his friends collected cards depicting either wartime leaders or scenes from the war that came with chocolate bars.⁵⁵) Family life was very much bound up with that of the neighbourhood: any holidays were celebrated with friends and neighbours, either with picnics and paellas on Montjuïc or in a local tavern. These were often rowdy gatherings, with alcohol, singing, guitars, castanets, and dancing. José’s father was much in demand due to his fine singing voice, although Teresa eventually curtailed his appearances at such *fiestas*.⁵⁶

José, meanwhile, became increasingly aware of the injuries of class: he was barred from participating in a school recital, as his parents could not afford the outfit required for the performance. Disillusioned with school, he started truanting again. As before, his errant ways were discovered. Rather than punishing José, this time his parents initiated a frank discussion of his objections to the church school. They explained that, while they wanted him to get a formal education, something that was clearly not happening with him roaming the streets, they could ill-afford to waste their limited resources. Finally, Teresa presented him with a choice: he either immerse himself in his studies or enter the world of work, as was common at a time when child labour was most

⁵⁰ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 11 December 1985.

⁵¹ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 12.

⁵² MI T. 7, L. XIII, 47.

⁵³ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 8.

⁵⁴ José Luis Martín, ‘Consequències socials: la resposta obrera’, *L’Avenç*, March 1984, p. 46.

⁵⁵ MI T. 1, L. I, 12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18–9.

prevalent. He opted for the latter and in 1916, aged eight, having hardly attended primary school, he started work.

He had a succession of jobs, first in a light metalwork shop, making screws for coffins, then as an apprentice in a photographic workshop, where a combination of his disregard for authority and the artlessness of youth saw him dismissed after pilfering from his employer. He worked in a tinsmith's shop, until forced to leave due to worsening leg pains.⁵⁷ Finally, he filled a vacancy in the textile plant where his sister Dolores worked. Because it is common for Perthes sufferers to experience great pain after standing for long periods of time or following repeated movements carrying weight, he suffered with his 'gammy leg'.⁵⁸ Sometimes Dolores had to help him walk home, even giving him a piggyback ride for part of the journey.⁵⁹

These ongoing physical problems, coupled with their faith in José's obvious intelligence, encouraged his parents to find him a new school. After making enquiries among friends and neighbours, he was enrolled in the school of the Workers' Rationalist Athenaeum in Sants.⁶⁰ The athenaeum was a pivotal institution within the local community; its plays, for instance, were so well attended that sometimes spectators had to bring their own chairs.⁶¹ Apart from being a couple of minutes' walk from the family home, the school appealed to Teresa as it rejected corporal punishment. The teacher, Juan Roigé, who came from a family of anarchists, was inspired by the pedagogical principles of Ferrer i Guàrdia's Modern School movement, with its stress on non-hierarchical education.

The Sants Athenaeum was part of a network of alternative cultural centres in Barcelona that compensated for the underdeveloped welfare state by providing educational and leisure services, such as drama and choral associations, libraries, evening classes, and hiking groups. There was a transforming element to the athenaeum: they aimed to forge a countercultural vision of the world that would raise working-class consciousness and challenge capitalist hegemony. Many of the CNT's leading activists emerged from the rationalist schools, while the athenaeum played an active role in creating and propagating a distinctly alternative culture that rivalled the official one.⁶²

This experience gave José his first direct contact with the alternative working-class public sphere to which he would devote his life. He flourished in the new school, where classes were conducted in Catalan by teachers who were frequently CNT members or anarchist activists. Gone were the beatings and humiliations; classroom discipline was maintained through reason and the charisma of the teachers. Students of both sexes were educated together and they were encouraged to formulate ideas freely, without prejudice or respect for established orthodoxy. This liberal, freethinking learning environment was far more in keeping with the disposition of the Peirats family and it irrevocably changed José's attitude towards education. As he later reflected, 'Once enrolled, I worked with all my heart and soul.'⁶³ He underwent a profound personal change and was transformed into an industrious student, a voracious reader who excelled in class and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁸ Peirats, 'Una experiència històrica...', p.12.

⁵⁹ MI T. 1, L. I, 21.

⁶⁰ Pere Foix, *Apòstols i mercaders*, Barcelona 1976, pp. 27–36.

⁶¹ MI T. 1, L. I, 21.

⁶² See the work of Pere Solà Gussinyer, *Els ateneus obrers i la cultura popular a Catalunya (1900–1939): L'Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular*, Barcelona, 1978, and *Educació i moviment llibertari a Catalunya (1901–1939)*, Barcelona, 1980; see also Josep Termes, 'Els ateneus populars: un intent de cultura obrera', *L'Avenç*, May 1987, pp. 8–12.

⁶³ MI T. 1, L. I, 22; Peirats, 'Una experiència històrica...', p. 10.

demonstrated a lively intelligence. As another ‘graduate’ from a rationalist school reflected, ‘The pupil emerged with a set of morals.’⁶⁴

His education was ended by state repression. In 1917, the Spanish monarchy experienced a revolutionary crisis. Rampant inflation had impelled the main trade unions – the CNT and the socialist Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT – General Union of Workers) – to make common cause, and their search for change saw them enter an *ad hoc* coalition with republican politicians and dissident military officers against the monarchy. The pressure for a social and political opening culminated in August in a general strike – a frontal challenge to the state.⁶⁵ Still just nine, José was aware of the developing revolutionary crisis: he saw the hardships and food shortages at home and the frequent street protests. For the first time, he sensed the collective power of the masses, as he witnessed the police retreat in the face of working-class women, ‘those skirted battalions’, who sacked food shops and stores and then distributed their haul. In August, he saw the other side of the coin, witnessing soldiers in the streets and the gunfire as they repressed the general strike.⁶⁶ Having shut down the unions, the escalating repression closed off all the institutions of the proletarian public sphere, including the rationalist schools. José had to watch helplessly as police arrived at his school and detained his teachers.⁶⁷

Encouraged by José’s progress as a scholar, Teresa hoped he would continue his studies in one of the legally functioning schools. But José would now accept nothing but rationalist schooling. As he recognised years later, ‘I had found my path’,⁶⁸ and he refused to return to a school system that previously converted him into a truant. With the family economy ailing, he re-entered the world of work, his ‘formal’ education thereby ending at nine.

He now became a brickmaker (*ladrillero*), one of the oldest activities in human history, a sector in which *valencianos* were heavily represented in Barcelona.⁶⁹ Conveniently for Peirats, many of the city’s brickworks (*bóvilas*) were located in the Sants-Collblanc-Les Corts axis, all very close to home.⁷⁰ There was nothing exceptional about his early baptism in the world of industrial work. If children from the very poorest families rarely saw the inside of a school, it was the norm for working-class boys and girls of José’s generation to be robbed of their childhood by the dull compulsion of economic forces, generally leaving school by the age of ten at the latest, as was the case with his sister Dolores.⁷¹ This was the start of an accelerated journey through life:

⁶⁴ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

⁶⁵ Chris Ealham, ‘An Impossible Unity: Revolution, Reform and Counter-Revolution and the Spanish Left, 1917–23’, in Paco Romero and Angel Smith (eds.), *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism: From War to Revolution, 1913–1923*, Basingstoke, 2010, pp. 93–5.

⁶⁶ MI T. 1, L. I, 22.

⁶⁷ Víctor García, ‘José Peirats Valls: Una bibliografía biografiada’, in Various Authors, ‘José Peirats Valls: Historia contemporánea del Movimiento Libertario. Visión crítica de un compromiso anarquista: La Revolución Social’, *Anthropos*, no. 102, 1989, p. 14; MI T. 1, L. I, 23.

⁶⁸ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 10.

⁶⁹ Federico Arcos, ‘José Peirats: A Comrade, A Friend’, *Fifth Estate*, December 1989. He was never a potter, as has been claimed by Josep Termes in *Historia del anarquismo en España (1870–1980)*, Barcelona, 2011, p. 702. Pottery, with its artisanal origins and lathe, is very different from the industrial production of bricks, the manufacture of which, given their form, is impossible using a potter’s wheel. Neither was he a bricklayer (*albañil*) nor a construction worker, as has been maintained by Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand (*El exilio de los republicanos españoles en Francia: De la Guerra civil a la muerte de Franco*, Barcelona, 2000, pp. 190, 399, n. 195) – a confusion probably stemming from the fact that the brickmakers formed part of the CNT Construction Union.

⁷⁰ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 10 December 1987.

⁷¹ Salut, *Vivers de revolucionaris*, pp. 42–3; Joan Llarch, *Los días rojinegros: Memorias de un niño obrero – 1936*, Barcelona, 1975, p. 22; Ricardo Sanz, *Los hijos de trabajo: El sindicalismo español antes de la guerra civil*, Barcelona,

if childhood ended at eight or nine, working-class youths were prematurely transformed into young adults by fourteen and many were already physically old at forty.

Workplace conditions were frequently atrocious, even in traditionally more protected sectors like the print industry. Employers, who knew they enjoyed the full backing of the authorities, adopted a cavalier attitude towards what they viewed as costly health and safety measures.⁷² Such was the seriousness of the situation that even the bourgeois press periodically condemned deficient workplace safety.⁷³ Arguably, factory conditions were worse still when José started work in World War I, since wartime neutrality presented an unprecedented boom for entrepreneurs and fostered a new type of *nouveaux riches* employer, far more obsessed with profits and anxious to cut production costs, irrespective of the dangers to employees, who were in no short supply. Conditions were worse still for child workers, who were on the receiving end of brutal labour discipline imposed by adult foremen. In addition, José recalled having periodic fights at work, as he responded robustly to anyone, young or adult, who mocked his limp.⁷⁴

In the brickworks, conditions were notoriously tough. Consisting of an oven in which bricks were forged, a chimney, and gaps in the walls through which the workers would pass to deposit bricks in a nearby store, the brickworks were exposed to the elements. Work was hard and fast-paced, as workers rushed to move bricks from the oven to the store. Barefoot and dressed in little more than baggy shorts and a hat to protect them from the heat of the oven, they toiled in extremely high temperatures in summer, when they became tanned, while in winter they faced chill winds. It was, as José reflected years later, and not without nostalgia, ‘a savage but fulfilling profession, working in the open, without shoes and the feet in contact with mother earth’.⁷⁵ The most arduous and perilous tasks, such as scurrying around close to the ovens, were reserved for young workers.⁷⁶ Employers were loath to improve hygiene and safety measures. In 1923, a brickmaker’s manual laid out a series of good practices in the industry, including the installation of showers, the cessation of winter work, and the limitation of employment to children over thirteen – all were ignored entirely.⁷⁷

By winter, it was clear the work was aggravating José’s leg condition, so he moved to a glass factory, which had the benefit of being closed to the elements. The work was no less dangerous: injuries and burns were common and apprentices faced violence from foremen and adult workers. Aged just ten, José gained direct experience of this: when he committed a tired error at the end of a night shift, he was punched and left unconscious by an adult co-worker. Once revived by his workmates, he was enraged, vowing to his aggressor he would find him when he was older and settle scores. (In his unpublished memoirs, he related how he kept track of his assailant in the *barrio* and, as a young man, returned to his workplace to confront him, only to discover his nemesis had died a few weeks earlier.⁷⁸ We can only speculate what might have occurred had he found the aggressor.)

1976, p. 72–7; Joan Ferrer and Simó Piera, *Simó Piera: Perfil d’un sindicalista. Records i experiències d’un dirigent de la CNT*, Barcelona, 1975, pp. 17–25.

⁷² Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión, *Estadística de los accidentados de trabajo*, Madrid, 1930, pp. 114–47.

⁷³ *La Vanguardia*, 15 August 1931.

⁷⁴ Letters to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 11 December 1985, and Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

⁷⁵ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

⁷⁶ ‘Our profession was not very complex. It was crude work and took place at an infernal rhythm’ (MI T. 1, L. I, 131–132).

⁷⁷ Julio von Bük, *Manual del Fabricante de Ladrillos*, Barcelona, 1923, pp. 199–230 & 241–6.

⁷⁸ MI T. 1, L. I, 25–7.

While factory life work was anything but a gymnasium for the young, José's experience of manual labour saw him develop into a strong teenager. His childhood illness notwithstanding, he was an able-bodied young man – about 1.60 metres, an average height for his generation – and more than capable of defending himself. Yet, perhaps more tellingly, in 1918, soon after the aggression, José sought redress through collective channels in what was his initiation in labour struggle. This was no conventional industrial conflict for better wages, but a local and generational struggle of the apprentices in the glass sector, who sought better treatment inside the factories both from employers and their adult co-workers – a demand that directly reflected José's experience of workplace violence. Although I have been unable to find any information about this dispute, it is possible to make certain observations. In a conflict spearheaded by what were still children, there was a strong element of play. For youths very much captivated by news of the world war, they now had the chance to participate in their own 'war'. Accordingly, José and his fellow strikers armed themselves with sticks and obliged apprentices in two nearby factories to stop work: 'We waited for the recalcitrant ones when they left work and we gave it to them.' While years later he would intervene in major CNT conflicts armed with pistols and sometimes explosives, his baptism in social struggle was, ironically, directed against the confederation, in which the adult glass workers were, for the most part, unionised. Without union backing and facing the hostility of their elders, the strike of the young discontents ended when they were forced back to work by their parents.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, this early and fleeting experience of struggle had a lasting impact on Peirats, and his unwavering trust in the rebellious energies of youth would remain a constant feature of his lifelong activism.

After the failed strike in the glass sector, José returned to work as a brickmaker, where wages were slightly higher to compensate for the tougher work involved.⁸⁰ In the twenty-year period from 1916–36, he worked in several of the many brickworks scattered around the southern part of Barcelona, in Sants, Collblanc, and in Les Corts, on the site of what is today the Barcelona Football Club stadium.⁸¹ This was the profession with which he identified most and which shaped his identity as a worker and his writing. Years later, when he was a renowned anarchist journalist, historian, and translated author, his printed calling cards proudly stated his profession as 'brickmaker'.⁸²

He was undoubtedly the world's most published brickmaker. As a rule, the brickmakers exhibited a rough working-class culture and, as a young adult, José himself was very much part of this:

At the time of the morning break, with the heat of the ovens if it was winter, everyone spoke and screamed loudly. Obviously the conversations were far from academic. Obscenities were common currency.

Popular topics were gambling, the voluptuous dancers of Paral·lel cabarets, and the sex workers from the brothels near the port, where many apprentices, including Peirats himself years later, became sexually initiated. There was also much talk of football, of which José described himself as a devoted fan and of 'el Barça'.⁸³ When weather permitted, the workers organised impromptu

⁷⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid.; Dolors Marín, *Clandestinos: El Maquis contra el franquismo, 1934–1975*, Barcelona, 2002, p. 186.

⁸¹ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 10 December 1987.

⁸² García, 'José Peirats Valls', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 15.

⁸³ MI T. 1, L. II, 36; letter to Mariano Aguayo, 13 June 1978. With football far more a middle-class spectator sport than in England, there is no evidence the impecunious Peirats ever saw a Barça match.

football matches during their breaks.⁸⁴ Despite his limp, Peirats enjoyed the ludic aspects of the game and revelled in the physical challenge.⁸⁵

Unskilled and underpaid, the brickmakers were perceived negatively in much of working-class society, especially among the more skilled, who looked down on them as the rogues of industry. Yet for José, brickmaking was a means of earning an 'honest' living.⁸⁶ Moreover, his sympathy with the brickmakers was very much in keeping with his growing compassion for the underdog – sentiments that were deepened after his family installed itself in Collblanc, among Barcelona's growing migrant sub-proletariat.

1.3 Collblanc

With the family economy suffering due to the economic downturn, and the ongoing fall-out of José's medical bills, in 1918 the Peirats moved from Sants to Collblanc Street, the main street in the neighbouring barri of Collblanc. This decision again reflected Teresa's mastery of the family's destiny. She appreciated that for a lower rent, the family would benefit from more spacious accommodation in Collblanc and, moreover, she could take in lodgers to improve the family finances. Their new top floor flat afforded an uninterrupted view of the Mediterranean coasts of Garraf, the mountains of Montjuïc and Tibidabo, and the chimneys of the nearby brickworks.⁸⁷ José's parents found work in an espadrille shop owned by a valldouxense, while he and Dolores worked in nearby factories. In the early difficult years in Collblanc, the Peirats shared their residence with up to three lodgers at a time.⁸⁸ Yet the new flat became the family home where José's parents lived out the rest of their lives: decades later they, like Dolores, would die in the house. José would remain there for eighteen years, until he was twenty-eight, when the course of his life changed irrevocably with the revolution and civil war of 1936. We might reasonably conclude that Peirats felt a strong sense of duty to his parents after they had become impoverished by his medical expenses. He was always concerned they perceived him as a 'good' son; nevertheless, along with his sister, the Peirats constituted a compact and functional family unit.

In their quest for cheaper rents, the Peirats had unconsciously followed Barcelona's shifting topography of revolution, from the first industrialised barrios (Poble Sec, Sants) to the marginal slums (Collblanc).⁸⁹ While an administrative part of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Collblanc was wedded to Barcelona's rapidly expanded urban periphery and, in the 1920s, it attracted legions of migrant workers, the shock troops of Catalonia's industrial and urban growth.⁹⁰ L'Hospitalet experienced vertiginous population growth (over 450 per cent in the 1920s alone) and by the early 1930s it was the second largest population centre in Catalonia, with around 40,000 inhabitants, over 27 per cent of whom were Valencian.⁹¹ Most of the new arrivals settled in Collblanc and the neighbouring district of La Torrassa, whose combined population grew from 3,810 in 1920

⁸⁴ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 10 December 1987.

⁸⁵ Letter to Mariano Aguayo, 13 June 1978.

⁸⁶ MI T. 1, L. II, 63.

⁸⁷ Letter to Domingo Canela, 11 May 1986.

⁸⁸ MI T. 1, L. I, 32.

⁸⁹ See José Luis Oyón, *La quiebra de la ciudad popular: Espacio urbano, inmigración y anarquismo en la Barcelona de entreguerras, 1914–1936*, Barcelona, 2008.

⁹⁰ For the district, see Inocencio Salmerón, *Històries de Collblanc-La Torrassa*, L'Hospitalet, 2009.

⁹¹ Josep Roca and Enriqueta Díaz, 'La Torrassa: Un antecedent de barri-dormitori', *L'Avenç*, June 1980, pp. 62–9; Joan Camós i Cabecerán, *L'Hospitalet: la història de tots nosaltres, 1930–1936*, Barcelona, 1986, pp. 6 & 14.

to 21,185 in just ten years.⁹² For the most part unskilled construction workers, the migrants of Collblanc-La Torrassa were the lowest of the low – isolated, spatially and socially, from the rest of L'Hospitalet, eking out an existence on the margins of Catalan 'civilisation'. As Peirats put it, the area was 'almost disregarded... We saw ourselves then as second-class Barcelonans.'⁹³

Urban conditions were among some of the most abysmal in the Barcelona area. This rapidly developed space had little or no infrastructure, and some houses lacked water, drainage, and electricity. Streets were often unpaved and many thousands lived in shanty houses. Nevertheless, like in La Vall, the community faced material hardships with mutual aid and reciprocity: if people were in financial trouble, neighbours would help out as best they could, whereas rough justice was meted out to those who abused this solidarity.⁹⁴

The first years in Collblanc were beset by tragedy. Peirats later defined 1918–20 as a time of 'crisis'.⁹⁵ Their arrival coincided with the influenza pandemic that ravaged Europe in the winter of 1918, which claimed perhaps as many as 300,000 lives from all social classes across Spain.⁹⁶ In Collblanc, the bodies of the dead were carted away under cover of darkness in the hope of stalling popular hysteria. The Peirats family was seriously affected; the entire family being bedridden apart from José senior and Dolores. Although José fell ill, he was outside the most endangered age group of 20- to 40-year-olds and made a full recovery. Uncle Nelo was less fortunate, and his death was a heavy blow for the family, particularly José. The following year, Cisquet, José's younger brother, died after a hernia operation.⁹⁷ With the death of his young sister Teresa just a few years earlier, José had, by eleven, attended several family funerals and was painfully aware of the fragility of life.

It is no exaggeration to state that death stalked the barrios. Besides the pandemic, many young males from Collblanc had been conscripted to fight in the Moroccan War and the neighbours were regularly mourning the loss of loved ones.⁹⁸ Then, with the eruption of social war on the streets of Barcelona, death came closer to home. The end of the World War I saw the coming of age of the CNT, which had attracted a vast membership: by 1919, it claimed close to 800,000 members across Spain, of which around one-third (over 250,000) was massed in its Barcelona stronghold.⁹⁹ As the economy slowed down in late 1918, the unions flexed their muscles. With the employers determined to break union power, the post-war years were a time of profound social ferment. A major trial of strength came with the 1919 La Canadiense conflict. Much of the state's repressive arsenal was mobilised; martial law was implemented and, following the militarisation of essential services, soldiers replaced strikers and some 4,000 workers were jailed. Regardless, energy workers paralysed industry across Barcelona province for forty-four days. Amidst food

⁹² Salmerón, *Històries*, p. 30.

⁹³ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

⁹⁴ MI T. 1, L. I, 28.

⁹⁵ Letter to Sara and Jesús Guillén, 18 April 1970.

⁹⁶ See Howard Phillips and David Killingray (eds.), *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19: New Perspectives*, London, 2003, and Beatriz Echeverri Dávila, *La gripe española: La pandemia de 1918–1919*, Madrid, 1993.

⁹⁷ MI T. 1, L. I, 24 & 27.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁹ Susanna Tavera and Eulàlia Vega, 'L'afiliació sindical a la CRT de Catalunya: entre l'eufòria revolucionària i l'ensulsiada confederal, 1919–1936', in Various Authors, *Col·loqui Internacional "Revolució i Socialisme"*, vol. II, Barcelona, 1989, p. 358.

shortages, power cuts, and torch-lit nocturnal army patrols, the Catalan capital seemed like a city at war.¹⁰⁰

The La Canadiense conflict polarised the social context. The authoritarian employers' association, the Federación Patronal Española (Spanish Employers' Federation), which represented the most militant elements within the Catalan industrial elite, embarked upon classic union-busting tactics. In alliance with extremists within the local military, the employers' federation pursued its reactionary utopia of pacifying industrial relations *manu militari*. In the autumn of 1919, the Sindicatos Libres (Free Unions), a Catholic anti-CNT union with a paramilitary wing, was established with the support of the most confrontational employers and officers within the Barcelona garrison.¹⁰¹ This was followed by an eighty-four-day lockout of some 300,000 workers, lasting from 3 November 1919 to 26 January 1920.¹⁰² In November 1920, the assault on the CNT gathered pace when General Severiano Martínez Anido was appointed Barcelona civil governor. Having served previously in Morocco and the Philippines, Martínez Anido ruled the city like a colonial fiefdom, appointing General Miguel Arlegui as his police chief and unleashing a two-year reign of terror based on the 'law of escape' (*ley de fugas*), a programme of selective assassination of CNT militants.¹⁰³

Like the rest of working-class Barcelona, the Peirats were afflicted by this collective trauma. Close to his twelfth birthday at the time of the lockout, José was shocked by the sight of growing numbers of jobless workers begging in the streets. As working-class consumption declined, so did demand for the espadrilles produced by José's parents, sending the Peirats into poverty. With food increasingly scarce, the family joined groups of workers who seized crops from the fields close to L'Hospitalet or collected wild vegetables. These trips provided José with his first real experience of repressive policing, as the Guardia Civil (Civil Guard) cavalry pursued 'the peaceful botanists with their sabres'.¹⁰⁴ The intensifying class struggle directly impacted on his life – one of his co-workers was assassinated by Free Unions gunmen and his workplace was full of talk of the CNT and of its newspaper, *Solidaridad Obrera* (commonly known as *La Soli*). At home, developments were regularly discussed at the dining table, which the family shared with their lodgers: a communist by the name of Gonzalo and two relatives, José's socialist uncle Benjamín and his cousin Vicente, an anarcho-syndicalist militant. The lodgers were an important part of José's political education, as they regaled him with the interpretations of the worsening political crisis from the perspective of the three main leftist tendencies. During long after-meal conversations, he discovered new terms like 'Soviet', 'social revolution', 'proletarian dictatorship', and, for the first time, heard the names of Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin.¹⁰⁵

José's cousin Vicente emerged as a new mentor and replaced Nelo as a guiding anarchist influence. Eight years older than José, Vicente was a twenty-year-old baker and CNT activist. A so-called 'man of action', he was a member of the defence committees that enforced strikes and had served a short jail sentence for possession of firearms. Upon his release, Vicente's parents

¹⁰⁰ Chris Ealham, 'Class and the City: Spatial Memories of Pleasure and Danger in Barcelona, 1914–23', *Oral History*, no. 29, January 2001, pp. 33–47.

¹⁰¹ Angel Smith, *Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction: Catalan Labour and the Crisis of the Spanish State, 1898–1923*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 324–6.

¹⁰² Soledad Bengoechea, *El locaut de Barcelona (1919–1920)*, Barcelona, 1998.

¹⁰³ Maria Amàlia Pradas, *L'anarquisme i les lluites socials a Barcelona 1918–1923: la repressió obrera i la violència*, Barcelona, 2003.

¹⁰⁴ MI T. 1, L. I, 27–8.

¹⁰⁵ Peirats, 'Una experiència...', p.14; MI T. 1, L. I, 30 & 32.

disowned him, whereupon he was taken in by José's parents. It is possible that Gonzalo, the communist lodger, had participated in similar activities, for he had also been jailed. José used to visit him frequently, as he had done before, along with the rest of the Peirats family, when uncle Nelo served a short stint in prison.¹⁰⁶

At a neighbourhood level, Collblanc-La Torrassa was in a state of effervescence. If the dreams of immigrant labourers for a better life were destroyed by the nightmarish urban crisis, the alternative offered by the CNT provided renewed hope. The CNT was arguably the most important structure in the barrio. Building on and refining bonds of kinship, reciprocity, and mutual aid, it forged a community of resistance in the struggle to ameliorate the manifold inequalities of everyday life. For the authorities and men of order, whose grip over this densely-populated area was weak, Collblanc-La Torrassa was a space of fear, 'the city without law',¹⁰⁷ described by *La Voz de Hospitalet* as 'a focus of civic disease' and home to 'the detritus of the city'.¹⁰⁸

The anarchists, meanwhile, were determined to reshape the local environment and create a social infrastructure of unions, schools, and cooperatives for the 'new' proletariat, which, still in formation in the immediate post-war years, would emerge as the decisive revolutionary actor in the 1930s, converting the district into what Peirats described as 'an anarchist fortress'.¹⁰⁹ This was the setting for José's first militancy and the neighbourhood moulded his perspectives. Living among people deprived of all but the most basic aspects of modern life, he was acutely conscious of their suffering and developed a faith in their essential goodness. It was here that his imagination conceived of a world in which the love of humanity and justice could become the moral core of a new order.

In late 1922, aged fourteen, and having completed his 'apprenticeship' as a brickmaker, José became a member of the Barcelona CNT's Sociedad de Ladrilleros (Brickmakers' Society). Its parent union, the Sindicato de la Construcción (Construction Union), was the most militant of all the city's unions, which encadred thousands of migrant workers. This coincided with a union recruitment drive ahead of a planned strike action intended to improve the lot of the brickmakers. Ironically, for all the influence of his milieu and his uncle Nelo and cousin Vicente, José was a reluctant cenetista: he was bluntly ordered to join the union by his workplace delegate or be declared a 'scab', 'and then you'll find out what happens!'¹¹⁰ Yet, once a trade unionist, he immersed himself in CNT activities, regularly attending the union office in Sants after work, where he met and socialised with other activists and perused newspapers and books in the reading room.

Peirats was radicalised by the great brickmakers' strike of 1923. Beginning on 28 February, the union sought to establish a stable wage system and suppress piecework, which workers viewed as a denigrating and inhumane system based on the payment of a set 'rate' for the number of 'pieces' produced. Since employers and subcontractors could manipulate the 'rate' to suit their circumstances, they found this form of remuneration extremely beneficial. For the brickmakers, it brought insecurity and unexpected fluctuations in their wages when the 'rate' was lowered, whereupon they found themselves working longer and producing more simply to secure the ear-

¹⁰⁶ MI T. 1, L. I, 29 & 34; Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', pp. 14–5.

¹⁰⁷ José del Castillo and Santiago Álvarez, *Barcelona, Objetivo Cubierto*, Barcelona, 1958, p. 32. For an elitist commentary on the district, see Carles Sentís, *Viatge en Transmiserià: Crònica viscuda de la primera gran emigració a Catalunya*, Barcelona, 1994.

¹⁰⁸ *La Voz de Hospitalet*, 16 March 1929, cited in Camós i Cabecerán, *L'Hospitalet*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁹ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 13.

¹¹⁰ MI T. 1, L. II, 33–4.

lier level of remuneration. The strike was bitterly contested and dragged on throughout spring into summer. There were frequent violent episodes, including attacks on strike-breakers and workshops.¹¹¹ While too young to play a role in the ‘combat commandos [that] settled scores with scab traitors’,¹¹² José was fully involved in the conflict, spending long periods in the union office, the nerve centre of the strike. As union resources became stretched, the brickmakers were increasingly fighting a rearguard action.

When the union ruled that single males could work in brickworks outside Barcelona, where there was no dispute with employers, José, still just fifteen, was sent with other cenetistas to work in Castellar del Vallès, twenty-five kilometres from home, returning at weekends to divide up his wages between his family and the union strike fund.¹¹³ But by September 1923, after seven months, the strike was collapsing, only to be killed off by the military coup launched by General Miguel Primo de Rivera on 13 September. The brickworkers returned to work in defeat, demoralised and embittered; the employers, however, were jubilant. The owners of Barcelona’s brickworks thanked their military saviour for bringing ‘social and political sanitation’ to their city and to Spain.¹¹⁴ The advent of dictatorship marked the end of a cycle of protest that had gathered pace during the world war. For José, however, this marked a new beginning, a time of reflection, clandestine activism, and consciousness-raising that equipped him with the ideas and beliefs that shaped the course of his life.

¹¹¹ *La Vanguardia*, 3 August 1923.

¹¹² MI T. 1, L. II, 34.

¹¹³ Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 68–9.

¹¹⁴ *La Vanguardia*, 12–14 and 23 September 1923.

Chapter Two: From the street gangs of Barcelona to the anarchist groups (1923–30)

I am a modest writer who emerged
from the fired clay of an oven.

—José Peirats

2.1 The forging of a revolutionary

During the seven years of the dictatorship, Peirats was transformed from a fifteen-year-old child labourer into an enlightened brickmaker, becoming, what was known in working-class circles, ‘*un obrero consciente*’ (literally, a conscious worker). This conversion, if inexorable, was nonetheless gradual. From age nine onwards, he had assimilated the ‘rough’ culture of the brickmakers, so the teenage *cenetista* was motivated by adolescent male concerns with sex, hedonism, and football. In keeping with patterns of masculine sociability, Peirats was part of a gang of young brickmakers, the leader of which was tattooed – something which, in the 1920s, was not as mainstream as it is today. They frequented the rowdy bars of Collblanc-La Torrassa and Barcelona’s notorious red-light district, the ‘Barrio Chino’ (Chinatown), in search of diversion and nocturnal pleasures.¹ As he later recognised, as a youth, he was ‘submerged in the milieu’.² Accordingly, his first sexual experience was with a ‘Barrio Chino’ prostitute.³ Even for a good-looking teenager like Peirats, whose delicate features and light brown wavy hair doubtless made him attractive to the opposite sex, it was commonplace for young males at this time to purchase sexual services in order to become initiated in sexual intercourse.⁴ Since such an act was anathema to anarchist morality, it indicates the limits of his ideological development, along with external cultural and peer pressures. Later in life, he would become a fierce critic of such activities and of all relations bound by the cash nexus.

Shortly after this important rite of passage, José’s personal enlightenment accelerated – a process of acculturation that prevented him from becoming a teenage ‘delinquent’. Driven by ‘shame due to my ignorance’, he moved away from his street gang friends with whom he previously caroused bars and found ‘new friends who always had a book under their arm’.⁵ The workplace

¹ MI T. 1, L. II, 38–9; for the ‘Barrio Chino’, see Chris Ealham, ‘An “Imagined Geography”: Ideology, Urban Space and Protest in the Creation of Barcelona’s “Chinatown”, c.1835–1936’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 50, no. 1, March 2005, pp. 373–97.

² Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

³ MI T. 1, L. II, 40.

⁴ César Broto and Miquel Àngel Bergés, *La Lleida anarquista: Memòries d’un militant de la CNT durant la República, la guerra civil i el franquisme*, Lleida, 2006, p. 37, and Fidel Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria. Juventud: amor, sueños y esperanzas*, México, 1989, pp. 149–50.

⁵ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

was an important educational arena. Having witnessed the sufferings of a co-worker with venereal disease (a major health problem at the time), he modified his sexual conduct.⁶ Meanwhile, during a work break, an older brickmaker showed him a book about the ancient Greeks. Appalled by his limited knowledge, José later confessed that he ‘wanted to know the history of humanity’.⁷ Increasingly, he craved enlightenment as a means of transcending the injuries of class, of dignifying and beautifying a brutal everyday context. The pursuit of culture was also, to an extent, motivated by the legacy of his illness. Never one to back away from a challenge, hitherto he had responded aggressively to taunts from co-workers about his limp. Now, he resolved to gain respect from those around him through ideas and culture.⁸

José’s cultural revolution was encouraged by his relationship with Pere Massoni, ‘the spiritual father of Barcelona’s brickmakers’ and former Construction Union secretary.⁹ The architect of the epic 1923 strike, Massoni was a marked man: blacklisted by employers, he was lucky to be alive, having survived an assassination attempt by right-wing gunmen in 1919 that left him with a pronounced limp and progressive paralysis in an arm.¹⁰ Subjected to intense police supervision, Massoni lived clandestinely, with an assumed identity, struggling to sustain the union from the shadows.¹¹ Although the CNT was forced underground, it retained sufficient power during the dictatorship to protect its prominent activists. Accordingly, Massoni found work through an agreement between the illegal CNT and José’s employer, although his fellow brickmakers covered for him when he needed to rest due to his injuries.¹² Tall and charismatic, Massoni was the author of a short historical study of the brickmakers from the time of Babylon and had a profound interest in culture. A powerful presence in the *bóvilas*, he was an inspiration for the young brickmakers. According to Peirats, ‘he was our leader, our guide’,¹³ ‘a tortured saint’.¹⁴ Massoni showed Peirats how someone with physical problems far more pronounced than his own could be respected, and his example impelled him on his path towards becoming an enlightened brickmaker.

José’s struggle for knowledge was the beginning of a revolution in his everyday life, a life-long fight for individual autonomy and personal discipline, to master his own destiny, and to maximise his human potential. He was accompanied in this journey by Domingo Canela, a co-worker three years his senior.¹⁵ The pair first met at the Sants Rationalist School and they were reunited in the brickworks, where José, Canela, and his two brothers worked as a team. Quick workers all, they laboured intensely to meet their quota of bricks before taking unofficial breaks to discuss their common interests. Before Massoni’s arrival, this time was spent playing football outside the brickworks; now, they succumbed to ‘the all-consuming fever of books’¹⁶ and used

⁶ MI T. 1, L. II, 35–6.

⁷ Interview with Peirats in Dolors Marín, *Ministros anarquistas: La CNT en el gobierno de la II República (1936–1939)*, Barcelona, 2005, p. 56, n. 31.

⁸ Letters to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 11 December 1985, and Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

⁹ José Peirats, ‘Secularización de Horacio M. Prieto’, *Polémica*, October–December 1985, p. 12; for Massoni, see Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 67–84.

¹⁰ *La Humanitat*, 8 June 1933.

¹¹ Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 67.

¹² MI T. 1, L. II, 36; Marín, *Clandestinos*, p. 188.

¹³ Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 70–1.

¹⁴ MI T. 1, L. II, 36.

¹⁵ Marín, *Clandestinos*, pp. 185–90.

¹⁶ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 15.

their breaks to discuss their readings and politics before returning to work. Away from work, José and Domingo, who had an intellectual air, nurtured each other's hunger for the written word: they spent much of their money on literature, visiting bookstalls at weekends and exchanging pamphlets, newspapers, and books with each other, as they transformed themselves into committed anarchists. With a camaraderie based on shared ideas, youth, workplace and neighbourhood loyalties, they were inseparable friends for the next decade or so.¹⁷ As teenagers finding their place in the adult world, there was a pronounced ludic element to their exuberant cultural activism. As Canela later recalled, 'It was a bit like a game. We always wanted to joke, laugh, run... and this shaped our activism, which was always both enjoyable and consistent.'¹⁸ These qualities were evident in José's adult activism; his youthful humour developing into a mordant wit that became a hallmark of his writing style.¹⁹

José's socialist uncle Benjamín, who often resided in the family home in Collblanc, also nurtured his appetite for ideas, allowing him access to his personal library and guiding his reading. Under his supervision, José devoured geographical and historical works by Élisée Reclus and Charles Darwin, as well as the literary *oeuvre* of French utopian socialist Eugène Sue, such as *Les Mystères de Paris* – readings they discussed together.²⁰ Benjamín also introduced José to theatre, taking him to the Teatro España in Plaza de España to see the 'social' plays by José Fola Igarbide, such as *El Cristo moderno* and *El sol de la humanidad*, with their subtext of human justice and resistance to tyranny. Since the dictatorship closed off other channels of social protest, these cultural activities acquired great political significance, often ending in impromptu political debates. José was enthralled by the power of theatre.²¹ Like many anarchists before him, he appreciated its propaganda value as a vehicle for the expression of a collective project, a means by which the audience could assimilate new concepts.²² Throughout his life, he devoted considerable energy to combing the languages of art and protest, organising theatre productions and writing two short plays.²³

His cultural obsession prompted him to attend evening classes with Roigé, his former teacher at the Sants Rationalist School, who now taught in one of the union-funded schools that were still tolerated by the authorities. Although José was approaching the age of conscription, his mother was delighted he could hone his writing skills. But the school provided Peirats with more than basic literacy. He was exposed to the masters of Greek philosophy (Diogenes, Socrates, and Epicurus), across to the French anarchist individualism of Han Ryner (Jacques Élie Henri Ambroise Ner).²⁴ Yet, arguably, it was the pedagogical context that moved him most: horizontal classroom practices that transcended social and gender hierarchies, debates fostering the development of powers of reasoning and public speaking, and class hikes in the countryside that deepened his love of nature. This experience was a defining one, giving him his first taste of genuinely free relationships across the gender divide. He even fell (unsuccessfully) in love with a classmate – a

¹⁷ Marín, *Clandestinos*, p. 185.

¹⁸ Domingo Canela, 'Testimonio de lucha y amistad recogido por I. de Llorens', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 46.

¹⁹ Felipe Aláiz, *Tipos españoles*, Paris, 1965, pp. 179–83.

²⁰ MI T. 1, L. II, 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² See Eduard Masjuan, 'Medis obrers, conflictivitat social i innovació cultural a Sabadell (1877–1909)', *Recerques*, no. 47–48, 2004, pp. 131–54.

²³ The unpublished *Violín de Ingres* and *Revivir*, L'Hospitalet, 1932.

²⁴ MI T. 1, L. II, 43, 51, & 58.

painful episode that would be repeated in his early adult life. In short, the school experience left him with a set of human values and anarchist convictions that guided his later life.²⁵

He acquired a new set of mental structures – a morality and a way of living, including temperance, all rooted in a deep sense of egalitarianism, camaraderie, and cultural improvement. He found himself hopelessly in love with ideas and their beauty, with an unbridled desire for knowledge and a voracious appetite for the written word; reading had become his ‘vice’.²⁶ He was also endowed with a new confidence that he could overcome the injuries of class and the cultural limits stemming from his social rank. These convictions, as we will see, remained with him: his very existence was inflected by a profound struggle for education and culture, the central values of the anarchist movement that he internalised as the core of his own existence.

His respect for scientific rationalism saw him declare war on all forms of ‘obscurantism’. This included spiritism, an occult, humanist doctrine popular in Catalan freethinking circles.²⁷ Prior to his evening classes, a curious Peirats, who ‘continued in search of the absolute truth with the tenacity of a little philosopher’,²⁸ had been exposed to spiritism by an uncle and an aunt. While he appreciated the moral content of spiritism as well as its hostility to Catholic idolatry and its stress on peace and love, his new intellectual maturity pushed towards pure reason. His final break with the spiritists reflected a different kind of maturity: having become infatuated with a female member of his spiritist group, he quarrelled with her male partner and left.²⁹

Still a teenager, José defined himself as ‘a romantic dreamer. I was always dreaming.’ Faced with a harsh political context, he sometimes retreated into adventure stories, including westerns, as well as travelogues that introduced him to new and exotic habitats. These readings helped him envisage alternative realities, a ‘marvellous world’, and, in walks with friends, his flights of imagination transformed the trees of the banks of the river Llobregat into an African jungle, while the beaches became the landscape of a desert island.³⁰

These last impulses of adolescent play eventually gave way to the desire of a young adult to make his mark on the world: ‘I took on the ambition of becoming someone in life.’³¹ Peirats created a study area in his bedroom with a desk and built a library, quite literally, as Benjamín had instructed him how to construct bookcases from large egg boxes, which supported his growing collection of Russian anarchist classics by Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, studies of the natural world and geography, as well as works by Tolstoy, Ibsen, Kant, and Schopenhauer.³²

This eclectic collection provides an insight into Peirats’s conception of culture. First of all, his was a non-partisan culture, far removed from the restrictive definition of ‘proletarian culture’ advocated by the official (Stalinised) communist movement in the 1920s; in contrast, Peirats believed workers must embrace and master the culture of humanity. Second, his quest for culture was combined with a deep appreciation of aesthetics – something that went hand in hand with

²⁵ Ibid., 53–4, & 61–2.

²⁶ Ibid., 68.

²⁷ See the studies by Gerard Horta, *De la mística a les barricades: Introducció a l’espiritisme català del XIX dins el context ocultista europeu*, Barcelona, 2001, and ‘Espiritismo y lucha social en Cataluña a finales del siglo XIX’, *Historia, antropología y fuentes orales*, no. 31, 2004, pp. 29–49.

²⁸ MI T. 1, L. II, 43–4.

²⁹ Ibid., 43, 48–9, 54, & 56.

³⁰ Ibid., 35 & 43; Peirats, ‘Una experiència històrica...’, p. 17.

³¹ Peirats, ‘Una experiència històrica...’, p. 16.

³² ‘I was motivated by a philosophical restlessness. I was concerned with interrogating the absolute truths of life’ (MI T. 1, L. II, 43).

his conviction that the exalted ideas of total liberty were beautifully ennobling for humanity. His craving for art and literature was a means of embellishing his life, a counterbalance to the deadening spiritual slavery of capitalist work. In a way that presaged the later stance of the Situationists, José grasped the aesthetic and poetic qualities of revolution, which he saw as a kind of artistic production: ‘A genuinely revolutionary creation is like a work of art.’³³ And all creation presupposed an affirmative struggle against structures of everyday oppression, without which the ultimate act of communal creation would be impossible.³⁴ In sum, his quest for beauty was a yearning for the splendour of revolution, a quest for revolutionary *truth*. Third, all the above implied an individual struggle. This facet was driven home by his numerous references to the sacrifices of the autodidact:

Culture, like freedom, has to be conquered. A law of compensation dominates life. Without an equivalent effort, nothing is possible. The sacrifice depends on individual will.... Culture does not come begging; it is attained through the open struggle against the bedrock of our prejudices.³⁵

This struggle marked José’s life indelibly. In 1985, four years before his death, he wrote in a private letter that ‘What others may learn with ease, required a titanic struggle on my part.’³⁶ We see here key aspects of his personality: internal strength and certainty, dogged tenacity and fortitude – traits that enabled him to counterbalance ‘the lost time’ of his early life and the ‘deficit in his knowledge base’.³⁷ For Peirats, this was a personal refusal to accept the limits of his social, familial, and environmental circumstances, a rebellion against the cultural condition imposed on him by the state and by capital.³⁸ This endowed him with an immense belief in his own capacity for self-improvement: he taught himself to paint in his sixties and he began writing short stories in his seventies. Paradoxically, this act of will to make culture ‘attainable’ could lead to condescension:

Those who cannot read choose to be like that... The autodidact is a cultural phenomenon far more interesting than all visions of beauty immortalised in treatises and monographs... The autodidact is a flower of life... his dogged and silent labour of filing through the prison bars of his ignorance makes him a hero.³⁹

Peirats unquestionably saw himself in the tradition of earlier ‘heroes’ like Anselmo Lorenzo, the autodidact printer who, more than anyone else, came to symbolise the human qualities of anarchist intellectuals.⁴⁰ Lorenzo’s example forged a cult of the autodidact in CNT circles. As José recognised, ‘Ninety-nine per cent of the anarchist contingent in Spain is a living example of the autodidact.’⁴¹

In certain respects, acculturation signified a desire for socio-cultural advance. In Peirats’s case, ‘I achieved this scratching around in books and I gained respect.’⁴² Yet beneath an individual sense of self-worth and dignity, there rested a deep sense of humility. It is risible to conclude Peirats was building up cultural capital to enhance his social position or to obtain a financial

³³ José Peirats, ‘¿Se renunció a la revolución?’, *Presencia*, September–October 1966.

³⁴ José Peirats, ‘García Lamolla y el surrealismo’, *Ruta*, 8 July 1937.

³⁵ José Peirats, *Los intelectuales en la revolución*, Barcelona, 1938, pp. 78–9.

³⁶ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 12 July 1985.

³⁷ MI T. 1, L. II, 43.

³⁸ José Peirats, ‘El autodidacta’, *Evolución*, September 1937.

³⁹ Peirats, *Los intelectuales*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Francisco Madrid, *Anselmo Lorenzo: Un militante proletario en el ojo del huracán*, Barcelona, 2009.

⁴¹ Peirats, ‘El autodidacta’, *Evolución*, September 1937.

⁴² Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

gain. Had he nursed such ambition, he was intelligent enough to appreciate there were better places to pursue this than within the anarchist movement. Indeed, his initial experience of CNT membership in the early 1920s was enough to show him that his activism would more likely take him to a prison cell rather than a summer house in Barcelona's bourgeois suburbs. There was also a pronounced social dimension to Peirats's cultural mission. While he saw anarchism as a vehicle for attaining perfection, his was not a yearning for beauty in a contemplative, passive sense, but at a collective level. Hence, he would read to his illiterate neighbours after dinner, particularly in the balmy summer months,⁴³ and he would always share his new ideas with workmates, neighbours, and friends.

To comprehend fully this struggle for culture, we need to consider the context of the Primo de Rivera regime, which closed off the principal activities of the anarcho-sindicalist public sphere (unions and newspapers) in Barcelona in an attempt to quell the mass movement that so threatened the socio-economic order during 1918–23. Meanwhile, the socialist movement, which briefly cooperated with the dictator, was largely left unmolested, creating a bitter rivalry for years to come. Hitherto, José's activism had been limited to the trade unions but now, in their absence, he was part of a younger generation engaged in consciousness-raising activities in which they identified anarchism as the ideological lodestar they were to follow in coming years.

2.2. The affinity group

The vehicle for these youth's anarchist energies was the affinity group, the basic cell of libertarian sociability. It is unclear when José first joined an affinity group but, by the late 1920s, he and Domingo Canela were members of Verdad, a group involved, among other things, in representing works of drama. Created by older activists, Verdad sought to bridge the generation divide and attract youth to their banner by organising theatre productions, the proceeds of which were donated to the prisoner support groups.⁴⁴ This emphasis on theatre appealed to Peirats's imagination and he readily joined other members of Verdad in producing agitprop-style productions consisting of social plays and poetry readings, which were followed by a debate. Through these productions, Verdad sought to bring the social issues of the day closer to the workers.⁴⁵

José faced a new struggle in 1928, when he reached the age of military service. His initial intention was that of many young anarchists: to declare himself a fugitive (*prófugo*) and go to France. This plan led to a bitter row with his mother, who was chastened by the abortive flight of her nephew Vicente to France and his subsequent incarceration. Teresa cried and pleaded with Peirats to reconsider. Resorting to emotional blackmail, she accused him of abandoning the parents who sacrificed so much for him during his illness. They reached a compromise, rooted in his mother's conviction that he would be deemed unfit for military service due to his limp. Accordingly, José would present himself for medical examination and, in the event that he was declared fit, he would flee to France. To the amazement of all, the army doctor declared him fit for active service. Before he could make plans to cross the border, his mother seized the initiative and arranged for a second examination by an independent doctor, who diagnosed him as suffering from 'curvature and necrosis of the head of the femur' and 'progressive paralysis with atrophy'

⁴³ MI T. 1, L. II, 42.

⁴⁴ Canela, 'Testimonio...', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 44.

⁴⁵ MI T. 1, L. II, 42.

in the hip – a judgement consistent with Perthes disease. Upon appeal, José was declared ‘fit for auxiliary service’, although this was postponed, with the requirement he report every two years for an army medical examination.⁴⁶

Free now to focus on his activism, and with the dictatorship tottering under the weight of its internal contradictions, José became one of the ‘Young Turks’⁴⁷ who played a decisive role in the ascendant protest curve of 1929–31. Following years of clandestine action, these activists emerged from the shadows to overcome their sense of collective trepidation. At times, their protest actions were limited to their neighbourhood, where they felt safer. For example, José and his group stymied plans to build a hermitage in Collblanc. Every time a wall was erected, he and ‘the followers of Atila’ knocked it down until the project was aborted.⁴⁸

He directed much energy into reorganising the CNT. With his fellow brickmakers and Massoni, he revived the Brickmakers’ Union.⁴⁹ To organise openly, the impatient brickmakers decided to comply with the existing labour legislation and form a legally constituted professional association. While the veteran Massoni was at the helm, a younger group of activists, including Peirats (who was elected librarian of the brickmakers’ social centre), came to the fore. These youngsters pressurised union leaders to release funds for new activities, including a newspaper. Thus was born *El Boletín del Ladrillero*, an occasional publication produced by the militants grouped around Peirats and Canela. Reflecting the rapid cultural development of those gathered around *El Boletín*, they were convinced of the transforming power of the written word and sought to raise the moral level of brickmakers and, in general, to dignify the working-class condition. As Peirats acknowledged:

[W]e endeavoured to instil our members with a social culture. We had swotted up on literature and sociology during the eight-years’ peace of the dictatorship. We hadn’t wasted any time.⁵⁰

Issue one included José’s first published article ‘La palabra ladrillero, sinónimo de perversión’, a defence of his co-workers while also a fierce attack on the culture of gambling, drinking, and whoring prevalent among young brickmakers.⁵¹ If we recall Peirats’s adolescent nights in bars and brothels, he was well informed of the problem against which he rallied. His first writings display many of the qualities that came to characterise his journalism: a keen eye for synthesis and an aversion to the excessive use of adjectives; a preference for direct prose, based on short, clear sentences; the combative title; the vehement and implacable moral tenor and polemical tone; and the unyielding view that misery can be transcended by beauty. As in his later writings, he confidently grappled with a big question; in this case, what he saw as the main cultural problem facing brickmakers. His combative writing style and his refusal to back away from a struggle were in part inspired by his personal fight with the consequences of Perthes disease. He readily conceded to a friend that the ‘inferiority complex’ caused by his leg impairment conditioned his confrontational prose.⁵²

Testimony to his potential as a writer, even at this young age, José was named editor of *El Boletín*, just months after its launch. This is more remarkable still when we consider that he

⁴⁶ MI T. 1, L. I, 30 and L. II, 64–6; Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Letter to Judith and Rodrigo Rama, 10 February 1985.

⁴⁹ MI T. 1, L. II, 54; Canela, ‘Testimonio...’, *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 46.

⁵⁰ MI T. 2, L. III, 76.

⁵¹ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 18; MI T. 1, L. II, 63.

⁵² Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

only started writing in Castilian when he was twenty, in 1928, the same year his first article appeared.⁵³ Though Catalan remained his first language, his readiness to write in Castilian reflected a desire to address the newly arrived migrants and, moreover, to use a language capable of uniting the working class across the Spanish state. Although *El Boletín* was formally the mouthpiece of a specific occupational sector within the local union movement, given the limited press freedoms of the day, it acquired an echo within the clandestine Barcelona CNT and attracted contributions from some of the leading movement figures, such as Ángel Pestaña and Progreso Alfarache, thereby drawing Peirats into closer contact with prominent cenetistas. Further evidence of his cultural-propagandist inclinations came in 1929, when his short play *La Venus desnuda* was serialised in *El Boletín*.⁵⁴

So what of Peirats's politics? He can best be described as an internationalist anarchist syndicalist: he was a trade unionist, but this was subordinate to his overriding libertarian aims. This was reflected in the press he read: he subscribed to New York's *Cultura Proletaria*, which was produced by Pedro Esteve, an exiled Catalan and former comrade of Anselmo Lorenzo. Meanwhile, Canela received Buenos Aires's *La Protesta*, which advocated an 'anarchist workers' movement', a formula associated with the Spanish-born Diego Abad de Santillán (Sinesio Baudilio García Fernández) and his Argentine ally, Emilio López Arango.⁵⁵ Peirats backed this project of an exclusively anarchist syndicalism, even though it clashed with the 'one big union' anarcho-syndicalist conception of those rebuilding the CNT at the time, including his mentor Massoni, who conceived of a less ideological movement. Later, as we will see, in the early 1930s, he broke with this schema after it contributed to a split in the CNT between the supporters of explicitly anarchist workers' associations and those who wanted ideologically diverse unions.

Besides following debates within transatlantic Hispanic anarcho-syndicalism, Peirats was fully apprised of the CNT's internal disputes at this time. He developed a profoundly classist and eminently anarcho-syndicalist dislike of the ideological anarchism of Juan Montseny (Federico Urales). Urales was the founder of *La Revista Blanca*, the flagship journal of Spanish anarchism, part of what Dolors Marín describes as his 'publishing enterprise'.⁵⁶ Peirats saw Urales as 'an old anarchist converted into a petit bourgeois of libertarian publishing' – a view that concurred with that of his old school teacher, Roigé, who described him as a 'parasite [*vividor*] of ideas'. José also recoiled against Urales's individualist anarchism, along with that of ideologues like Émile Armand, the French propagandist of 'free love' then much in vogue, whose ideas he rejected as 'almost pure libertinism'.⁵⁷ Most of all, he disliked Urales's anti-CNT stance and the 'poisonous and indiscriminate campaigns against union leaders'.⁵⁸ Presaging the divisions that would split the CNT just a few years later, the young anarcho-syndicalists were stupefied at news that Federica Montseny (Urales's daughter and one of the most polemical figures in Spanish anarchist history) had struck a member of a clandestine CNT committee during an argument over money collected by *La Revista Blanca* in the name of the social prisoners – money that the Urales refused

⁵³ There are no available records of *El Boletín del Ladrillero*. The exact date of publication of the first issue of *El Boletín* and Peirats's age are inferred from his writings and recollections and related sources. See Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 13.

⁵⁴ Peirats, *La Semana Trágica*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987.

⁵⁶ Dolors Marín, *Anarquistas: Un siglo de movimiento libertario en España*, Barcelona, 2010, p. 306.

⁵⁷ MI T. 1, L. II, 61 & 67. See Émile Armand, *The Anarchism of Émile Armand*, Quebec, 2002.

⁵⁸ MI T. 1, L. II, 60–1.

to hand over to the CNT Comité pro Presos (Prisoners' Support Committee).⁵⁹ Peirats had a lingering distrust of middle-class anarchist intellectuals and, as we will see, he later clashed with Montseny, who inherited her father's mantle as the leading theoretician of Iberian anarchism.

With the CNT flexing its muscles after its enforced slumber, the focus of Peirats's activism shifted into the streets. Years of declining living standards overseen by the employer-friendly dictatorship had left the brickmakers frustrated and, in late 1929, the Brickmakers' Union declared a strike. Since the dictatorship's official labour policy was rooted in arbitration courts (the *Comités Paritarios* – literally, Parity Committees), which forbade direct industrial action, the strike was a frontal challenge to the regime.⁶⁰ To enforce the stoppage, the Brickmakers' Union created action squads, of which Peirats was a member. Although deemed unfit for military service, his commitment to the cause compensated for his physical difficulties and, pistol in hand, he served capably in the CNT's paramilitary squads.⁶¹ Distributed strategically across the city, these armed groups, as José explained, were directed at strike-breakers: 'We stopped them and attempted to dissuade them from committing treasonous actions.' Sometimes more robust methods were required, such as when José and his group overturned a cart carrying bricks in the street. At twenty-one, he was a 'man of action' or, as he described it, one of the 'nerve cells that set in motion from below the machinery of the CNT'.⁶² When he later reflected on his motivations at this time, he recalled that:

I was stimulated by revolutionary romanticism... I was attracted most of all by ideological problems. The business of sticking stamps on union cards and assembling the workers to preach to them did not appeal to me. I preferred getting involved in conflicts with the employers and confronting the security forces...⁶³ I was a simple grassroots activist... In our movement, there existed two classes: the Areopagites and those who worked hard clashing with the scabs and the cops who protected them. We were the movement's worker ants who organised and declared strikes, which we sustained with our blows and our coshes; we drew up the 'demands' which we later negotiated with the employers.⁶⁴

The landscape of struggle changed at the end of January 1930 with the ignominious collapse of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship. Alfonso XIII replaced it with General Dámaso Berenguer's 'soft dictatorship' ('dictablanda'), which was conceived to manufacture a limited democratic opening capable of saving the monarchy and returning to the political system that had been highly discredited by 1923. Peirats met the new dictator in person as part of the 'Guiot–Climent Support Group', which was formed to save the lives of two brickmakers sentenced to death. The case dated back to the robbery and murder of a financial agent in January 1924 by a four-man gang. Only Remigio Climent and Enrique Guiot were detained; the former being found guilty of murder, the latter of being his accomplice. Having refused to reveal the identities of their two escaped associates, both men were sentenced to death in a military court, even though it was unclear whether either had fired the fatal shot. After spending three years on death row, in 1927 their sentences

⁵⁹ Teresa Abelló y Enric Olivé, 'El conflicto entre la CNT y la Familia Urales-Montseny en 1928: La lucha por el mantenimiento del anarquismo puro', *Estudios de Historia Social*, no. 32–33, 1985, pp. 317–32.

⁶⁰ *La Vanguardia*, 10 and 28 November 1929; MI T. 1, L. II, 68–9.

⁶¹ Josep Alemany, 'Entrevista con José Peirats', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 26; MI T. 2, L. III, 94–5.

⁶² Peirats cited in Ignasi de Llorens, 'José Peirats: La historia como escenario de la libertad. Presentación de su figura y obra', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 43.

⁶³ Peirats, 'Una experiencia...', p. 15.

⁶⁴ MI T. 2, L. III, 76.

were reduced to life imprisonment.⁶⁵ The ‘Guiot–Climent Support Group’, which included fellow brickmakers Massoni, Canela, and Peirats, then pushed for their release. José even corresponded with Guiot in jail on a regular basis in a bid to raise his spirits. Eventually, General Berenguer received members of the group, including Peirats, led by veteran Barcelona activist, Juan López. While Berenguer only offered vague promises, the collapse of the monarchy a year later ensured the release of the prisoners.⁶⁶

For Peirats, this was the start of an ‘infernal decade of action’.⁶⁷ While still involved with his affinity group, Verdad, he was increasingly active in the clandestine CNT, participating in the struggle for the release of social prisoners and for new freedoms that would hasten the union’s reorganisation. He participated in the meetings that drafted the statutes of the Barcelona CNT, which were approved by the civil governor in April 1930. Nevertheless, the most emotive moment in the CNT’s rebirth was the massive rally held in the Paral.lel’s Teatro Nuevo on 27 April. The auditorium, with a capacity for around 2,500 people, could not cope with the human multitude that answered the CNT’s call, and many people had to content themselves with following the speeches on loudspeakers in the street outside. The majority of the speakers were older activists, such as Massoni, Joan Peiró, and Pestaña, the CNT’s general secretary. More inclined to syndicalism, and all of them veterans of the pre-1923 era, these militants had spearheaded the reorganisation of the CNT in the preceding months and were attempting to chart a course through the limited freedoms permitted by the dictablanda.

Tactical differences quickly came to the surface. Divergences were evident over the CNT’s relationship with the wider opposition to the monarchy, which included dissident army officers, renegade monarchist politicians, socialists, and republicans. Peiró, one of the many activists in contact with the political opposition, came in for fierce criticism for signing a manifesto with republican groups in support of a socially progressive democracy. Urales, always at loggerheads with the anarcho-syndicalists, inveighed against the ‘political’ compromises of leading CNT figures. Yet it was not just the more moderate anarcho-syndicalists who flirted with opposition politicians; for instance, Felipe Aláiz, a radical anarchist who later became Peirats’s most important mentor, shared a platform with leading Catalan republicans.⁶⁸ While Peirats had much in common with the anarchist radicals, his social background and his quest for class struggle predisposed him towards the anarcho-syndicalists, and he was intoxicated by his new experiences within the CNT.⁶⁹

The CNT’s struggle for economic demands resulted in a wave of social mobilisations and strikes during 1930–1 and this increasingly dovetailed with the campaign for political and civil liberties. Beset by its own internal and external contradictions, the monarchy buckled under the weight of the spiralling dynamics of protest that its very existence engendered until, on 14 April 1931, the Second Republic was proclaimed. This momentous event opened up a new phase in Peirats’s life, in which the ‘anarchist family’ would become his real family.

⁶⁵ ABC, 20 and 24 September 1927; Abel Velilla, *Una gran injusticia social: El proceso Guiot–Climent*, Barcelona, 1931.

⁶⁶ MI T. 2, L. III, 71–2; Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 19; *La Vanguardia*, 3 May 1930.

⁶⁷ Letter to Luis Pasamar, 27 January 1970.

⁶⁸ MI T. 2, L. III, 73 & 75–6; José Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, vol. 1, Madrid, 1978, pp. 44–50.

⁶⁹ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 16 December 1980.

Chapter Three: The Second Republic: The split in the anarchist movement and ‘revolutionary gymnastics’ (1931–33)

3.1 The short republican honeymoon

For José, 14 April 1931 began like any other working day: he rose and set off on foot to the Sants brickworks where he was employed. He would have been aware that, two days earlier, municipal elections had been converted by the liberal-left opposition into a plebiscite on the future of the monarchy. With the CNT leadership calculating that the unions would get a better deal under a democracy, many grassroots *cenetistas* had been encouraged to vote. It is highly unlikely that more anarchist-inclined activists like José, firm in their anti-political convictions as they were, participated in the proceedings. Yet many thousands of workers voted and, in Barcelona and L’Hospitalet, the monarchists failed to win a single council seat. As news spread of the leftist opposition victory in the major urban centres, anti-monarchist crowds took to the streets in a show of pro-republican feeling. By afternoon, José knew something big was in the air when he saw an animated group marching towards central Barcelona carrying the republican tricolour flag. As the hubbub outside grew, he left work and walked a short distance to Gran Vía, a major artery leading to the city centre, where he saw ‘a human wave’ coming from L’Hospitalet.¹ Meanwhile, in the corridors of power, profound fissures opened up within the elite. Mindful of the isolation of the discredited monarch, General José Sanjurjo, head of the Civil Guard, respectfully informed the king that his erstwhile praetorian guard would not block a democratic opening. The path was now laid to the proclamation of a republic.

Peirats witnessed emotional scenes as workers from neighbouring barrios converged on Plaza de España to celebrate the demise of the monarchy, what for many was a despised authority structure. Amidst huge popular revelry, people climbed on tram roofs and waved republican flags. Peirats did not join the celebrations, though. Going against the flow of the wave of jubilant humanity descending on central Barcelona, he set off for the CNT’s La Torrassa office, where he met other activists keen to define their position in the face of these momentous events. Peirats and his comrades appreciated the need to gain maximum advantage from what they perceived was a fluid situation. This meant forcing events, in a bid to accelerate history. That afternoon, he was part of a crowd of ‘several thousand’ protesting outside the Modelo prison for the release of the social prisoners, who eventually regained their freedom.² Later that evening, there was an armed clash between security forces and anarchists, as the latter attempted to seize weapons from a police station near the port. The confrontation left a soldier dead and several civilians wounded, including Conrado Ruiz Vilaró, a close comrade of Peirats, who later died from his wounds. With

¹ MI T. 2, L. III, 76.

² Adolfo Bueso, *Recuerdos de un cenetista*, vol. 1, Esplugues de Llobregat, 1976, pp. 341–4.

tensions running high, republican politicians were on the streets trying to defuse the situation, promising further change was possible only through legal channels: 'It was the same old tune... We knew that their promises would go unfulfilled.'³ As well as promises, the newly ensconced republican 'revolutionary committee' hastily formed a 'security guard' to augment the public order role of the police and the army.⁴

With the coming of the Republic, militants like Peirats represented the left wing of the CNT and of the libertarian movement. A strategic-generational conflict developed, as some older activists, whose perspectives were heavily conditioned by the more or less continuing repression to which the movement had been subjected since 1921, were prepared to offer the Republic a degree of leeway, in the hope that democracy would allow for the CNT's reorganisation. Yet, radicals like Peirats gave no quarter to the new regime. After the enforced *interregnum* of the dictatorship, they were primed and ready for direct action.

It is naïve to berate these ideologically committed libertarians for not becoming liberal democrats on April 14: they were doctrinally opposed to what they saw as an inherently limited bourgeois democracy that offered formal political equality but left the economic structure of oppression inherited from the monarchy intact. Likewise, in strategic terms, as activists committed to direct action as a means of wresting concessions from the authorities and employers, it made sense to them to build on the ascendant curve of mobilisation that had contributed to the fall of the monarchy. Convinced that the republicans were incapable of advancing the cause of social progress whatsoever, the radicals sought to intensify protest dynamics and channel them towards short-term gains on the road to liberation. They regarded any respite in popular mobilisation as a capitulation to the new authorities. As Peirats later reflected:

The vast majority of those leftist politicians... were individuals who, because of their mentality and political education, thought that by unseating the monarchists their hour had come.⁵ The republicans had reached the end of journey and had alighted from the train. For them, the revolution – their revolution – was already a fact. Their main leaders would soon find themselves suckling restlessly at the teat of money. We were now alone on the road to 'complete emancipation'.⁶

Nevertheless, he and his associates were optimistic that the republican spring, and the limited political freedom accompanying it, would at least provide them with a new scope to develop their activism. Indeed, during the Republic, the worker-activists of José's generation came of age. Part of a new mass working class formed by the accelerated industrialisation of the 1910s and 1920s, their youth had prevented them from playing a prominent role in the pre-1923 struggles. As we will see, these younger workers were the major protagonists of the struggles that radicalised the CNT in the prelude to the July 1936 revolution.

The day after the birth of the Republic, the CNT organised a general strike which, according to one militant, was 'total in Catalonia', but 'the atmosphere was one of fiesta, not struggle.'⁷ Peirats went to the central Barcelona office of the Construction Union, a union that had radicalised during the final months of struggle against the monarchy and that would emerge as the flagship of radical anarcho-sindicalist practice prior to the civil war, constantly clashing against local

³ MI T. 2, L. III, 77.

⁴ *La Vanguardia*, 15–18 April 1931.

⁵ Letter to Isidro Guardia, n.d. (November 1976?)

⁶ MI T. 2, L. III, 78.

⁷ Bueso, *Recuerdos*, vol. 1, p. 345.

employers and authorities. Besides debating the new political situation, the construction activists developed a strategy to defend the most pressing needs of the dispossessed – the struggle against unemployment and high rents.⁸ It is possible that later that day José was part of a mobile group which toured the city to gather intelligence and seize arms, since he was well informed of the extra guards posted around army garrisons following the clash with security forces the previous day.⁹

The next major CNT activity in which Peirats participated was the May Day rally, the first celebration of the International Workers' Day that fell barely two weeks after the birth of the Republic. An inevitably emotive gathering, it was all the more poignant since the CNT had chosen to assemble at the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts), its birthplace in 1910. Now, it proved woefully inadequate for what some estimates suggest were 150,000 workers on the streets. The rally was followed by a demonstration over a two-kilometre route through central Barcelona to the recently named Plaza de la República (now Plaça de Sant Jaume), the site of the city's main official buildings, where the marchers planned to submit a list of demands to the authorities. Peirats was near the front of the demonstration when he witnessed the peaceful march turn violent. As the square brimmed with demonstrators, shots rang out. There was pandemonium, as people fled for safety. In the *mêlée*, Peirats was swept away by the movement of the crowd and thrown to the ground, with people running and crawling over him. Bodies piled up on top of him and he found it impossible to get up, struggling for breath, while the shooting continued. He was extremely lucky to escape unscathed: one policeman lay dead and two more were wounded, along with ten workers. Once able to get up, he expected to be surrounded by dead bodies. To his amazement, he saw none, just an array of discarded jackets, hats, shoes, and espadrilles, which was opportune as he had lost his and was able to select a pair that fitted him before walking home to L'Hospitalet.¹⁰ This would not be the last time that he would escape alive from potentially mortal circumstances.

The events of that day remain confused. It is certain that there were right-wing gunmen from the Free Unions in the square with the intention of provoking a disturbance. It seems likely that one of their number was identified by a CNT steward, who discharged his weapon, prompting an initial exchange of gunfire. Given the proximity of the Council and Generalitat buildings, the security forces responded, provoking a second, apparently three-way, firefight lasting intermittently for around forty-five minutes, as armed *cenetistas* took cover in the four corners of the square.¹¹ Another version – which also acknowledges the presence of right-wing *provocateurs* – suggests that the first shots came from police guarding the Catalan government building.¹² It is doubtless, guided by memories of police assassinations of *cenetistas* in the 1920s, that the situation was defused only with the arrival of soldiers, who were cheered into the square as 'sons of the people' and whom, the marchers believed, would not open fire on workers.¹³

⁸ Manel Aisa, *La huelga de alquileres y el comité de defensa económica*, Barcelona, 2014.

⁹ MI T. 2, L. III, 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹ For Peirats's version, see *ibid.*, 79. See also Severino Campos, *Una vida por un ideal*, unpublished manuscript, 2006, pp. 25–7; *Solidaridad Obrera*, 3–5 May 1931; *El Luchador* and *Tierra y Libertad*, 8 May 1931; Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos: El anarcosindicalismo en la calle, en el Comité de Milicias, en el gobierno, en el exilio*, Barcelona, 1978, pp. 115–8.

¹² Abel Paz, *Durruti en la Revolución española*, Madrid, 1996, pp. 255–62.

¹³ *Las Noticias* and *Solidaridad Obrera*, 3 May 1931.

We can only speculate about the extent of Peirats's involvement that day. He never admitted to being armed, but it is significant that he was at the vanguard of a militant demonstration headed by armed stewards. Moreover, as we know, Peirats had used firearms in the course of his CNT activities and, as we will see, these activities became more frequent. Years later, he acknowledged that he knew that his local barber from La Torrassa was involved in the gunfight, as he recognised the sound of his Smith and Wesson revolver.¹⁴ It is also possible that they went to the demonstration together. Whatever the case, in Peirats's eyes, the events and their violent denouement confirmed his view that the new authorities would, ineluctably, rely on the same repressive apparatus as the monarchy and the dictatorship had and that it was, therefore, struggle as usual.

3.2 'The university of La Torrassa'

Behind the noisy street mobilisations, Peirats was one of the thousands of anonymous activists who were busy reorganising the anarchist public sphere that had been largely snuffed out by the dictatorship after 1923. The rapid expansion of this subaltern public sphere after the birth of the Republic reflected the accumulation of social demands in the preceding eight years, when economic, social, and cultural advances had been systematically eroded. The CNT grew vertiginously: by August 1931, it claimed 400,000 members in Catalonia, while the Barcelona CNT announced that it encadred 58 per cent of the city's workers. Peirats's Construction Union put its membership at 25,000, while the L'Hospitalet CNT affirmed it organised 9,000 workers out of a total population of 37,650 (almost 24 per cent).¹⁵ In fact, since many hospitalenses worked in Barcelona and were affiliated to the CNT there, the total number of cenetistas was far higher.¹⁶

There was also a rapid expansion of athenaeums throughout the Barcelona area. Local workers were desperate for culture and, according to one activist, 'athenaeum fever' erupted, due to the craving for knowledge.¹⁷ In L'Hospitalet, in 1930, 42.5 per cent of men and 54.1 per cent of women were illiterate, while the figures would have been higher still among La Torrassa's migrant populace.¹⁸ Aware that a people without culture would be less capable of taking control of its destiny, José and his group were determined to disseminate the revolutionary ideas they had refined during the dictatorship and bring culture to this most neglected district. Their efforts helped convert La Torrassa into what one expert describes as 'one of the most important neighbourhoods in the history of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism'¹⁹ or, as *La Vanguardia* described it, a district with a 'preponderance' of 'extremist elements'.²⁰

¹⁴ José revealed he knew the gun's resting place in the barber's shop (MI T. 2, L. III, 79).

¹⁵ CRT de Cataluña, *Memorias de los comicios de la regional catalana celebrados los días 31 de mayo y 1 de junio, y 2, 3 y 4 de agosto de 1931*, Barcelona 1931, pp. 50–6; Albert Balcells, *Crisis económica y agitación social en Cataluña (1930–1936)*, Barcelona, 1971, p. 192.

¹⁶ According to Camós, the CNT organised 90 per cent of the active population at the start of the 1930s (*L'Hospitalet*, p. 75).

¹⁷ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 13 March 1983.

¹⁸ Camós, *L'Hospitalet*, p. 115.

¹⁹ Dolors Marín, 'Anarquistas y sindicalistas en L'Hospitalet: La creación de un proyecto de autodidactismo obrero', in José Luis Oyón and Juan José Gallardo (eds.), *El Cinturón Rojinegro: Radicalismo cenetista y obrerismo en la periferia de Barcelona (1918–1939)*, Barcelona, 2004, p. 128.

²⁰ *La Vanguardia*, 12 December 1933.

Before the Republic, the local elite that resided in the centre of L'Hospitalet already viewed the residents of La Torrassa with a mixture of suspicion and condescension. The official view was summed up by a pseudo-sociologist who described *torrassenses* as being 'badly adjusted and whose children display extremely high levels of criminality and parental neglect'.²¹ With the creation of an autonomous Generalitat government, La Torrassa was demonised as a 'decatalanised' space, labelled 'Little Murcia', home to the stereotypical migrant – the 'backward' and 'savage' 'uncultured Murcian'.²² Of all the different groups of migrants from across the Spanish state, Murcians were singled out as the source of all Catalonia's problems, as the middle-class republicans in the Generalitat, like the Catalan bourgeois patricians before them, adopted a colonial-style mentality towards working-class 'outsiders'. As always with such panics, the reality was more complex: according to the 1930 census, over 50 per cent of hospitalenses were Catalan; migrants from Murcia and Almería constituting just 18 per cent.²³ For Peirats, La Torrassa was a place of hope, 'a compact town, genuinely working-class, and underdeveloped in every sense',²⁴ for whom the Republic brought no change to the overarching structure of oppression. The August 1931 outbreak of bubonic plague highlighted the official neglect in the area.²⁵

La Torrassa's dense network of CNT supporters converted the district into 'a focal point for social ferment',²⁶ 'famous in the sensationalist press for the rebelliousness and the bellicosity of its inhabitants', and it was here that Peirats focussed much of his activism prior to the civil war.²⁷ He was one of the founders of La Torrassa Rationalist Athenaeum.²⁸ Based in Llançà Street, just a few blocks away from his Collblanc home, the centre was born thanks to the sacrifice of local workers. Peirats and other brickmakers scraped together the rent and deposit for the premises, while carpenters provided desks, chairs, and shelves. Modelled on the Sants Rationalist Athenaeum of his youth, the athenaeum organised evening classes, theatre productions, musical recitals, public talks, and debates and also housed a library. Its meeting rooms were used by local anarchist and neighbourhood groups,²⁹ and along with its supporters, the athenaeum intervened in local community struggles.³⁰

Peirats invested considerable energy in the athenaeum, and its cultural vision closely resembled his ideas.³¹ In keeping with the notion that the workers had to grasp universal culture, and in contrast to the 'proletarian culture' then *de rigueur* in Stalinist circles, the library included works by Marxist, bourgeois, and even reactionary authors, along with the anarchist classics. Similarly, speakers from diverse political tendencies were invited to address the athenaeum, with the only prerequisite that they accept open debate with the audience after their talk.³² Highlighting the activists' democratic approach to the battle for ideas, on one occasion, a public debate was or-

²¹ Eugenio Cuello, *Criminalidad infantil y juvenil (sus causas, régimen jurídico, tribunales para menores, libertad vigilada, colocación en familia, internamiento en instituciones, etc.)*, Barcelona, 1934, pp. 33–4.

²² See, for instance, *L'Opinió*, 7 August and 20 September 1931; Sentís, *Viatge*, pp. 72 & 87–8.

²³ Marín, 'Anarquistas y sindicalistas', p. 129.

²⁴ MI T. 2, L. III, 80.

²⁵ *La Vanguardia*, 29 August 1931.

²⁶ MI T. 2, L. III, 82.

²⁷ MI T. 3, L. V, 194.

²⁸ Peirats, 'El autodidacta', *Evolución*, September 1937.

²⁹ *La Vanguardia*, 7 July and 9 September 1932; MI T. 2, L. III, 80.

³⁰ Interview by Nick Rider with Francesc Pedra, 30 March 1984.

³¹ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 12 July 1985.

³² Letter to Marta Ackelsberg, 30 January 1979.

ganised with an extreme conservative cleric. Another promoted activity was hiking, which complemented José's appreciation of beauty as a counterpoint to a lived environment rendered ugly by capitalist urbanism. Hiking was especially popular with younger workers, who could escape for the day to nearby countryside or beaches. Important in its own right given the absence of affordable commercial forms of leisure, hiking also had vital cultural, political, and pedagogical dimensions: groups might discuss important political questions or a previously agreed text. The activists also organised mass picnics, which attracted entire families, with organised games and learning activities for children, while the adults either just relaxed or participated in debates.³³ For Peirats, these activities were essential for attracting the youth to the movement, one of his lifelong concerns.³⁴

The athenaeum was an unqualified success and it quickly became an important community institution for all generations, 'a family home'.³⁵ As Peirats noted proudly, it embellished the everyday life of the dispossessed and, for this reason, 'we swept the neighbourhood along with us'.³⁶ Weekend plays were particularly well attended, drawing audiences of over 200. Soon, the athenaeum was attracting people from neighbouring Barcelona and it was obliged to relocate to bigger premises in nearby Pujós Street, whereupon its activities were expanded.³⁷ Nevertheless, according to one participant, the new space was, at times, too small for the number of people who attended the most popular functions.³⁸ To evade repression, the activists also operated under the name Amigos del Arte Escénico, which organised theatre and film events right up until the civil war.³⁹

The majority of L'Hospitalet's anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist activists passed through the doors of the athenaeum. This played a pivotal role in shaping the culture of the local CNT, and it reaffirmed the essentially proletarian nature of movements whose most prominent militants and 'leaders' were, like Peirats, invariably working-class autodidacts. Fiercely loyal to the movement that formed them, and unlike the salaried 'professional revolutionaries' of the communist parties, these activists remained within the world of labour – their direct experience of poverty and their profound awareness of working-class problems bringing them respect from their fellow workers.⁴⁰ They constituted, therefore, a vital linkage between the movement and the rest of the working class and were central to CNT struggles. Of the many activists 'schooled' in the athenaeum, Diego 'Amador' Franco – later described by Peirats as 'our prodigal son' – stands out.⁴¹ Born in Barcelona in 1920, he was an apprentice carpenter and had attended evening classes from around the age of eleven, progressing to write both journalism and poetry, for which he revealed much talent. Active in the anarchist youth movement – the Juventudes Libertarias (JJ. LL. – Libertarian Youth) – at the age of thirteen he joined the revolutionary militias during the civil war, after which he fled to France. In 1946, he returned to Spain to revive the clandestine

³³ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

³⁴ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p.18.

³⁵ MI T. 2, L. III, 80 & 83.

³⁶ Letter to Adela García, 11 March 1977.

³⁷ *La Vanguardia*, 7 April 1933; MI T. 2, L. III, 82–3.

³⁸ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 13 March 1983.

³⁹ See, for instance, *La Vanguardia*, 22 February 1936.

⁴⁰ Manuel Vicente Alcón, cited in Anna Monjo, 'La CNT durant la II República a Barcelona: Líders, militants, afiliats', PhD diss., Barcelona University, 1993, p. 293.

⁴¹ José Peirats, 'Más sueños de una noche de verano', *Frente Libertario*, October 1971.

anarchist movement only to be detained and tortured, before being executed a year later, in 1947, aged twenty-seven.⁴²

For all its success, the athenaeum, which depended on financial contributions and donations from its far-from-wealthy supporters, led a precarious existence. Despite this adversity, the organisers were creative: library books were routinely ordered from local publishers, the bills then going ignored.⁴³ Thus they acquired a significant collection of books from the leading publisher Espasa-Calpe, including its celebrated encyclopaedia.⁴⁴ But most of all it was the tireless labour of Peirats and his group who, no more than twenty strong, worked 'like devils' in their spare time to keep the athenaeum alive.⁴⁵ In Peirats's case, he gave talks, taught, acted, directed plays, applied make-up to fellow actors, painted stage sets, and even wrote a play. Any surplus generated by the athenaeum's activities was either used to fund new initiatives or was donated to other causes, such as the CNT Prisoners' Support Committee, which took care of social prisoners and their families. The organisers expected no personal gain other than the satisfaction of participating in a work of collective creation.⁴⁶ Peirats was deeply enamoured with a forum that allowed him to give full vent to his cultural and aesthetic energies, particularly his love of theatre and song.⁴⁷ In this sense, as a form of cultural activism grounded in everyday life, the athenaeum allowed him to live out his desires. Within the obvious constraints imposed by work commitments, he could live anarchically while cultivating alternative cultural visions in opposition to the mainstream in ways that presaged later developments in post-World War II Beat and libertarian countercultures. This was much in keeping with his revolutionary goals and his belief that the building blocks for future mobilisations had to be rooted in neighbourhood activism. Rather than seeing revolution in simple insurrectionary terms, for José it was a socio-cultural process rooted in attitudinal change. He was then a cultural missionary, attempting to consciously transform his local environment, along with the collective experience of those around him. As a result, the athenaeum was a communitarian experiment that generated new socio-cultural practices; it advanced a non-hierarchical way of life, part of a bid to fashion a new everyday life based on new emotions and values rooted in human self-expression and cooperation.

Through the athenaeum, Peirats became known locally as a 'conscious worker', one of 'those with ideas' who, through their own individual self-determination and personal conduct, set an example to those around him.⁴⁸ Therefore, he now rejected 'vices' such as gambling and smoking and, unlike in his teenage years, he prided himself on rarely imbibing alcohol. While this may have been personally gratifying for Peirats, there is a sense in which his intense activism possibly impeded him from developing intimate relationships with the opposite sex. While his social activities provided him with interpersonal skills that enabled him to develop relationships with

⁴² Marín, *Clandestinos*, p.192. See also Felipe Aláiz and Víctor García, *La FIJL en la lucha por la libertad: Raúl Carballeira y Amador Franco*, Paris, 1954.

⁴³ Myrna Breitbart, 'The Theory and Practice of Anarchist Decentralism in Spain, 1936–1939: The Integration of Community and Environment', PhD diss., Clark University, 1978, p. 147.

⁴⁴ MI T. 2, L. III, 80.

⁴⁵ Letter to Adela García, 11 March 1977; MI T. 2, L. III, 83.

⁴⁶ Letter to Luis Ballester, 18 May 1979; MI T. 2, L. III, 81–2.

⁴⁷ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 28.

⁴⁸ See Francisco Javier Navarro Navarro, 'El "perfil moral" del militante en el anarquismo español (1931–1939)', *Spagna contemporanea*, no. 25, 2004, pp. 39–68. When, some fifty years later, an activist who attended the athenaeum as a youth was asked to name the organisers, she could only recall Peirats (interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 13 March 1983).

males and females of varying ages ('quite a few girls' attended the athenaeum in La Torrassa⁴⁹), his autobiographical writings reveal a degree of timidity that resulted in unfulfilled or undeclared loves.⁵⁰

In the first year of the Republic, still just twenty-three, Peirats started addressing CNT public meetings. Typifying the CNT's loosely structured nature, he learnt of his new role as a public speaker walking down a street in La Torrassa, where he saw a poster announcing he was to speak at a meeting. After hurried preparations, he channelled his considerable nerves into a tirade against the republican authorities, which he accused of defrauding the hopes of the people. He concluded defiantly, stating how, despite growing repression, the CNT would vanquish its enemies to 'forge a new Spain'. Soon, Peirats found himself addressing CNT meetings across provincial Catalonia. Although he never considered public speaking his forte, relying on notes even later in life, he was capable of improvisation, such as when he arrived at Mollet del Vallès, twenty-five kilometres from Barcelona, to find the mayor had banned the meeting. Rather than face a fruitless journey home, he organised an impromptu meeting in the town square, concluding just in time to avoid the security forces.⁵¹

3.3 Radicalisation: The 'man of action' in the streets

The clampdown by the authorities on the anarchist public sphere presaged a new stage of social struggle in which Peirats's status as a man of action was consolidated. Social radicalisation was inseparable from the growing internal struggle within the 'anarchist family'. The advent of the Republic exacerbated long-standing strategic and tactical fissures between the CNT's anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, and more syndicalist-inclined factions over the relationship between revolution and democracy. For the anarchist radicals, the way forward was through insurrectionary street mobilisations that would imbue the masses with the confidence to topple capitalism and the state. This contrasted with the syndically-focussed approach of the anarcho-syndicalists, who believed that revolution would come through powerful unions inside the workplace. Meanwhile, the syndicalists, who were grouped around Pestaña and those of his ilk and who had been most affected by state and employer repression, were more concerned with gradual economic improvements and were losing sight of the ultimate revolutionary goals championed by the other two factions.

These divisions were often described, albeit inaccurately, as a struggle between *treintismo* and *faísmo*. The more moderate *treintistas* took their name from an anti-insurrectionary manifesto signed by thirty prominent cenetistas in August 1931.⁵² Consisting mainly of older anarcho-syndicalist activists, including Massoni, they believed the Republic offered new opportunities to consolidate CNT structures. The radicals, meanwhile, were incorrectly named after the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI – Iberian Anarchist Federation), the exclusively anarchist secret organisation formed in 1927 to preserve libertarian purity inside the CNT and coordinate the activities of the myriad anarchist affinity groups scattered across Iberia. The FAI would become the

⁴⁹ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

⁵⁰ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 18; MI T. 1, L. II, 62; T. 2, L. IV, 117; and T. 5, L. X, 16–21.

⁵¹ MI T. 2, L. III, 102–7.

⁵² See Eulàlia Vega, *Entre revolució i reforma: La CNT a Catalunya (1930–1936)*, Lleida, 2004, *passim*.; John Brademas, *Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en España (1930–1937)*, Esplugues de Llobregat, 1974, pp. 78–86; Julián Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931–1939*, 2004, pp. 17–63; Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 87–101.

great, frequently irrational, fear of the republican authorities. This position was most identified with the Nosotros affinity group, which included Francisco Ascaso, Buenaventura Durruti, and Juan García Oliver, the mythical ‘three musketeers of Spanish anarchism’ who, after World War I, emerged as the prototype for the urban guerrillas that spearheaded the defence of the CNT in the face of spiralling state repression. From the start of the Republic, Nosotros impelled the insurrectionary line, advocating ‘pendular insurrectionary actions’, armed uprisings that would impede the domestication of the proletariat within the ‘parliamentary fiction’ and create a ‘revolutionary gymnasium’ to prepare workers for the armed overthrow of capitalism.⁵³ Anything else, such as the more union-centred anarcho-sindicalist approach of the treintistas, smacked of reformism that distracted workers from their revolutionary vocation.

Tensions between the two factions grew during the ‘hot’ summer of 1931, when a wave of CNT economic strikes met with accelerating state repression, which sealed the radicalisation of workplace activists and members of the Comité pro Presos, who were most sensitive to the repression. The turning point in relations between the two factions and between the Barcelona CNT and the authorities came after a general strike on 4 September. The stoppage, in support of a hunger strike by social prisoners, many of whom were interned without trial, lasted seventy-two hours and affected around 300,000 workers in the Barcelona area. The authorities responded with a show of strength that included soldiers on the streets, martial law, and the deployment of warships in the port, leaving sixteen workers dead, three of whom might have been summarily executed in police detention.⁵⁴

As the CNT was further radicalised, so too was Peirats, who attended clandestine activist meetings. His disposition and youth placed him closer to the maximalists, as did his activism in the Construction Union, which followed or, perhaps more correctly, advanced, the radical line. Nevertheless, in La Torrassa, Peirats was at loggerheads with prominent radical Francisco Tomás, who typified the insurrectionists’ maximalism. Some eight years older than Peirats, Tomás was a true militant, a born speaker. Yet he was cunning and bent on proselytising, and bore no respect for any other influence than his own. He had earlier encouraged his small band of followers to boycott the ‘reformist’ Rationalist Athenaeum, as they abhorred cultural initiatives and preferred violent street actions. Meanwhile, the supporters of the athenaeum saw Tomás’s group as ‘a handful of demagogues’, for whom the revolution was ‘just around the corner’; practitioners of what Peirats mocked as ‘tavern communism’ and ‘ballsly anarchism’.⁵⁵

As far as the CNT’s internal division is concerned, therefore, Peirats and his group occupied an uncomfortable position between the two factions. While Peirats was an anarchist in the streets and in the athenaeum, he was very much an anarcho-sindicalist in the workplace, and this convinced him that the revolution would come through a combination of cultural awareness and revolutionary strikes as opposed to simply firing pistols, like the radicals appeared to believe.

With the breach between the two factions heading towards a split in the unions, Peirats remained unwavering in his commitment towards the CNT. He played a decisive role in the December 1931 brickworkers’ strike.⁵⁶ The strikers sought to achieve their long-standing goals – the abolition of piecework and the disappearance of the contractors who exploited the day labourers.

⁵³ García Oliver, *El eco*, p. 115.

⁵⁴ *La Vanguardia* and *L’Opinió*, 3–9 September 1931; *Solidaridad Obrera*, 3, 6, and 12 September 1931; *Tierra y Libertad*, 5, 12, and 19 September 1931.

⁵⁵ *MI T. 2*, L. III, 82 & 85.

⁵⁶ *La Vanguardia*, 12 and 19 December 1931.

This, they hoped, would result in a stable wage structure and would allow them to deal directly with their employers, not the contractors, who were seen as a parasitic strata benefitting from the system of payment by results. José was part of the four-strong strike committee and, when the employers refused to negotiate, he joined armed teams that went out to ‘hunt “scabs”’ – an activity that was not without risks since strike-breakers often benefitted from a police escort. Given the strength of the CNT locally, persuasion alone was often enough to encourage workers to join the strike. Employers were less easily convinced. As the strike dragged on, the CNT relied more heavily on its traditional direct action tactics and Peirats became involved in more audacious activities, including arson attacks on several brickworks. Although he never commented on this issue, it is likely that Peirats was now a member of the CNT’s defence groups (*grupos de defensa*).⁵⁷ In one incident, he led a group that disarmed a security guard before burning a workshop. Curiously, despite addressing the guard face-to-face, Peirats did not wear a mask, which can be interpreted either as recklessness or as a measure of the confidence felt by cenetistas in a neighbourhood where they held considerable power.⁵⁸ Perhaps, however, it was felt they could rely on fear alone, since a guard at another local factory had recently been assassinated.⁵⁹ Finally, the employers returned to the negotiating table, at which Peirats was also present. The brickmakers achieved a partial victory: the employers agreed to dispense with the contractors but the system of piecework would remain. It was an outcome, nonetheless, that was seen as a considerable advance by most brickmakers.⁶⁰

After the conclusion of the strike, Peirats started working as a baker – a change of profession occasioned by continuing leg pains. In some cases, the consequences of Perthes disease lead to an explosion of severe pain in the early to mid-twenties. For Peirats, this pain seemed unbearable at times, and his condition was further aggravated by the freezing cold of the brickworks. Worsening unemployment, however, meant his new job as a baker drew him into new social struggles. In response to the economic crisis, the CNT practised ‘union impositions’ (*imposiciones sindicales*), whereby it sent the unemployed into those workplaces that offered overtime to employees or those which the union deemed were in need of more workers to cover production. This policy was part of an ongoing trial of strength with the employers and periodically led to confrontations and arrests. At his union centre, José was directed to a bakery whose owner had a reputation for hostility towards the CNT. He duly entered the bakery and casually set to work, explaining to the employer and his wife, to their consternation, that the CNT had sent him. Tellingly, the couple were impressed by Peirats’s good humour and hard work and invited him back. This work experience proved invaluable and, ironically, he ended up getting some more baking work in the kitchen of the Modelo prison.⁶¹ Peirats could just as easily have been a detainee there, for just a few weeks after becoming a baker, he initiated what he later described sanguinely as ‘a chapter in my life as a terrorist’.⁶² This was part of a struggle by CNT bakers to achieve their historic

⁵⁷ According to one activist, ‘One always had to force things a little bit’ during strikes (interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983).

⁵⁸ MI T. 2, L. III, 93–5.

⁵⁹ ABC, 14–15 January 1932.

⁶⁰ MI T. 2, L. III, 96–7.

⁶¹ Ibid., 97–100.

⁶² Letter to Gerardo Patán, 14 June 1978.

demand: the abolition of night work and a 5 a.m. start that would allow them to spend the night at home and shake off their ‘death’s heads’ (*caps de mort*) nickname.⁶³

The bakers also had health and safety demands, since ‘90 per cent of the bakeries were disgusting underground rooms, humid and replete with cockroaches and rats.’ When employers resisted, the union established a ‘war committee’ (*comité de guerra*). José duly volunteered and, along with other younger bakers, was at the forefront of the conflict. There followed a series of small bomb attacks on bakeries before the employers’ association accepted the CNT’s demands, excluding the need for a strike. Yet some employers refused to accept the deal and victimised the activists. When the union boycotts of these bakeries proved unsuccessful, militants resolved to give them a ‘fright’ (*susto*). Armed with pistols, Peirats and a comrade visited one employer who had victimised CNT bakers to ‘persuade’ him to change tack. On another occasion, he and a couple of comrades bombed a bakery, making their escape after a brief exchange of gunfire with security guards from a nearby factory.⁶⁴ Such was the aggressive stance of L’Hospitalet bakers that local employers complained to the authorities about the spiral of violence.⁶⁵

Peirats’s activism also centred on his new affinity group, known simply as *Afinidad*. Formed around the time the Rationalist Athenaeum opened in 1931, this ‘propaganda and action group’ included his brickmaker friend Canela, as well as other like-minded young anarchists, male and female, who had met in local athenaeums and rationalist schools. Totalling around fifteen members, *Afinidad*, like all such groups, was rooted in strong neighbourhood and personal relationships; for instance, there were three couples in the group. Among the group was Pérez, a pistol-wielding youth, not ‘one to mess with’, who was a close friend of Peirats and his family, for whom he was ‘like another son’. In terms of orientation, the group conjoined a variety of activist approaches: some members were more anarcho-syndicalist and others dedicated themselves to cultural activities through the athenaeum; some rejected violence entirely, while a subgroup – which included Canela, Pérez, and José – ‘accepted everything’. As we will see, this was not always the case, and they mainly dedicated themselves to acts of sabotage during strikes. While it is understandable that José was somewhat guarded about the group’s specific actions, he did refer to what was perhaps its most spectacular action, the collapse of electricity lines outside L’Hospitalet during a general strike.⁶⁶

By 1932, José was, as he subsequently described himself, ‘a kind of wannabe intellectual [*intelectualillo*] and premature terrorist [*terrorista en agraz*]’. His activism shifted according to the changing fortunes of the movement, operating publicly when possible, yet ready to step forward to defend the CNT using all necessary means. In his case, this was made easier since at this time he was yet unknown to the police, so he felt comfortable keeping a small arsenal in his room at home. As he reflected years later, not without humour and possibly with a degree of exaggeration: ‘My mother couldn’t open one of my drawers without shrieking at finding a grenade or a couple of pistols.’⁶⁷

While it is clear that young Peirats had a penchant for violent struggle, in keeping with his commitment to anarcho-syndicalist practice, these armed activities were intimately linked with

⁶³ Another literal translation would be ‘skulls’.

⁶⁴ MI T. 2, L. III, 101–2 & 109–12.

⁶⁵ *La Vanguardia*, 22 July 1933.

⁶⁶ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 20; letter to Domingo Canela, 31 October 1985; MI T. 2, L. III, 107–8; Marín, *Clandestinos*, p. 197.

⁶⁷ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987; Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 23.

concrete, day-to-day union struggles and the moral certainty that they would improve the lot of his fellow workers. The same cannot be said of the three insurrections organised by the radicals during the republican years. While these uprisings tapped the growing disenchantment of the dispossessed with the Republic, Peirats was fiercely critical of them due to their wholly negative consequences for his beloved CNT.⁶⁸

3.4 The cycle of insurrections': Internal schism and demoralisation

The first uprising occurred in January 1932 in Alt Llobregat, an isolated mining district in northern Catalonia. Localised and easily contained by the army, the authorities used the insurrection as a pretext to deport over 100 revolutionaries from across Spain to the Canary Islands and Spanish territories in Saharan Africa.⁶⁹ Among the deportees were Durruti and Ascaso, probably the two most high-profile advocates of the maximalist position, and Canela, Peirats's closest friend and comrade in *Afinidad*.⁷⁰ Although Canela did not participate in the uprising, he had a police record and had been detained on several occasions since the birth of the Republic, which meant the authorities were happy to get him off the streets.⁷¹ Peirats's love for his friend was channelled into a righteous indignation against both what he saw as the 'authoritarian' republican state and the fruitless insurrectionary tactic.

The fallout of the rising and the deportations brought tensions between the CNT's rival factions to a head. Although the moderates had no prior knowledge of the insurrection, the radicals berated them for not supporting the movement; meanwhile, the moderates criticised what they saw as the radicals' reckless adventurism. The gulf between the two factions was exacerbated by the *vendetta* of the Montseny family towards the moderates, led by some of the Barcelona *cenetistas* who, during the dictatorship, as mentioned above, had questioned their authority to collect money in the name of social prisoners as unaccountable middle-class publicists. The charge was led by Federica, whose contempt for anarcho-syndicalism was such that she joined the CNT only in 1931. Known disparagingly among her critics as 'Miss FAI', Montseny directed her ire against the union moderates in family publications, such as *La Revista Blanca* and *El Luchador*, creating the climate for the most serious split in the union's twenty-year history.⁷² As we will see, this conflict between proletarian, autodidacts, and middle-class intellectuals would be repeated later during the civil war and in exile, when Peirats frequently crossed swords with Montseny.

In what was the first but not last CNT schism that José would witness, one might be forgiven for assuming he would be an unconditional supporter of the radical position. His temperament, his style of activism, his youth, and his experiences in La Torrassa, where the moderates had few supporters, all inclined him towards the radicals, as did his friendship with Canela, who had introduced him to Ascaso, one of the leading advocates of the insurrectionary line.⁷³ Likewise,

⁶⁸ See Casanova, *Anarchism*, pp. 64–83.

⁶⁹ Jesús Giráldez, *Creyeron que éramos rebaño: La insurrección del Alto Llobregat y la deportación de anarquistas a Canarias y África durante la II República*, Málaga, 2010.

⁷⁰ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987.

⁷¹ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 20; Marín, *Clandestinos*, p. 185. He was released in August 1932.

⁷² Chris Ealham, 'The crisis of organised labour: the battle for hegemony in the Barcelona workers' movement, 1930–1936', in Angel Smith (ed.), *Red Barcelona*, London, 2002, pp. 88–107.

⁷³ MI T. 2, L. IV, 116.

Peirats's first pamphlet, *Glosas anárquicas (Interpretación anarquista de la historia)*, was a contribution to the movement's internal debates at this time and constituted a sustained attack on the 'organised' trade unionism of French theoretician Pierre Besnard, then de rigueur with moderates like Pestaña.⁷⁴ Although we cannot be certain of its publication date, *Glosas anárquicas* probably appeared in late 1931 or early 1932, when Peirats was twenty-four, and he revealed great sympathy for Hispano-Argentinian Abad de Santillán's idea of an exclusively anarchist workers' movement, which guided many of the radicals and the FAI.⁷⁵ Yet he also outlined his conviction that a future revolution hinged on 'educational propaganda and incitements to individual perfection', through which 'we can heat up the atmosphere while we educate the people in a revolutionary fashion, raising its cultural baggage.' This led him to criticise 'theatrical conspiracies', which he saw as 'irreconcilable with our libertarian principles'.⁷⁶

While Peirats's activism deepened *after* the CNT split, he nevertheless refined his position. By mid-1933, when it was manifest that the pursuit of an anarchist workers' movement had provided justification for a split and the expulsion of revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists from the CNT, he rejected the idea of ideological purity in the unions.⁷⁷ With hindsight, he appreciated how the moderates 'saw things more clearly' when it came to the need for revolutionary organisation, even if they committed 'the mistake' of exaggerating republican freedoms. Despite a small minority of the moderates (essentially the *pestañistas*, who later formed their own political party, evolving towards reformism), the majority consisted of activists with 'positive values', such as Joan Peiró, a lifelong anarcho-syndicalist and, ironically, a FAI member. These activists had not become 'traitors' or 'counter-revolutionaries' overnight, as demonstrated by their eventual return to the CNT in May 1936. As for the radicals, Peirats was appalled by the intolerant 'FAI sectarianism', their exaggeration of the revolutionary inclinations of the masses, and their 'absurd' insurrectionary 'adventures'.⁷⁸ Unlike the leading protagonists on both sides of the split, Peirats lacked the petty, insular spirit required for an internecine conflict.⁷⁹ If, in terms of the theory that guided him, Peirats was an anarchist (he claimed that 'I have always considered myself more anarchist than syndicalist'⁸⁰), his practice remained firmly grounded in the anarcho-syndicalist axiom that the CNT should preserve the unity of all those dedicated to anti-state revolution.⁸¹

Years later, with the obvious benefits of hindsight, Peirats concluded that, notwithstanding the genuine divisions of the early 1930s, 'a third way' could and should have been found to avoid the split.⁸² Some CNT Regional Committees, Asturias being just one example, remained in the confederation with an orientation very similar to that of the moderates expelled from the Catalan unions.⁸³ Equally, militants like Eusebi Carbó, who had long represented the most anarchist currents inside the CNT, saw the uprisings as 'pure Bolshevism', 'a cold uprising...

⁷⁴ José Peirats, *Glosas anárquicas (Interpretación anarquista de la historia)*, L'Hospitalet, n.d., pp. 24–5.

⁷⁵ See Diego Abad de Santillán and Emilio López Arango, *El Anarquismo en el movimiento obrero*, Barcelona, 1925.

⁷⁶ Peirats, *Glosas anárquicas*, pp. 28–9.

⁷⁷ MI T. 2, L. IV, 117–8.

⁷⁸ Letters to Isidro Guardia, n.d. (November 1976?); Mariano Casasús, 26 December 1988; and Antonia Fontanillas, 27 September 1982.

⁷⁹ José Peirats, 'Cabezazos en el muro', *Frente Libertario*, June 1974.

⁸⁰ Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980.

⁸¹ Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980 and Vernon Richards, 13 March 1988.

⁸² Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 27 September 1982.

⁸³ See Ángeles Barrio, *Anarquismo y anarcosindicalismo en Asturias (1890–1936)*, Madrid, 1988.

decreed by order of a circular'.⁸⁴ A participant in the 1915 El Ferrol anti-war congress, Carbó later rallied against the pro-Bolshevik current inside the movement and, while by 1931 he had embraced anarcho-syndicalist positions, he was clearly no reformist – although he would later occupy positions in the Catalan government during the war. Others rejected the insurrectionist road as it stymied the cultural struggle that would prepare the masses for a future revolution.⁸⁵ Peirats and the rest of *Afinidad* belatedly backed this middle road,⁸⁶ yet such voices were drowned out by the schismatic clamour of the radicals, who blocked all reasoned debate.⁸⁷

Towards the end of 1932, Peirats's decision to leave L'Hospitalet and the family home provides evidence of his disillusionment with developments inside the Barcelona CNT. Certainly, this move also reflected the worsening economic crisis, which badly affected the construction industry and associated industries like brickmaking. The split in the CNT had reduced its muscle, making it harder for its unemployed activists to get work.⁸⁸ As a twenty-four-year-old, Peirats doubtless sought adventure too, so he accepted an invitation from his uncle Benjamín to return to his birthplace in La Vall d'Uixó, where he found work as an agricultural labourer. He retained a deep emotional attachment to Benjamín and La Vall, 'that uncomplicated world, with its aromatic mountains and its pure blue sky... the fertile nature, without fake adornments and almost bereft of traitorous hypocrisy'. Agrarian labour relations were less idyllic, as José discovered upon entering the miserable world of the rural working class. Despite hopes the Republic's agrarian reform would improve the lot of the rural dispossessed, José was forced to stand in the square (*hacer plaza*) while foremen selected the strongest looking hands from a multitude of hungry workers. The experience of rural work changed his perspectives and, years later, he still viewed the agrarian issue as 'the most urgent of all problems'. Even though he would have a long and exhausting working day, José still found the energy to run evening classes in his uncle's house. When alone, he and his uncle, a lifelong socialist, had long, amicable debates about politics, each defending their respective position – Benjamín accusing the anarchists of 'doing the work of the Right' by destabilising democracy and José denouncing the Republic's repression.⁸⁹

This repression increased after the second anarchist insurrection of January 1933. Although organised across a wider terrain – armed incidents occurred in Andalusia, Aragon, Catalonia, Madrid, and Murcia – like the first rising a year earlier, it was quickly snuffed out by the authorities. This was unsurprising. As prominent anarchist youth organiser Fidel Miró observed, following the split, the CNT was 'losing power, both in terms of its membership and its revolutionary impetus'.⁹⁰ The rising was the action of an armed vanguard with no real connection with the masses. Peirats later wrote how people were 'cold, indifferent or afraid, holed up behind their doors'.⁹¹ With no organised anarchist presence in La Vall, José followed the march of the movement through the pages of the *CNT* daily, which he received from Madrid on the days it passed the state censor. Although he had grown attached to the village and its people, after a

⁸⁴ Cited in Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 42.

⁸⁵ J. Barthe, 'Antorcha en las tinieblas', *Estudios*, January 1933, p. 64; interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

⁸⁶ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 25.

⁸⁷ Peirats, 'Cabezazos en el muro', *Frente Libertario*, June 1974; letter to Jacinto León-Ignacio, 26 August 1984.

⁸⁸ García, 'José Peirats Valls', *Anthropos*, no. 102, pp. 15–6; *Solidaridad Obrera*, 19 September 1933; *MI T. 2, L. III*, 74.

⁸⁹ *MI T. 2, L. IV*, 113–5 & 120.

⁹⁰ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 273.

⁹¹ José Peirats, *Los anarquistas en la crisis política española*, Buenos Aires, 1964, p. 88.

few months, by early March, the agricultural work dried up and he was restless. For a while, he worked in an espadrille workshop, as his parents had done before him, but the lure of Barcelona, his family, and his comrades – all that gave meaning to his life – was ever more powerful.⁹²

His return to Barcelona marked the start of a new stage in his activism. He completely immersed himself in the organisational life of the anarchist movement, then in open crisis following the second failed uprising of January 1933, which had heightened internal conflicts. These conflicts caused Peirats great personal distress when the wrath of the radicals fell on Massoni, his first important mentor in anarcho-syndicalism and fellow brickmaker and one of the last signatories of the treintista manifesto to remain in a position of influence inside the CNT. Massoni evoked tremendous compassion in CNT circles due to the injuries inflicted upon him by right-wing gunmen, which left him unable to continue working as a brickmaker. In 1930, Massoni was elected administrator of *Solidaridad Obrera*, a position he occupied with great diligence despite the difficult financial and political circumstances and for which he was later re-elected. After signing the treintista manifesto, however, Massoni became the target of the ire of radicals in the print-workers union, the Sindicato de Artes Gráficas (Graphic Arts Union), whose campaign against him led to the deterioration of his precarious health. The tragic denouement came at the Regional Plenum of the Catalan CNT held in Barcelona on 5–13 March 1933, where Massoni was so unwell that a comrade had to read his report and respond to radical accusations that he had misappropriated funds.⁹³ While there was no evidence to support such claims, Massoni was forced to resign from *Solidaridad Obrera*. For a noble activist who had given everything to the movement, this was a bitter moral blow and he suffered a heart attack in the middle of the plenum.⁹⁴ With their erstwhile comrade on his deathbed, the radicals issued a manifesto denouncing Massoni as the spokesperson of all ‘splitters’.⁹⁵ He fell into depression and died weeks later, having devoted most of his forty years to the CNT.⁹⁶

His death coincided with the most violent phase of the split, which saw armed clashes between treintistas and radicals, as they disrupted each other’s meetings with coshes, knives, and pistols. Although Peirats was above the mêlée and had maintained his friendship with Massoni, the moderates identified him with the maximalist position; so, when he and Canela attended the funeral, they were forced to leave without having the chance to bid farewell to their mentor. For Peirats, this was a bitter reminder of the pointlessness of this fratricidal schism.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, in L’Hospitalet, the CNT was effectively now run by the radical Tomás and his cronies. From their insurrectionist perspective, Peirats and his associates were little more than culture-obsessed reformists. As for Peirats, Tomás’s witless maximalism, coupled with his blundering sectarianism, embodied everything that was wrong with the radicals, whose futile uprisings only served to undermine the CNT, the anarchist movement, and the cultural initiatives he so valued.

⁹² MI T. 2, L. IV, 114–5.

⁹³ Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 77–83. For the plenum, see CRT de Cataluña, *Memoria del Pleno Regional de Sindicatos Únicos de Cataluña celebrado en Barcelona del 5 al 13 de marzo de 1933*, Barcelona, 1933.

⁹⁴ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 14 March 1933.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1933.

⁹⁶ Miguel Íñiguez, *Esbozo de una Enciclopedia histórica del anarquismo español*, Madrid, 2001, p. 393; *Sindicalismo*, 17 and 24 March, 7 April, and 16 June 1933.

⁹⁷ Peirats, ‘Secularización...’, p. 12.

Afinidad now rallied to change the movement's orientation. During Peirats's time in La Vall, Afinidad voted to join the FAI in an explicit bid to counter this 'insurrectionary adventurism'.⁹⁸ In particular, they opposed what they saw as the unaccountable vanguardism of the Nosotros group of Durruti, Ascaso, and García Oliver, whom they blamed for implicating the entire movement in their military fantasies.⁹⁹ Like other groups, Afinidad believed the uprisings were minority actions of armed groups on the fringes of the movement. According to one prominent Barcelona *faísta*, 'A considerable number of FAI militants were appalled by their constant use of demagoguery and found their coup-style practices less acceptable still.'¹⁰⁰ Once in motion, the insurrections presented the movement with a *fait accompli*, leaving activists conscious of their moral obligation to show solidarity. In effect, Nosotros benefitted from a glorious myth, in no small part fuelled by anarchism's internal culture, which revered all that was secret and clandestine. This enabled its members to exert a charismatic authority over key sections of the CNT and the FAI. Yet, while Nosotros was publicly identified with the anarchist movement, frequently invoking its name, Afinidad correctly noted they had no democratic mandate from grassroots assemblies for their insurrectionary politics.¹⁰¹ Afinidad sought to open up a debate on the viability of armed struggle and to gauge the extent to which the CNT and the FAI actually endorsed the insurrections. For Peirats, this was the first of a series of occasions in which he would find himself in direct opposition to the movement's 'leadership'. Indeed, according to one critic of Nosotros, Peirats was 'the main defender' of the thesis that the group had to be isolated.¹⁰²

Afinidad similarly rejected the armed fundraising tactics that were central to the radical repertoire. For the radicals, expropriations were another front in the growing insurrection against the existing order that also provided vital funds to purchase arms for their 'revolutionary gymnastics'. Likewise, armed fundraising offset the decline in dues-paying members inside a fractured CNT, at a time when there was intense pressure on the funds of the Comité pro Presos to assist the rising numbers of social prisoners caused by the insurrections. Meanwhile, for those affinity groups inspired by the anarcho-individualism of Max Stirner, expropriations allowed them to finance their activities and constituted an alternative to paid work – something that clashed frontally with the worker ethos of Afinidad, who shared the anarcho-syndicalist belief in payment for a job well done.

Peirats's rejection of expropriations was rooted in ethical and strategic considerations. We saw earlier that, in the 1920s, he subscribed to Buenos Aires's *La Protesta*, which was co-edited by López Arango, a brilliant organiser and anarchist propagandist, whose denunciations of 'anarcho-banditry' cost him dearly: he was gunned down at home in front of his wife and children by a member of the Severino Di Giovanni affinity group.¹⁰³ Peirats's direct experiences with Barcelona's expropriators confirmed his hostility to this practice. Through Ginés Alonso, Afinidad member and co-founder of La Torrassa's athenaeum, Peirats was introduced to the anarcho-individualist Ágora affinity group, of which Alonso was also a member. After several meetings with Ágora, Afinidad voted to break with what Peirats described as a 'club of lib-

⁹⁸ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 20.

⁹⁹ MI T.2, L.III, 82, 84 y L.IV, 117; letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987.

¹⁰⁰ Fidel Miró, *Cataluña, los trabajadores y el problema de las nacionalidades*, México, 1967, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ Peirats, 'Encuesta para un proyecto de libro "Historia de la FAI"' (IISG); letter to José Gutiérrez, 12 July 1985.

¹⁰² Miró, *Cataluña*, p. 54.

¹⁰³ See Osvaldo Bayer, *Anarchism and Violence: Severino Di Giovanni in Argentina, 1923–1931*, London, 1986.

ertines',¹⁰⁴ whose fondness for smoking, drinking, and aversion to work was a world away from his strict conception of proletarian morality and 'the dignity of flaunting callused hands'.¹⁰⁵ The logic of Ágora's actions was later writ large in a bungled armed robbery at a bar that left one waiter (and trade unionist) dead and most of the group, including Alonso, in jail.¹⁰⁶

Afinidad's frustration with the radical line turned to exasperation following the third insurrectionary essay, which started on 8 December 1933. It later became evident that the Barcelona police had prior warning of the action.¹⁰⁷ Peirats witnessed first-hand the abysmal organisation of the rising in L'Hospitalet, one of its main foci. Those Afinidad members who specialised in direct action assembled at Canela's flat with their pistols to discuss their stance in advance.¹⁰⁸ The notable absentee was Pérez, always the boldest of the group, who was part of a team that had successfully executed an audacious plan to liberate inmates from the Modelo prison by digging a hole from the sewers into the building. Though opposed to the rising, as men of action, Peirats and the others were eventually drawn to the streets by the sound of gunfire and the knowledge that their comrades were fighting the security forces. Before midnight, they took to the streets individually, aware the police would be less likely to stop individuals. Peirats later confessed to being motivated by his curiosity to see the 'revolution' play out.¹⁰⁹

He was singularly unimpressed. Confirming his view that revolution was impossible if the masses were unprepared, he witnessed insurrectionists hammering on doors to rally people, *manu militari*: 'Women and children to their beds! Men to the streets! The revolution has broken out!' When calls went unheeded, the insurgents became contemptuous: 'The Spanish people live in a chicken coop! With these materials, we can't do anything!' Events shifted from comedy to near tragedy, when José was almost killed in an incident that underscored the rising's sham-bolic nature. A previously agreed password had been circulated among activists to enable them to identify one another in the streets.¹¹⁰ Fearing the watchword had been leaked to the police, some insurrectionists unilaterally created a new one. With the electricity supply cut off and the streets in total darkness, Peirats spotted an armed group ahead of him and took cover in the doorway of a building, before calling out the password he had been given. He was greeted by 'a shower of bullets'. When he repeated the call, he was met with 'the same categorical response'. Since he was drawing pistol fire, he knew this was 'friendly fire' rather than the Civil Guard. After some anxious moments, he used his knowledge of the streets to extricate himself from immediate danger. Moments later, he was confronted by rifle fire. Fearing arrest by the security forces, he hurriedly buried his pistol in a plot of wasteland just before being detained by nervy civil guards. Despite claiming he was returning from a girlfriend's house, he was marched to a nearby café that served as a temporary detention centre, where he found mainly young males, including several comrades. Hours later, after being registered by the authorities, he was released and went home. Concerned he was now on the radar of the local police, he cleared his room of incriminating materials and, for the next few nights, slept at an aunt's house. His fears were indeed

¹⁰⁴ MI T. 2, L. III, 84.

¹⁰⁵ José Peirats, *España: ¿Transición o continuidad?*, Toulouse, 1973, p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ *La Vanguardia*, 17 August 1933 and 14 December 1935; MI T. 2, L. III, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

¹⁰⁸ MI T. 2, L. IV, 119–26.

¹⁰⁹ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 12 July 1985.

¹¹⁰ The watchword was 'socks' (*calcetines*). An individual was to call out 'cal', to which the agreed reply was 'cetines'.

well founded, for the police came to search his parents' house, seizing anarchist newspapers.¹¹¹ He was now, therefore, known to the authorities as an anarchist.

Many Barcelona anarchists were hostile to these risings, convinced that the masses were unprepared.¹¹² Peirats and Afinidad were left with a 'disastrous impression' of what they saw was a 'catastrophic' insurrection.¹¹³ In a letter to Aragonese anarchist Francisco Carrasquer, José explained the problem of revolution by decree: 'One day a comrade would approach you and whisper in your ear, "The insurrection is tonight."' On a military level, there was no overarching plan: 'Each group would fire into the air to proclaim the revolution without a genuine strategy worthy of the name.'¹¹⁴ Instead, it was simply an attempt to 'make revolutionaries by force'.¹¹⁵ One participant described the rising as 'a crazy dream... the people weren't ready' and the consequences left many 'people demoralised'.¹¹⁶ Beside the fatalities, the repressive aftermath saw activists imprisoned and a comprehensive clampdown on CNT activities. The L'Hospitalet unions were forced underground and only properly reorganised in early 1936.¹¹⁷ Claims that these uprisings prepared the masses to defeat the military coup of July 1936 are disingenuous.¹¹⁸ As Peirats later observed, the repression weakened the CNT greatly in key areas where the December 1933 rising had been strong (Zaragoza, La Rioja, and western Andalusia), and these zones quickly fell to the military rebels at the start of the civil war.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, Tomás, whose maximalist discourse did most to prepare the climate for the uprising in La Torrassa, was expelled from the L'Hospitalet CNT after his actions failed to match his valiant words: on the night of the rising, he was curiously absent from the streets and his comrades later found him at home. However, there was no immediate change in the L'Hospitalet CNT's orientation, as Tomás was replaced by Josep Xena, a rationalist teacher sympathetic to the insurrectionist position.¹²⁰

In what was a critical juncture in the movement's history, Afinidad redoubled its campaign against 'anarcho-sindicalist Jacobinism'.¹²¹ Reflecting a growing grassroots rejection of the radical stance, Peirats had been elected secretary of the Barcelona Local Federation of the FAI in the summer of 1933, while Canela was voted in as secretary of the Catalan Regional Committee of the FAI a year later, in April 1934. This left Afinidad members occupying the two most important positions in the anarchist movement in Catalonia.¹²² Committed to pursuing a 'constructive' approach to revolution, Peirats and Canela summoned the architects of the risings – the Nosotros group of Durruti, Ascaso, and García Oliver – to a meeting for them to justify their position to the rest of the movement.¹²³ Given the repressive climate, this clandestine assembly was organised in the countryside outside Barcelona. To Peirats's stupefaction, the 'three musketeers' did not

¹¹¹ MI T. 2, L. IV, 121–5.

¹¹² Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

¹¹³ MI T. 2, L. IV, 120 & 128.

¹¹⁴ Letter to Francisco Carrasquer, n.d.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 27 September 1982.

¹¹⁶ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

¹¹⁷ Marín, *Clandestinos*, pp. 196–201; Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 139–40.

¹¹⁸ According to Helmut Rüdiger, they were mere *putsches*, whereas 'July 1936 was the first time when the CNT acted at a moment in which it was possible to carry all the people with it, especially in Catalonia' (*El anarcosindicalismo en la revolución española*, Barcelona, 1938, p. 13).

¹¹⁹ Letter to Isidro Guardia, n.d. (November 1976?); see also Miró, *Cataluña*, p. 52.

¹²⁰ MI T. 2, L. IV, 124 & 126; Marín, *Clandestinos*, p. 173.

¹²¹ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 23 September 1985.

¹²² MI T. 2, L. IV, 136.

¹²³ Alemany, 'Entrevista', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 30.

show: ‘There were good comrades, modest, willing, selfless people, but none of the grand figures who roused the masses in meetings as they spoke in the name of the FAI.’¹²⁴

Peirats called Nosotros to the next FAI meeting, where he intended to propose their expulsion. This time García Oliver and Ascaso attended. Peirats’s plan was hindered upon discovering, to his amazement, that ‘the big stars... without belonging to our organisation, have used its name as a scarecrow and they dragged it into every mess they could find!’ Nosotros, moreover, displayed a lofty arrogance towards their critics. Besides refusing to change their insurrectionary path, they defended their freedom to act unilaterally as they were not FAI members, despite invoking the organisation’s name. Peirats was no pacifist, either. As Barcelona FAI secretary, he organised arms smuggling across the French border via Puigcerdà, conscious that the anarchist movement would not achieve its ultimate aims with words alone.¹²⁵ Still, he was adamant that democratic accountability was vital if these long-term goals were to be attained and that they were endangered by the tendency of Nosotros to trample on the norms of the movement, as it sucked everyone into a repressive vortex.

By now, Peirats was a totally committed activist, with experience across the diverse trade union, cultural, paramilitary, and, more specifically, anarchist wings of the movement. Yet, most of all, he was concerned with readying the workers culturally for revolution. In a world shaped by the forces of consumerism and individualism, some may struggle to appreciate he was motivated neither by personal ambition nor careerism. His was a transforming activism: he wanted to assist the anarchist movement achieve its higher, altruistic goals that would, so he believed, benefit the rest of humanity. In the course of this activism, he was prepared to risk both his freedom and, indeed, his life. If he believed he had much to offer to the movement, this was always couched with humility; indeed, at key moments, as will be seen, those around him had to push him to take new responsibilities. Nevertheless, when he overcame his diffidence, he went on to emerge as one of the most talented propagandists and writers of his generation.

¹²⁴ MI T. 2, L. IV, 128.

¹²⁵ MI T. 2, L. IV, 128–9; Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 22.

Chapter Four: The revolutionary writer (1934–36)

In his mid-twenties, Peirats established himself as a revolutionary writer, closely resembling Antonio Gramsci's notion of the proletarian 'organic intellectual'.¹ Both Peirats and Gramsci stressed the role of education in founding a counter-hegemonic revolutionary consciousness – an alternative culture that, in order to flourish, had to be rooted in everyday life. While Gramsci conceded that some 'organic intellectuals' might be middle-class renegades, he held in higher esteem worker-intellectuals of the kind typified by Peirats, since they could play a key role in the creation of class-based movements, the *sine qua non* for revolutionary transformation. Peirats typified the movement's intellectuals who emerged from the proletarian ranks of anarcho-syndicalism. It is striking that middle-class intellectuals attracted to the libertarian camp, like Urales and Montseny, were hostile to syndicalism and, as we have already seen, periodically found themselves at odds with key sectors of the overwhelmingly proletarian CNT. In contrast, Peirats and those of his ilk were worker-autodidacts who, inevitably, had an intimate understanding of the conditions shaping the lives of other workers.

For Peirats, writing was a struggle in itself. Unlike professional propagandists like Urales, who lived and, indeed, prospered, from their publishing endeavours, Peirats not only had to overcome the cultural deficit imposed on him from birth but he frequently combined writing with manual labour. On the occasions that his words were remunerated, he received the wage of a semi-skilled labourer. Also in contrast to Urales, Peirats's writing was intimately linked to his activism, and his emergence as a publicist did not mark the end of his phase as a 'man of action', even if it inevitably meant he spent less time engaged in some of the clandestine activities described earlier.

His first writings were both tentative and ambitious and reflected the quest of a young man searching for his place in the world and within the movement. Following his first published article in 1928, in *El Boletín del Ladrillero*, at the start of the 1930s he penned two short plays, which reflected his fascination with theatre and its communicative value: the unpublished *Violín de Ingres* and *Revivir*, which appeared in 1932.² Unsurprisingly, given the intense internal debates within the anarchist movement at this time, his activist writings were destined to take precedence, as we saw with *Glosas anárquicas*.³ By the end of 1933, writing in his free time, Peirats was a regular contributor to the movement's most important publications, such as *Tierra y Libertad* (the FAI weekly and Spain's most important anarchist newspaper), *La Revista Blanca*, *Acracia*, and *Ética*. He also wrote for the CNT press, including the influential daily *Solidaridad Obrera*

¹ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, London, 1971, pp. 3–43; see also Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and revolution: A study of Antonio Gramsci's political and cultural theory*, Berkeley, CA, 1980.

² José Peirats, *Revivir*, L'Hospitalet, 1932.

³ L'Hospitalet, n.d.

(commonly known as *La Soli*). In an attempt to evade unwanted police attention, most of these articles appeared under the penname 'Jazmín'. He also frequently used the pseudonym 'Afnidad', the name of his affinity group, which points to his readiness to submerge his own identity within that of a collective unit.

Older activists gradually took note of the young man behind the pennames and he acquired a reputation for his incisive prose. His potential was quickly spotted by Felipe Aláiz, arguably the most talented writer in anarchist circles and, indeed, one of the best journalists of his generation.⁴ Born in Belver de Cinca (Aragon) in 1887, after studying in Lleida and Huesca and barely twenty-seven, Aláiz became director of *La Revista de Aragón*, before José Ortega y Gasset drafted him into the liberal daily *El Sol*. In Madrid, he frequented the city's literary bohemia, rubbing shoulders with Pío Baroja and Eugeni d'Ors, although the elite intelligentsia, with its distinguished cliques, pedantry, and manners, chafed at his cheerful and down-to-earth spirit. Turning his back on a promising career in the official press, he moved to Barcelona and threw in his lot with the anarchist movement, becoming editor of *Solidaridad Obrera*. During spells in jail, he wrote his celebrated novel, *Quinet*.⁵ He also acquired a reputation as a skilled translator (his Spanish translation of Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* continues to be reprinted even to this day). Identified with the radical wing of the movement, in 1930 he was director of *Tierra y Libertad* before becoming director of *Solidaridad Obrera* in October 1931. A great wit, joker, and inveterate gossip, he was incarcerated on many occasions for publishing blistering attacks on officialdom.⁶ On more than one occasion, his sister, a nun, sheltered him in her convent.⁷ Aláiz was one of the most active and, arguably, the most valuable of the few middle-class bohemians attracted to the anarchist movement.

If Massoni was Peirats's mentor in social struggles, Aláiz was, as José later acknowledged, his 'tutor in journalism'.⁸ Separated by twenty-one years and by their social backgrounds, their vocation to write as a revolutionary necessity ensured they became close friends: Aláiz referred to Peirats affectionately as 'Campaneret', a reference to his bell-ringing grandfather in La Vall; years later, Peirats conceded that 'he was like a father to me.'⁹ Aláiz was also a friend to the Peirats family, and José's parents sometimes lent the invariably down-at-heel writer money.¹⁰ In the course of their long discussions, Aláiz communicated to his *protégé* the essentials of journalism; his contribution to José's apprenticeship as a writer is, therefore, incalculable. Inspired by Aláiz's axiom that 'journalism requires a light touch with the pen, an agreeable porosity', Peirats discarded the esoteric prose glimpsed in *Glosas anárquicas* in favour of a more concise language.¹¹ Likewise, the irony and caustic humour of his mentor became hallmarks of Peirats's writing style.

⁴ For his life, see Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 26–36, and Francisco Carrasquer, *Felipe Aláiz: Estudio y antología del primer anarquista español*, Madrid, 1981; for his view of journalism, see Felipe Aláiz, *El arte de escribir sin arte*, Toulouse, 1946.

⁵ Barcelona, 1924.

⁶ Susanna Tavera, *Solidaridad Obrera: El fer-se i desfer-se d'un diari anarcosindicalista (1915–1939)*, Barcelona, 1992, pp. 65–73.

⁷ MI T. 6, L. XII, 91.

⁸ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 39.

⁹ MI T. 6, L. XII, 84.

¹⁰ Peirats, 'Notas'; MI T. 2, L. IV, 136.

¹¹ MI T. 3, L. IV, 150.

Dividing his time between manual and intellectual labour, Peirats was increasingly drawn towards writing.¹² In the autumn of 1933, most likely at Aláiz's suggestion, Peirats was appointed administrator of *Tierra y Libertad*, which now had a print run of up to 30,000 copies.¹³ This position allowed Peirats to see a newspaper functioning from within and it left him feeling fresh to write at the end of his working day. Yet this was no career move. The fraught relations between the authorities and the libertarians meant that, as part of the team running the self-proclaimed 'publication of the social revolution in Spain', Peirats was eminently jailable. Indeed, in a matter of months, he became one of the most wanted anarchists in Barcelona.¹⁴

4.1 Public Enemy Number One

In early 1934, the Generalitat assumed control of public order, in accordance with the scheduled devolution of power from Madrid to Barcelona brokered by the first republican government. With central government in Madrid controlled by an anti-Catalan, centre-right coalition since the November 1933 elections, the liberal-republicans in the Generalitat were keen to demonstrate a robust approach to law and order and unleashed a fierce clampdown on the CNT and the libertarian movement.¹⁵ The judicial and police offensive was accompanied by a no less strident campaign in the Catalan press, which Peirats described as 'a hysterical offensive with the FAI as scapegoat'. The anarchists were cast as the greatest threat to existing civilisation in a series of fantastical stories identifying them with organised crime, drug pushing, and prostitution.¹⁶ Another theme of this criminalising discourse was the identification of anarchism with migration, with La Torrassa singled out as a rebel territory of lawless migrants and anarchists who had effectively seceded from Catalonia.¹⁷

As secretary of the FAI in Barcelona, Peirats later acknowledged how activists laughed at the 'horror stories' propagated by the authorities¹⁸ based on the myth of 'the terrible FAI of serialised crime novels':¹⁹ 'If only they knew that we were a handful of people!'²⁰ In truth, while this clandestine organisation perforce held no detailed statistics, on Peirats's reckoning, at its high point there were no more than 30,000 FAI members across the Spanish state, with an estimated 3,750 in Barcelona.²¹ As the authorities had gagged the anarchist press, the Barcelona Federation of anarchist groups replied to its accusers with *FAI*, a clandestine and self-proclaimed 'revolutionary publication', described by Peirats as a 'fighting pamphlet'.²² With a growing reputation as a writer and organiser, Peirats was recruited by Aláiz, who was already involved in *FAI*, teaming him with another main contributor, Jaume Balius, who had a long insurrectionary background

¹² Ibid., 136.

¹³ Íñiguez, *Esbozo*, p. 592.

¹⁴ MI T.2, L.IV, 117–8.

¹⁵ Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 144–7.

¹⁶ MI T. 2, L. IV, 134. See the series of articles by Josep Maria Planes, under the title 'Els gàngsters de Barcelona', in *La Publicitat*, 6 and 10–12 April 1934.

¹⁷ Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 124–6.

¹⁸ MI T. 2, L. IV, 130.

¹⁹ Ibid., 128.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

²¹ Letter to Norman Ridenour, n.d. (October 1969?) Another FAI activist put the figure at around 300 (Miró, *Cataluña*, p. 49).

²² MI T. 2, L. IV, 135.

as a radical Catalan nationalist during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and who had been jailed for his part in an assassination attempt on King Alfonso XIII.²³ In April 1934, however, Peirats was entrusted with the publication of the paper. Thus, with the birth of the Republic, drawn to the anarchist movement by its combative power and in charge of a clandestine publication in violation of the law, Peirats effectively became ‘public enemy number one’.²⁴

While *FAI* began as a collaborative effort, repression was on the rise, and its publication had now to rely on one person only. This was a security measure to narrow the circle of information surrounding *FAI*. Whenever activists distributing the paper were detained by the police, they were subjected to beatings and torture, although they were unable to name anyone involved in producing the paper.²⁵ Such was the secrecy surrounding *FAI*, even Peirats’s closest *compañeros* had no idea he was behind the paper. On the days it went to press, rather than risk being stopped in the streets, Peirats travelled by taxi to a print shop in central Barcelona to have the proofs composed before taking another taxi to a print shop a kilometre away. Once printed, he took another taxi and met two contacts responsible for distributing the paper.²⁶

As for its content, *FAI* was fierce and uncompromising. With the anarchist movement in open war with the authorities, Peirats gave full vent to his anti-republican sentiments and his indignation at the racist stereotyping by the Generalitat.²⁷ The tone was set in the ‘Introduction’ to the first issue of *FAI*, which explained how the new paper had emerged in spite of the ban on the anarchist press:

[T]hrough the back door, to evade the stalking of the men of order. The police regime thus requires it. We are under the dominion of the baton and the stake. All civil liberties have been abolished by the satraps of petit bourgeois nationalism. The most fundamental constitutional rights have been eliminated... We are those who react. Anarchism had set a path in the propaganda of its ideas, the criticism of all authoritarian systems and the negation of the state... having no other censor but our very conscience.²⁸

When official efforts to silence *FAI* grew more frantic, Peirats was obliged to take further precautions, sometimes staying with an aunt in the countryside outside Barcelona. As the authorities’ net widened, Peirats was finally arrested by Catalan police in the summer of 1934 and registered as an anarchist. Fortunately for him, they could neither identify him as secretary of the Barcelona *FAI* nor as the driving force behind *FAI*. He was detained with Canela, his friend from *Afinidad*, who was then secretary of the Catalan Regional Committee of the *FAI*, en route to a clandestine meeting of the anarchist youth movement, the *JJ. LL.* Generally held in the mountains outside Barcelona, the details of these gatherings were circulated at the eleventh hour to evade the police.²⁹ On this occasion, the police had detained an activist who, after a severe beating, gave up details of the meeting.

Before Peirats and Canela were taken off along with some 100 *JJ. LL.* activists for interrogation, they managed to discard incriminating evidence – Peirats eating a note that confirmed his posi-

²³ Miguel Amorós, *La revolución traicionada (La verdadera historia de Badius y Los Amigos de Durruti)*, Barcelona, 2003.

²⁴ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987; Ángel García, 26 August 1984; and Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 20 September 1972.

²⁵ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 22.

²⁶ *MI T.* 2, L. IV, 135.

²⁷ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

²⁸ *FAI*, April 1934.

²⁹ Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 27 February 1983.

tion within the Barcelona FAI. Upon reaching the central police station in Barcelona, they were threatened by the officers. Their discomfort increased after Canela asked his partner to bring him some reading material to help him pass the time. Unwittingly, of all the books at home, she selected one containing a letter relating to the supply of arms from France. To their amazement, the guards did not search the book, which allowed Canela and Peirats to eat the damaging evidence. Peirats was released the next day, but Canela and other activists with police records were jailed without trial (*presos gubernativos*), an extra-judicial form of detention common during the monarchy and which the republican authorities preserved.³⁰

Peirats's time in the FAI was nearing an end. Afinidad, and José in particular, were becoming uncomfortable with the FAI's democratic deficits. They were particularly critical of the cult of leading groups, such as Nosotros, who enjoyed considerable kudos due to the long record of its members as armed defenders of the movement. Another of Afinidad's concerns was what it perceived as the imposition of bureaucratic control within what had been conceived as a democratic anarchist organisation. This coincided with the rise of the Z and Nervio affinity groups – one based around Fidel Miró³¹ and the other around Abad de Santillán.³² Born in Spain, Miró and Abad de Santillán had cut their teeth as militants in Cuba and Argentina respectively and had recently arrived in Barcelona following the spread of dictatorships in the 1920s and 1930s across the Caribbean and South America. If some Barcelona activists resented the newcomers on personal grounds, in Peirats's case this was undoubtedly secondary to ideological-strategic concerns that Z and Nervio were taking control of the FAI and imposing what he believed was their brand of 'disciplinary anarchism', which included majority voting on decisions that would bind all faístas. For Afinidad, this was contrary to FAI traditions and 'basic anarchist principles'. While it might be desirable to reach majority agreements inside mass organisations like the CNT, Afinidad feared that, in a small anarchist organisation like the FAI, this raised the danger of 'authoritarian nonsense'. At a meeting called to discuss this matter towards the end of 1934, Peirats was accused of 'infantilism' and he clashed violently with Abad de Santillán. When Peirats informed the rest of Afinidad, they quit the FAI, and he resigned his position as secretary of the Barcelona FAI as well.³³ The criticism might be levelled that by leaving the FAI, Afinidad effectively handed victory to its adversaries. Nevertheless, resignation as an act of protest had a long history in the anarchist movement and Peirats quickly found a new front of struggle.

4.2 His 'golden age' at Solidaridad Obrera

In August 1934, Peirats was drafted onto *Solidaridad Obrera*, the Catalan CNT's flagship daily paper, then under the editorship of Manuel Villar, another of the recently arrived Hispano-Argentinian militants. Aláiz sealed Peirats's arrival, proposing him to other members of the editorial board and brushing aside José's concerns that, at twenty-six, he was unprepared to work in the hub of the most important of the movement's press organs. At *La Soli*, Peirats completed his 'apprenticeship' as a journalist and, towards the end of his life, he looked back on this experience

³⁰ MI T.2, L.IV, 136–41.

³¹ See his autobiography, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*.

³² See his *Memorias 1897–1936*, Barcelona, 1977, and Frank Mintz (ed.), 'Diego Abad de Santillán: Un anarquismo sin adjetivos; Una visión crítica y actual de la revolución social', *Anthropos*, no. 138, 1992.

³³ MI, T. 2, L. IV, 117–8 & 142–4.

as his 'golden age... one of the most glorious landmarks in my life as a thinker and as a human being'.³⁴

Symbolic of the CNT's scarce resources at the time, there was only one typewriter, and Peirats, like Aláiz, prepared copy by hand. Much of Peirats's time was spent correcting the numerous notes and announcements that arrived at the paper, which gave notice of the union's myriad activities.³⁵ José's writing now flourished and reflected his broad range of cultural, social, philosophical, and political concerns. For instance, during this period he published his second pamphlet, *Para una nueva concepción del arte: Lo que podría ser un cinema social*.³⁶ Focussed on 'social cinema', this study was commissioned by the Barcelona-Madrid quarterly and anarchist publishing house *La Revista Blanca* and reflected his enduring interest in cultural communication.³⁷

Like many of his generation, Peirats was an avid cinemagoer and devoured magazine and newspaper articles on the subject. Revealing a sensibility that was both urban and urbane, he was fascinated by the potential of this new genre and how it had triumphed over theatre. His observations on the genre were very much at odds with the official perception of anarchism as an atavistic form of protest – a view that would receive new currency decades later due to Eric Hobsbawm's Marxist theory of anarchism as 'primitive rebellion'. He was particularly gripped by the 1933 Oscar-winning film *Eskimo*.³⁸ Directed by Woody Van Dyke, the film – which catapulted Iñupiaq actor Ray Mala into international stardom – represented one man's fight for his place in the world in the face of the incursion of the state and whites in an isolated indigenous Alaskan community.³⁹

Possessing a more mature writing style, *Para una nueva concepción del arte* had the explicit aim of demonstrating the efforts of the CNT cinema workers to promote social cinema as a counterpoint to the 'moral code' of Hollywood and the 'belligerent tendencies' of cinema under the Nazis.⁴⁰ Beginning with an analysis of the growth of the cinematography industry, Peirats revealed intimate knowledge of the reach of this new medium, before going on to consider the import of more technical aspects, such as the 'realism of the image and the conquest of space' and technical processes in sound and Technicolour. He then critiqued mainstream cinema and its development in Hollywood, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Stalinist Russia. Finally, he considered the potential of 'social cinema' rooted in a 'pedagogical methodology' and 'the crusade against the brutalising opiate of "standard" production'.⁴¹

Peirats's writing career was very nearly cut short on 6 October 1934. Following the November 1933 elections, the authoritarian Catholic Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA – Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Right-Wing Groups) had become the biggest party in parliament. Although it had no direct cabinet representation, the CEDA had sufficient parliamentary power to influence the centre-right government of Alejandro Lerroux to either freeze or repeal the reforms of the first two republican years. By early October, CEDA leader José María Gil Robles, who was perceived by many on the Left as the gravedigger of the Republic, was

³⁴ Ibid., 145; Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', pp. 21 & 39.

³⁵ MI T. 2, L. IV, 145–7.

³⁶ José Peirats, *Para una nueva concepción del arte: Lo que podría ser un cinema social*, Barcelona, 1934.

³⁷ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 26.

³⁸ Canela, 'Testimonio', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 46.

³⁹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023990/>, accessed 29 June 2011.

⁴⁰ Peirats, *Para una nueva concepción del arte*, p. 32.

⁴¹ Peirats, *Lo que podría ser*, pp. 29–31.

pushing for his party to take control of specific government ministries. Liberals and leftists feared the Republic was about to be destroyed from within, as had occurred with Germany's Weimar Republic. Worried the CEDA would revoke Catalan autonomy, the liberal republican ruling parties inside the Generalitat planned to rebel against the central government.⁴² As we have seen, prior to the crisis, relations between the two big powers in Catalonia – the CNT and the Generalitat – were highly fractious. Smarting from the repression it had received from the local state, the Catalan CNT remained aloof from a general strike organised in support of the Generalitat.⁴³ On the evening of the protest, the Generalitat dispatched paramilitary police to close *La Soli's* office and silence the Catalan CNT's main voice. Expecting such a move, Peirats, the least known of the editorial team to the police, had been assigned the job of remaining in the office. When police arrived, he failed to convince them he was the errand boy for the journalists and was held at gunpoint as the office was searched. In the course of the search, a nervy policeman accidentally discharged his rifle, almost blowing Peirats's head off.⁴⁴

The protest of the Generalitat and its civilian supporters was swiftly put down by the Spanish military. Yet the aftermath of the events of October 1934 rocked the Catalan CNT. When the army took control of Barcelona, Ascaso, one of the Nosotros insurrectionists, took the unprecedented step of speaking on military radio to order an end to the general strike in Catalonia, even though it had not been called by the CNT.⁴⁵ This move appeared all the more treacherous since, at precisely the same time, the Asturian CNT was resisting the military in what was the biggest revolutionary explosion in Europe since the Paris Commune of 1871.⁴⁶ Events in Asturias reflected the influence of Valeriano Orobón Fernández, a polyglot, translator, and highly insightful young anarchist theoretician, who embraced the insurrectionary anti-fascism of the Alianza Obrera Revolucionaria, a coalition of the united Left (anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, socialists, and dissident and official communists).⁴⁷ This non-sectarian stance stood in sharp relief to the exclusivist insurrectionism of the Barcelona radicals.⁴⁸ Jailed in March 1934, Orobón Fernández contracted tuberculosis and died in Madrid, in early 1936, aged just thirty-one. Coming at a crucial moment in the history of the anarchist movement, his death was a tragic loss. Peirats felt enduring admiration for him and described him as 'the most complete anarcho-syndicalist in all spheres'.⁴⁹

The 'Asturian Commune', which resisted the military for two weeks, entered the annals of Spanish revolutionary history until its brutal repression by the Spanish Legion under the command of General Francisco Franco. After October, Asturian activists felt betrayed by the Catalan CNT and its 'us alone' mentality. The rising repressive curve hit the CNT and all other leftist

⁴² See Alejandro Nieto, *La rebelión militar de la Generalidad de Cataluña contra la República el 6 de octubre de 1934 en Barcelona*, Madrid, 2014.

⁴³ Chris Ealham, "Nosaltres sols": La CNT, la unidad antifascista y los sucesos de octubre de 1934 en Cataluña', in Alejandro Andreassi and José Luis Martín Ramos (eds.), *De un octubre a otro: Revolución y fascismo en el periodo de entreguerras, 1917–1934*, Barcelona, 2010, pp. 169–97.

⁴⁴ MI T. 3, L. V, 152–4; Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ MI T. 3, L. V, 156.

⁴⁶ See David Ruiz, *Insurrección defensiva y revolución obrera: El octubre español de 1934*, Barcelona, 1988. Also Barrio Alonso, *Anarquismo*.

⁴⁷ See José Luis Gutiérrez, *Valeriano Orobón Fernández: Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en Europa*, Valladolid, 2002, and Peirats, 'Cabezazos en el muro', *Frente Libertario*, June 1974.

⁴⁸ Miró, *Cataluña*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Letter to Ángel García, 26 August 1984.

groups very hard. In Barcelona, however, while some members of the *Solidaridad Obrera* editorial board were jailed and because the Catalan CNT was a spectator during the October protest movement, *La Soli* continued to appear and was relatively unmolested by the authorities.

When his comrades decided Peirats was 'virgin' as far as prison was concerned, he was selected as the paper's 'official editor', which meant that, whenever the authorities launched a case against *La Soli*, he faced the threat of jail, leaving the real editor to continue his work. He stoically accepted the arrangement, while he faced over thirty charges for articles he had not in fact written.⁵⁰ He also began to write some of the editorials. With the rest of the Catalan leftist press also banned, it became a source of embarrassment that *La Soli* continued to appear. To resolve this conundrum, Peirats published an editorial, 'Down with the death penalty!', in which he condemned the executions and military trials of Asturian revolutionaries. The paper was immediately banned, whereupon José returned to making bricks.⁵¹

Following its reappearance in 1935, Peirats returned to *La Soli*, working as a roving reporter, travelling throughout Catalonia in an increasingly quixotic manner, covering conflicts in factories and fields or CNT meetings. He also reported on court trials involving cenetista pickets and activists. Wearing his traditional proletarian rope-soled espadrilles, he cut an idiosyncratic figure alongside the besuited 'professional' journalists from the mainstream press, and his attire periodically elicited adverse comments from court judges.⁵² On one occasion, at least, he was praised by a judge for his reportage of court affairs. During a long trial relating to the October 1934 uprising, it was not uncommon for journalists to nod off in the press box. According to Peirats, only he and another reporter from the leftist republican *La Humanitat* covered events diligently. One morning, the prosecutor approached the press box with a copy of *La Soli* and gave a brief 'lesson' to the other journalists: 'You should learn from *La Soli*, gentlemen of the press. This is real information, not the pack of lies you print.'⁵³

During these months, a curious incident revealed how Peirats was perceived as an honest broker within the movement, even by those with whom he had clashed in the ideological arena. The circumstances involved a motion of censure launched by CNT tram workers against Durruti. This came after Durruti, who was in prison, had put pressure on Barcelona's tram workers to return to work after a particularly bitter and violent strike. There was a degree of self-interest on Durruti's part, since he felt the continuation of the strike was preventing the release of prisoners held without trial, of which he was one.⁵⁴ In November 1935, a meeting of tram union activists was convened to 'judge' Durruti. As the accused, Durruti had the right to select a third party to preside over the trial and, notwithstanding their history of conflict over the insurrectionary tactic, he selected Peirats, evidently trusting in his integrity and impartiality.⁵⁵

4.3 Anti-fascism, the Popular Front, and dissidence

After October 1934, the governmental counter-reform gained momentum and civil liberties were eroded. With the threat of right-wing authoritarianism all the more present, both interna-

⁵⁰ Gómez, *Colección de Historia Oral*, p. 19.

⁵¹ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', pp. 45–6.

⁵² Letter from Felipe Aláiz to Peirats, 5 November 1946.

⁵³ MI T. 3, L. V, 161–2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁵ Paz, *Durruti*, p. 439; José Peirats, 'El complejo Sabaté', *Frente Libertario*, September 1972; MI, T. 3, L. V, 158.

tionally and domestically, a debate opened up within the anarchist movement as to how best resist fascism.⁵⁶ Inevitably, the contrast between events in Asturias and Catalonia in October 1934 fed into this discussion and support for revolutionary anti-fascism *à la Asturias* dovetailed with existing disquiet about the insurrectionary road pursued during 1932–3. Peirats, unsurprisingly, denounced the radicals' maximalist insularity and their vanguardist belief that they alone could make the revolution. Several affinity groups had already left the FAI in protest at Nosotros's machinations and their woeful 'revolutionary gymnastics'.⁵⁷

However, as 1935 wore on, rather than follow the Asturian model, the dominant current inside the CNT favoured the return of the political Left to power as a way of blocking the rise of fascism. With general elections announced for February 1936, there was a growing awareness on the Left as a whole that a rightist victory might likely take Spain down the German road, where the Nazis had established a dictatorship following their electoral triumph of January 1933. Equally, the repressive policies of the centre-right government convinced many cenetistas of the desirability of a new legal climate that would allow for the open reorganisation of union structures following the battering they had received during the 'cycle of insurrections' of 1932–3. It is worth noting that the most ardent supporters of the earlier maximalist line – most notably Urales, Durruti, and García Oliver – now embarked on an about-turn and backed the Frente Popular (Popular Front) electoral coalition of republicans, socialists, and communists, which was, to all intents and purposes, a rerun of the republican-socialist coalition of 1931.⁵⁸ The moderation of mythical figures like Durruti, frequently identified with the most radical positions inside the movement, is especially striking.

This *volte-face* prompted Peirats to adopt a new dissenting position. At the Catalan Regional Conference of the CNT held at the end of January to define the movement's stance ahead of the February elections, despite a verbiage of apoliticism, it was effectively agreed to allow grassroots cenetistas to vote for Popular Front candidates.⁵⁹ In protest, Peirats resigned from *Solidaridad Obrera* in early February.⁶⁰ While he appreciated the critical political context, he opposed 'the law of the pendulum... the ebb and flow tactic the CNT was following, shifting according to circumstances and its mood.'⁶¹ The tipping point was a clash with Villar, the editor of *Solidaridad Obrera*.⁶² It would be a misrepresentation to reduce the conflict to personalities or a struggle of egos. The ascendancy of Hispano-Americans like Villar, Abad de Santillán, and Miró coincided with a rising bureaucratic trend inside the anarchist movement. Months before Peirats's resignation, his ally Carbó had quit *La Soli* after Abad de Santillán was parachuted into the paper as interim editor when Villar had been jailed. Rather than a petulant act of jealousy, Carbó's protest is best seen as a response to a situation in which Abad de Santillán was, temporarily at least, editor of three anarchist publications – a scenario which prompted Carbó to denounce him

⁵⁶ Barrio, *Anarquismo*, pp. 402–15.

⁵⁷ José Luis Gutiérrez, *La idea revolucionaria: El anarquismo organizado en Andalucía y Cádiz durante los años treinta*, Madrid, 1993, p. 77.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Federico Urales, 'Tribuna libre: Ante las próximas luchas políticas', *La Revista Blanca*, 3 January 1936, and *Solidaridad Obrera*, 8, 16, 17, and 24 January 1936; see also Diego Caro, 'El anarcosindicalismo y la victoria del frente popular en las elecciones de 1936', *Historia social*, no. 76, 2013, pp. 45–66.

⁵⁹ CRT de Cataluña, *Memorias de la Conferencia Regional Extraordinaria celebrada en Barcelona durante los días 25, 26 y 27 de enero de 1936*, Barcelona, 1936; *Solidaridad Obrera*, 26–31 January 1936.

⁶⁰ José Peirats, *Examen crítico-constructivo del movimiento libertario español*, México, 1967, pp. 26–7.

⁶¹ MI, T. 3, L. V, 164.

⁶² Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 20.

as ‘Argentine tyrant’. In Peirats’s case, he was not only hostile to Villar’s Popular Frontism but also his authoritarian control of *La Soli*, which he felt reflected the same bureaucratic tendency he had earlier seen developing inside the FAI. Following the ‘political’ turn in favour of the Popular Front, these bureaucratic tendencies increased, doubtless to stymie grassroots dissent. This perhaps explains why García Oliver, along with other prominent Catalan militants, apparently opposed Peirats’s departure from *La Soli*, fearing that he would heighten the opposition to CNT Popular Frontism from outside the tent.⁶³

Such concerns were well founded. Although Peirats returned to brickmaking, he contributed to Carbó’s weekly paper *Más Lejos*, which was diametrically opposed to intervening in the political process and critiqued the shifting whims of the Nosotros affinity group. He was joined by Badius, another dissident with whom he had collaborated earlier on *FAI*. As Peirats later explained:

[We considered] the revolution as a phenomenon conditioned by popular participation... Channeling a revolution did not mean imposing proprietary rights over it. And it could not be made by audacious minorities.⁶⁴

From the pages of *Más Lejos*, Peirats lambasted anarchist Popular Frontism and deepened his rift with García Oliver, when he labelled him a ‘Bolsheviser’.⁶⁵

Due to the instability of the construction industry, Peirats found himself unemployed in the spring of 1936. When Abad de Santillán bumped into José at this time, he observed that ‘by his appearance it was likely that he was eating little and poorly.’ Obviously moved, and despite their evident political differences about the path of the movement, the Hispano-Argentine offered Peirats a part-time position on the *Tierra y Libertad* editorial board. Although broke, José refused the invitation on principle, a stance that had a lasting impression on Abad de Santillán: ‘Afterwards, I felt great respect and a certain admiration for him, since integrity of this type is a rare quality.’⁶⁶

With poor job prospects in Barcelona and finding himself at loggerheads with the anarchist movement, a restless Peirats decided to go south to Castelló to work on the orange harvest. With no money for the passage, he embarked on a quixotic adventure: like many unemployed workers, he clandestinely boarded a goods train and travelled hobo-style.⁶⁷ As he journeyed south, he was shocked at the sight of disabled and unemployed beggars at train stations: ‘I had no idea something like this existed in Spain or anywhere in the world. It was like Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*.’⁶⁸ This was a perilous journey. The Republic had witnessed an escalating judicial offensive against the unemployed. In 1933, the republican-socialist government passed the Vagrancy Act (*Ley de vagos y maleantes*), which allowed for the internment of jobless workers, and the ‘undocumented’ (*indocumentados*) in particular, who could barely afford to keep their papers in order.⁶⁹ If discovered, hobos ran the gauntlet of private security guards and the police, who readily applied the dreaded Vagrancy Act. So, to remain undetected, Peirats spent part of the

⁶³ Peirats, *Figuras*, pp. 48–9; MI T. 3, L. V, 159–60 & 165; letter to Manuel and Mary Salas, 1 April 1987.

⁶⁴ Peirats, ‘¿Se renunció a la revolución?’, *Presencia*, September–October 1966.

⁶⁵ *Más Lejos*, 30 April 1936; Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 52.

⁶⁶ Abad de Santillán, *Memorias*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ MI T. 3, L. V, 165–7.

⁶⁸ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 78–80.

journey clinging to cables on the underside of an express train, suspended just above the rails. Later in the trip, he found an empty wagon, which he shared with other hobos.⁷⁰

When the train stopped at a station, he was arrested by police and charged with vagrancy. Fortunately for José, after being detained for two days on ‘suspicion’, the authorities released him as he had no records as a ‘vagrant’ and was able to prove his identity. Finally, he reached Castelló with just one peseta and ‘looking like a pig... My huge bush of light brown, curly hair had been turned black by coal dust.’ He decided to go to the local CNT centre to request solidarity, only to be mistaken for a beggar and unceremoniously ejected. After stealing some food, he went back to sleep on a train but was detained again, this time as an ‘undesirable’. Left in a cell without food for forty-eight hours, the police eventually released him with a ninety-minute deadline to leave the city. Hungry, he went to an anarchist athenaeum to ask for help. Despite finding a copy of his *Glosas anárquicas*, he could not convince anyone there that he was not a chancer and was kicked out again. Filthy and dejected, Peirats jumped aboard a Barcelona-bound goods train. Afraid of being detained once more by the police at the train station, he took the drastic measure of jumping from a moving wagon, tramping home to Collblanc.⁷¹

4.4 The May 1936 Zaragoza Congress

José’s return coincided with the preparations for the May 1936 CNT National Congress in Zaragoza, the last such gathering before the civil war. In L’Hospitalet, the local CNT organised a series of meetings to decide its position and select three delegates for the congress. Peirats was chosen, along with Josep Xena and Manuel Collado. The delegates set off for Zaragoza in a carnival-like atmosphere on a special train rented by the Catalan CNT, arriving in the Aragonese capital along with legions of activists from across the Spanish state, ‘a genuine red-and-black invasion’.⁷²

The proceedings of the May congress have been much analysed: the return of the moderates to the CNT, the analysis of the ‘revolutionary gymnastics’, and the political turn of 1935–6 being among the most important issues.⁷³ While Peirats now represented the radical wing of the movement, he was critical of Isaac Puente’s essentially agrarian blueprint for a future anarchist society, approved at the congress as ‘the confederal concept of libertarian communism’.⁷⁴ This reflected Peirats’s essentially urban (anarcho-syndicalist) activism and his view that Puente’s vision was out of step with Spain’s historical development. Years later, he referred mockingly to this resolution as ‘the science-fiction programme of libertarian communism’.⁷⁵

The members of Nosotros came in for sharp criticism at the congress. Despite an evident division within the L’Hospitalet delegation between Peirats and Collado, on the one hand, and Xena, who defended the FAI line, on the other, all three threw their weight behind Peirats’s critique of

⁷⁰ MI T. 3, L. V, 168–9.

⁷¹ Ibid., 172–8.

⁷² Ibid., 181, 184, & 189.

⁷³ Juan Pablo Calero, ‘Visperas de revolución: El Congreso de la CNT (1936)’, *Germinal: Revista de estudios libertarios*, no. 7, 2009, pp. 97–132; Brademas, *Anarcosindicalismo*, pp. 168–70; Marcos José Correa, *La ideología de la CNT a través de sus Congresos*, Cádiz, 1993; for the proceedings, see CNT, *El Congreso Confederal de Zaragoza 1936*, Bilbao, 1978.

⁷⁴ CNT, *El Congreso Confederal*, pp. 226–42.

⁷⁵ MI T. 3, L. V, 187.

Nosotros and its shift from febrile insurrectionism to cold political collaborationism prior to the February 1936 elections. This position was not unique. Other radicals, like the delegate from Port de Sagunt, singled out Durruti as representing the new ‘collaborationist’ line, denouncing ‘his gigantic steps towards the most exasperating and castrating reformism’. Meanwhile, Asturian delegates attacked Ascaso, who was called to task for ending the October 1934 general strike in Catalonia while the fight was still very much alive in the north. Ascaso was left politically and morally weakened. Only in death, two months later, as he fought to put down the military coup in Barcelona, was the heroic myth of Ascaso resurrected.⁷⁶

4.5 The revolutionary: The military coup and revolution from below

After the congress, Peirats returned to the brickworks, combining his work with his activities in La Torrassa’s CNT and athenaeum. He also found himself in demand as an orator. At the end of May, he addressed an anarchist meeting alongside movement luminaries like Montseny, Urales, and Max Nettlau, the German activist-historian of the international anarchist movement. Meanwhile, he had not given up on his vocation as a revolutionary writer. He enrolled in the Lebrun Institute in downtown Barcelona to perfect his knowledge of the French Duployé system of shorthand note-taking. On Saturday, 18 July, like most Saturdays, he finished an early morning shift in the brickworks before attending a shorthand class.⁷⁷ Little could he appreciate he had made his last brick.

Around midday, a friend entered his class to inform him of a military coup in Morocco. Since the Popular Front electoral victory in February, most right-wing parties had given up hope of overthrowing the Republic through legal means, lending their weight to a coup plot of extreme military conservatives and crypto-fascists. The coup became a reality on 17 July, in Morocco. The CNT had made contingency plans to counter any such coup and it now ordered a general mobilisation of its activists. Peirats set off for La Torrassa’s athenaeum, stopping at home for his pistol, only to learn that his sister had already given it to a cenetista cousin. When he arrived at the athenaeum, most of the other Afinidad members were there with whatever arms they could muster. They were accompanied by youths from the barrio. In desperate need of weapons, Peirats and the rest broke into nearby mansion houses in the hope of adding to their arsenal, en route to the Sociedad Coral ‘El Universo’, the venue for the athenaeum’s theatre productions. There, Afinidad established its ‘divisional headquarters’ on 18 July and waited, amidst great tension.⁷⁸

On the morning of 19 July, Barcelona awoke to factory sirens, a pre-arranged signal for the workers to take to the streets to confront the coup.⁷⁹ But the CNT masses had limited arms at their disposal, and the Generalitat president, the left-wing republican Lluís Companys, had rejected appeals from anarchist leaders for weapons. However, as the day wore on, CNT and FAI activists successfully engaged the military rebels in street fighting, seizing more and more arms, which were distributed to grassroots militants, who formed urban militias. The militias, combined

⁷⁶ CNT, *El Congreso Confederat*, pp. 22 & 172; MI T. 3, L. V, 182–6; Paz, *Durruti*, pp. 486–91.

⁷⁷ MI T. 3, L. V, 180 & 191; letter to Domingo Canela, 25 July 1972.

⁷⁸ MI T. 3, L. V, 193.

⁷⁹ Agustín Guillamón, *Barricadas en Barcelona: La CNT de la victoria de julio de 1936 a la necesaria derrota de mayo de 1937*, Barcelona, 2007, pp. 11–69.

with loyal detachments of the republican security forces, effectively quashed the rebellion in the Catalan capital.

In L'Hospitalet, the anarcho-syndicalist masses accounted for the vast majority of those on the streets. Peirats was in the front line of the workers' counter-mobilisation, coordinating activities and building barricades. Roused by the sirens, Peirats and his comrades – 'a group of badly-armed youths, including several women' – converged on two of the main arteries leading into Barcelona, where they intended to confront troops from the Pedralbes barracks, on the L'Hospitalet-Barcelona border. With only 'meagre handguns and some rusty rifles' at their disposal, Peirats knew all he and his comrades could do was 'harry the troops with ingenuous fire'. After an anxious wait, they received word that most of the troops garrisoned in Pedralbes had already passed into Barcelona, whereupon the revolutionaries built a barricade facing the city centre in case they returned. The arrival of more comrades with rifles helped soothe their nerves. That evening, Peirats went for a walk through the barrio. Relative calm prevailed, although a local church had been set alight by youths. When he reached Sants, he saw evidence of fierce street fighting, with intestines hanging from the tramlines and flesh stuck to the walls.⁸⁰

On the morning of 20 July, after two nights without sleep and with the coup effectively defeated in Barcelona, Peirats and other Afinidad members were part of a poorly-armed crowd that assembled to storm the Pedralbes barracks. Before their attack, possibly as a result of their preparations, several unarmed soldiers deserted the barracks and informed the revolutionaries that the troops inside were 'disoriented' and in no mood to resist. The insurgents seized the barracks and its main prize – the armoury. Peirats was one of the first to enter. It was a jubilant moment for him as he felt the authority of the old state being swept aside: 'We controlled the barracks.' The revolutionaries seized rifles, pistols, mortars, grenades, helmets, and machine guns, which were then transported on requisitioned trucks and cars to La Torrassa and neighbouring Sants.⁸¹

Peirats was exhilarated by the storming of the barracks, for 'extraordinary things take place in the collective psyche. The individual feels annulled. The new being is the mass.' The workers were re-conquering space, since the Pedralbes barracks had been built during the Republic on what had been a tree-lined public area, where families previously went to make paellas. For José, this had been his 'favourite refuge', where he went in search of solitude and to read. He watched as the barracks was built 'from the foundations up', before the surrounding area was declared out of bounds due to 'security concerns'.⁸²

Now the revolutionaries renamed the building 'Bakunin Barracks'. Although Peirats lost close friends and comrades during the street fighting of 19–20 July, this was the stuff of his dreams: the worker masses had breached the bastions of state power and the people were now armed with a new creative confidence as agents of their own history. As he reflected decades later:

[S]uch an opportunity only comes once in a hundred years. It is impossible to describe the joy registered by a people that feels itself sovereign and sees its feared enemy defeated at our feet.⁸³

Although the coup had failed to topple the republican authorities in most of Spain, it had, nevertheless, fractured the power of the state. With some 50,000 CNT activists armed, the state had lost its monopoly of coercive power. New structures of popular power immediately sprang up.

⁸⁰ MI, T. 3, L. V, 194–5; José Peirats, 'El tesoro de Alí-Babá', *Frente Libertario*, July–August 1971.

⁸¹ *El Diluvio*, 22 July 1936; Peirats, 'El tesoro...', *Frente Libertario*, July–August 1971; MI T. 3, L. V, 196–7; letters to Diego Camacho, 16 March 1967, and Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 4 December 1984.

⁸² Peirats, 'El tesoro...', *Frente Libertario*, July–August 1971.

⁸³ MI T. 3, L. V, 198; Paz, *Durruti*, p. 483.

The bricks that had been placed one on top of the other by Peirats and thousands of anonymous insurgents to create barricades now formed the basis of grassroots revolutionary committees. As the armed workers who controlled the various barricades communicated with one another across the Greater Barcelona area, a 'federation of barricades' (*federación de barricadas*) was established – the first and only truly revolutionary body to be formed after the uprising, which mirrored the district federations of the Paris Commune. One of the first acts of the federation of barricades was to create a 'war committee' (*comité de guerra*) in the Bakunin Barracks, which established the earliest workers' militias, the armed embodiment of revolutionary power, formed to reconquer territory still controlled by the military rebels. At the same time and on their own initiative, the local revolutionary committees assumed responsibility for food distribution and supplies in the working-class neighbourhoods.⁸⁴

Peirats was immersed in the revolution in La Torrassa, where the athenaeum that previously brought culture to the dispossessed now served as a forum for popular democracy within the community.⁸⁵ In his memoirs, he relates the hectic first days of revolution. At one of the early meetings of the Revolutionary Committee of L'Hospitalet, a speaker invoked Kropotkin's aphorism, 'If there is hunger the day after a revolution, then the revolution has failed'; immediately, a 'supply committee' (*comité de abastos*) was established in a collectivised warehouse, where food seized from shops was distributed among the community.⁸⁶ This was local decision-making through self-governing structures and popular self-determination, shaped by the specific needs of the local community. Fuelled by revolutionary enthusiasm, sleep was now an unnecessary luxury. Peirats, like other militants, attended a succession of community assemblies and meetings of the revolutionary committee by day; and, by night, he baked bread before joining the armed workers' patrols on the streets. For Peirats, it was the culmination of his life's work, the first tentative steps towards the creation of an alternative society.

Nevertheless, in the corridors of power, limits were already being placed on the revolution. On 20 July, with the street fighting over and the coup defeated throughout Catalonia, President Companys invited the CNT-FAI leadership to a historic meeting at the Generalitat. A skilled politician, and acutely aware of the revolutionary balance of forces in the streets, Companys made an emotional speech in which he praised the anarchists for their triumph over the military:

Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalonia... You have conquered everything and everything is in your power. If you do not need me or want me as president of Catalonia... I shall become just another soldier in the struggle against fascism. If, on the other hand, you believe in this post... I and the men of my party... can be useful in this struggle.⁸⁷

In this way, Companys offered the CNT-FAI leaders to continue with their support for the Popular Front, albeit under new circumstances, proposing the creation of the *Comité Central de Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya* (CCMA – Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias),

⁸⁴ Abel Paz, *Durruti: El proletariado en armas*, Barcelona, 1978, p. 360; Chris Ealham, 'The Myth of the Maddened Crowd: Class, Culture and Space in the Revolutionary Urbanist Project in Barcelona, 1936–7', in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (eds.), *The Splintering of Spain: New Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 111–32 & 249–55.

⁸⁵ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 38.

⁸⁶ MI T. 3, L. V, 199.

⁸⁷ Cited in Ealham, *Anarchism*, p. 173.

a new structure composed of anti-fascist political and trade union organisations committed to spearheading the fight to liberate those areas where the military rising had triumphed.⁸⁸

Trusting that Companys and the republican order were impotent, the anarchist leaders opted simply to ignore what remained of the old state and accept a policy of 'democratic collaboration' with the other anti-fascist forces on behalf of unity in the fight against authoritarianism. Therefore, on 21 July, the CCMA was formed.⁸⁹ If, superficially, the CCMA appeared to be a revolutionary structure, in practice it was little more than a government and war ministry under the control of the unions. For the defenders of the bourgeois republic, on the other hand, the establishment of the CCMA presupposed a halt in the process of revolutionary change. Not only did the legality of the republican state remain intact but, by agreeing to the CCMA, the republicans, led by Companys, had succeeded in drawing the politically inexpert anarchist leaders further into a process of inter-class collaboration. As the fleeting 'short summer of anarchy' gave way to 'the autumnal cold',⁹⁰ Peirats would quickly find himself, once more, in fierce opposition to the de facto leadership of the anarchist movement.

⁸⁸ Josep Eduard Adsuar, 'El Comitè Central de Milícies Antifeixistes', *L'Avenç*, March 1979, pp. 50–6.

⁸⁹ *La Vanguardia*, 22 July 1936.

⁹⁰ Abel Paz, *Viaje al pasado (1936–1939)*, Barcelona, 1995, pp. 63–70.

Chapter Five: A revolution consumed by war (1936–39)

Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts that heaven has bestowed upon men; no treasures that the earth holds buried or the sea conceals can compare with it; for freedom, as for honour, life may and should be ventured; and on the other hand, captivity is the greatest evil that can fall to the lot of man.

—Don Quixote to Sancho Panza

[1936], the biggest revolutionary betrayal since the Russian Revolution.

—Emma Goldman

In the historiography of the Spanish anarchist movement it is widely acknowledged that the revolution was devoured by civil war.¹ This chapter will examine how Peirats's initial optimism turned into dismay as the revolution was sidelined, an event that opened up new divisions within organised anarchism.² In the first year of the war, Peirats emerged as one of the most prominent oppositionists to the CNT-FAI leadership. After the July revolution, it became manifest that the leading figures within the movement possessed a very restrictive interpretation of anarchist thought and practice. According to Helmut Rüdiger, a German anarchist exiled in Spain since 1933, the CNT-FAI 'did not know how to prevail; it had no idea how to establish an anti-fascist community inspired by its own libertarian ideas.'³ In no small part, this can be attributed to the inability to reflect on the lessons of the October 1934 'Asturian Commune' discussed in the previous chapter – a process that was further hindered by the untimely demise of Orobón Fernández, in many respects the great strategist that the Spanish anarchist movement so desperately needed.

Decades later Peirats reflected on this *political* problem and attributed it to an absence of intellectuals schooled in anarcho-syndicalist culture. In the long decades of struggle prior to 1936, 'technicians and intellectuals distanced themselves from us, just as we did from them.' For Peirats, this reflected the conservatism of these groups in the face of 'our bustling pace' and 'our excessive revolutionary romanticism', which meant that 'we had no qualms about risking the Organisation every other minute. We were used to rebuilding it, freeing our prisoners and healing our wounds, which were considerable. Intellectuals and technicians could not follow us down this path.' While this state of affairs endowed anarcho-syndicalism with profound protest resources,

¹ See Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, *passim.*; Casanova, *Anarchism*, pp. 101–45; Brademas, *Anarcosindicalismo*, pp. 173–249; Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 170–94.

² Chris Ealham, 'De la "unidad antifascista" a la desunidad libertaria: "Comités superiores" contra "Quijotes anarquistas" en el marco del Frente Popular (1936–37)', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2011, pp. 121–42.

³ Helmut Rüdiger, *Ensayo crítico sobre la Revolución española*, Buenos Aires, 1940, p. 30.

when it came to the 1936 Spanish Revolution, the absence of intellectuals mutated into ‘our weakness’ (*raquitismo*).⁴

Rather than extend the power of the grassroots revolutionary committees over social and economic life, CNT-FAI leaders clung to the Popular Front formula of anti-fascist unity glimpsed before the February 1936 elections. The logic of this position sealed their divorce from fundamental anarchist principles. First, they shored up the institutions of the Republic that had initially collapsed under the weight of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary mobilisations in July; later, contrary to anti-state ideals, they participated in republican cabinets, first in Catalonia (September), then in the central government (November). Outnumbered in government and politically inexperienced, the anarchist leaders made a series of compromises attendant on their cabinet commitments. In particular, they embarked upon concessions to their cabinet allies regarding the conduct of the war, which gradually saw the erosion of the basis of popular power. The workers’ militias were a vivid example of this, since they were eventually incorporated into the regular republican army.

This collaborationism, as it was labelled by its anarchist critics, was accompanied by an idealistic reformism reminiscent of pre-World War I German social democracy. The day in which four anarchists became ministers in the Madrid government, *Solidaridad Obrera* observed that:

The government today... is no more an oppressive force against the working class, just as the state is no longer the organ that preserves class society. And the participation of the CNT in both means they will repress the people even less still... And the government will have no greater concern than that of organising the war and co-ordinating the revolution within a general plan.⁵

It was no exaggeration when veteran anarchist Ricardo Sanz later commented how, during the war, the libertarian movement ‘renounced everything, absolutely everything’.⁶

In the course of this renunciation, to minimise dissent from below, the higher committees of the CNT-FAI were bureaucratised, converting the movement into a ‘top-down’ organisation.⁷ As was later acknowledged by a prominent supporter of collaborationism, the leadership, with ‘its bureaucracy and its power, completely anaesthetised the senses’.⁸ While the FAI became just another political party, according to Camilo Berneri, an Italian anarchist exiled in Barcelona, there was ‘a Bolshevisation process inside the CNT’, as leaders exerted new control over the base and eroded internal democracy.⁹ For instance, breaking with the norms of the organisation, the leadership now convened assemblies and drew up the agenda, which was not circulated in advance as had occurred before the war. As the CNT-FAI were drawn into high politics, for the first time in its history it attracted careerists. Miquel Amorós describes ‘the avalanche of members’ drawn to the movement after the revolution as ‘politically neutral, a malleable mass from which shady careerists emerged’.¹⁰ One example was Joan Pau Fàbregas, the accountant son of a bar owner and ex-member of the conservative republican party *Acció Catalana*. A former

⁴ José Peirats, ‘En este que parece amanecer’, *Frente Libertario*, June 1976.

⁵ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 4 November 1936.

⁶ Ricardo Sanz, *El sindicalismo y la política. Los ‘Solidarios’ y ‘Nosotros’*, Toulouse, 1966, p. 310.

⁷ Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, p. 108.

⁸ Toryho, *No éramos tan malos*, p. 186.

⁹ *Guerra di Classe*, 5 November 1936.

¹⁰ Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, pp. 127–8.

car salesman, Fàbregas represented the CNT in the Generalitat government.¹¹ According to one young anarchist, there were ‘problems’ with ‘many of these new people’.¹²

At the grassroots of society, meanwhile, the revolution was spearheaded by thousands of workers who set about establishing the biggest experiment in workers’ control of the economy in the history of Western Europe.¹³ For all the power enjoyed by CNT activists, some were still conditioned by a defensive mentality framed by decades of clandestine activity. A telling example came in the heady days after July. With the connivance of the anarcho-syndicalist masses, now the masters of L’Hospitalet, Peirats and his comrades established a secret arms dump in a brickworks to store some of the weaponry seized from the Pedralbes barracks, clearly suggesting they feared they would be forced underground sooner or later.¹⁴

In the course of the post-July wave of workplace occupations, the workshops of the prestigious paper *La Vanguardia* were taken over by CNT printers and *Tierra y Libertad*, the main FAI newspaper, was produced there. Aláiz, the editor and Peirats’s mentor in journalism, drafted his protégé onto the paper, where he combined his journalistic work with membership of the Revolutionary Committee of L’Hospitalet. In accordance with the Popular Front formula, these revolutionary committees ceased to reflect the balance of forces in the streets and were expanded to include representatives from all the anti-fascist organisations. Peirats became quickly disillusioned with the new formula, which he believed undemocratic, since it allowed for ‘considerable representation of other sectors’ with little influence in L’Hospitalet. He also witnessed for the first time the hostility of the new official communist party, the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC – Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia), towards the revolution – something that nourished in him an enduring anti-communist feeling.¹⁵

Anarchist involvement in looting and lethal violence after July has long been exaggerated.¹⁶ Peirats, for instance, was a staunch opponent of both. At the very start of the revolution, on 20 July, Afinidad members stopped a group of looters and Peirats threatened to shoot them ‘as thieves’. Days later, he and an associate from the revolutionary committee detained two militiamen who had stolen from the deserted house of a local notable.¹⁷ Peirats was governed by a firm ethical code that was as much ideological as it was instilled in him through a family background that valued austerity. As he recognised, ‘I took it upon myself to remain true to the family tradition and not *rip off* anyone. The anarcho-robbers and anarcho-ministers always had me before them.’¹⁸ This was confirmed by Antonia Fontanillas, who described him as ‘an upright, even moralistic, man’.¹⁹

Peirats was also moved by a profound humanism. This impelled him to reject violence that was dressed up as ‘revolutionary terror’: ‘Real revolutionaries kill (if they do) with disgust.’²⁰ He was

¹¹ See Joan Pau Fàbregas, *80 dies en el govern de la Generalitat: El que vaig fer i el que no em deixaren fer*, Barcelona, 1937.

¹² Interview by Nick Rider with Concha Pérez Collado, 13 March 1983.

¹³ See Antoni Castells Durán, *Les col·lectivitzacions a Barcelona, 1936–1939*, Barcelona, 1993.

¹⁴ José Peirats, ‘Razones y sinrazones de la participación libertaria en el Gobierno’, *Polémica*, July 1986, p. 63.

¹⁵ Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 32; MI T. 3, L. V, 201–2.

¹⁶ Ealham, ‘The Myth of the Maddened Crowd’, pp. 111–32 & 249–55; Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury*, pp. 101–20 & 145–72.

¹⁷ Peirats, ‘Una experiencia histórica...’, p. 38; MI T. 3, L. V, 202–5.

¹⁸ Letter to José Agustín, 26 October 1969 (original emphasis).

¹⁹ Letter from Antonia Fontanillas to the author, 6 January 2011.

²⁰ Letter to Mariano Puente, 29 July 1971.

horrified that people were being hunted down simply for having attended mass and, throughout the civil war, he did all in his power to prevent these ‘one-way trips’ (‘paseos’).²¹ On another level, like other radical anarchists, he rejected terror on the grounds that it might undermine the revolution.²² For Peirats, the revolution was a new beginning that rendered violence largely unnecessary. This was seen immediately after the coup, when he was involved in the resumption of the bread supply. One bakery owner, who had a long history of conflict with the CNT and who had earlier sacked Peirats and his cousin, was visibly shaken upon seeing José arrive at his workshop with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Peirats reassured him: ‘Don’t give me that face! I’m not here to settle grudges. I’m here to help you with the baking.’²³ Possibly fearful that not all anarchists would respond in this way, the employer in question later joined the FAI.²⁴

5.1 The dissident anarchist

The stance of the CNT-FAI hierarchy after July pushed José towards a new rebellion: as an opponent to the leaders of the movement to which he had dedicated his life. Just twenty-eight at the start of the revolution, he was at the centre of debates within the CNT-FAI during the civil war, frequently crossing swords with Montseny and García Oliver, former anarchist firebrands converted into government ministers. According to Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, Peirats emerged as ‘one of the most important anarchist youth leaders’.²⁵ Meanwhile, Fidel Miró, prominent organiser of the JJ. LL. who embraced the collaborationist stance of the higher committees, described him as ‘leader’ of the ‘red skins’ (*pieles rojas*), as the radical opponents of anarchist governmentalism were known.²⁶

During this time, Peirats revealed his adult character: the tough, implacable personality of an independent man, whose critical spirit meant he never shied from controversy.²⁷ For some, he was surly, but really he was uncompromising in debate and scornful of what he perceived as hypocrisy and weakness, above all when it came from anarchists. Nonetheless, he preserved friendships regardless of the intensity of political disagreements.²⁸ A case in hand is Miró, with whom he clashed repeatedly before and during the civil war. Despite their sharp differences, Peirats acknowledged that ‘we learnt to become friends’,²⁹ ‘like two little brothers’.³⁰ This was confirmed by Miró, who apparently respected the ‘dignity’ and ‘honest behaviour’ of his adversary.³¹

Highlighting the new defiant stance of José and his comrades in La Torrassa, the name of their *Afinidad* group changed to *Los Irreductibles*. Their rebellious spirit helped ensure that L’Hospitalet became one of the most important centres of opposition to the CNT-FAI leaders.

²¹ MI T. 3, L. V, 199, 207, & 211.

²² Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, p. 107.

²³ MI T. 3, L. V, 201.

²⁴ Peirats, ‘Razones...’, *Polémica*, July 1986, p. 63.

²⁵ Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, *Cultura y libertad: La educación en las Juventudes Libertarias (1936–1939)*, Valencia, 1996, p. 64.

²⁶ Fidel Miró, *Anarquismo y anarquistas*, Mexico, 1979, p. 32.

²⁷ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 13 February 1963.

²⁸ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971 and Marcelino Boticario, 18 June 1987.

²⁹ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 8 May 1986.

³⁰ MI T. 3, L. VI, 246–7.

³¹ Miró, *Anarquismo*, p. 32; letter to Diego Abad de Santillán, 18 February 1973.

Meanwhile, Peirats continued writing and was an energetic and assiduous contributor to the anti-collaborationist press, particularly *Ruta*, the JJ. LL. newspaper, ‘the paper of the Young Turks’.³² He also wrote for *Ideas*, the Baix Llobregat CNT newspaper and one of the most vocal opponents of governmentalism. In all his articles, he underscored the independence of the anarchist movement over and above any circumstantial political influences. In spite of his defiant stance, however, the only limitation on his critique of CNT-FAI leaders was his underlying loyalty to the movement that constituted his extended family.

His dissenting trajectory saw him relocate to the provincial Catalan capital of Lleida in mid-August, where he remained for ‘the short revolutionary honeymoon’ of 1936.³³ Some 160 kilometres from Barcelona, Lleida would become second only to L’Hospitalet in terms of its importance as a centre of opposition to anarchist Popular Frontism.³⁴ Peirats moved to Lleida at the invitation of Félix Lorenzo Páramo, secretary of both the CNT Defence Committee and the FAI-affiliated local federation of anarchist groups, who drafted him on to the city’s leading libertarian newspaper, *Acracia*.³⁵ A railwayman and autodidact, Lorenzo Páramo had founded *Acracia* as a weekly paper in 1933 and, under his editorship, it became more of an anarchist than a CNT publication. Appointed mayor of Lleida after the revolution, Lorenzo Páramo wanted Peirats to enhance the critical line of *Acracia*, which was now a daily paper. Yet Lorenzo Páramo did not just want a capable pen – he was aware that Lleida lacked seasoned activists and, worse still, since the July days, Barcelona anarchist gunmen had arrived in the city and their ideas about making a revolution did not extend far beyond assassination.³⁶

Under Peirats’s custodianship, *Acracia* became one of the foremost adversaries of the CNT-FAI leadership. In fact, *Acracia* allowed him to give full vent to his oppositional spirit. Now in his late twenties, he was doubtless ready to leave home and pursue an independent path in life. He achieved this in Lleida, where he came of age as both an anarchist publicist and a man.

During 1936–7, Lleida was very much a revolutionary canton. When the Generalitat government took measures to limit the revolutionary independence gained after the July coup, the local council resisted attempts to impose central control from Barcelona.³⁷ The city grew in importance during the war as a vital stopping-off point for propagandists, militias, and war materiel en route to the Aragon front. In political terms, since it was a stronghold of the dissident communist Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM – Marxist Unification Workers’ Party), the CNT was the second revolutionary force, it presented Peirats with new challenges. This contrasted with La Torrassa, where the anarchists had long been the dominant force on the streets. Consequently, as well as writing, Peirats committed himself to consolidating Lleida’s anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements.

His ‘delightful times’ in revolutionary Lleida were perhaps the most fulfilling moments of his life.³⁸ He drew a first-rate team of discontents to *Acracia*. These included Ramón Bou, a veteran

³² José Peirats, ‘Benito Milla Navarro’, *Polémica*, October 1987, p. 29.

³³ José Peirats, ‘Doña Anastasia’, *Frente Libertario*, April 1973.

³⁴ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 205.

³⁵ MI T. 3, L. V, 207; see also Broto and Bergés, *La Lleida anarquista*, p. 74.

³⁶ MI T. 3, L. V, 208. For the violence, see Joan Sagués, *Una ciutat en Guerra: Lleida en la Guerra Civil Espanyola*, Barcelona, 2003, pp. 263–84.

³⁷ Joan Sagués, ‘La recerca d’una nova societat des de la intervenció del poder local: Els projectes d’un ajuntament en temps de guerra i de revolució (Lleida, 1936–1938)’, *Butlletí de la Societat Catalana d’Estudis Històrics*, no. 13, 2002, pp. 89–104, especially pp. 90–1.

³⁸ Letter to Fidel Miró, 17 September 1968.

anarchist whom he knew from Barcelona, as well as Aláiz, who arrived in October, having found himself at loggerheads with the CNT-FAI hierarchy. He also drafted locals, such as Antonio García Lamolla ('Platón'), a revolutionary and surrealist artist, who provided sketches for the paper and with whom José established a close friendship,³⁹ and Pedro Panés, who became *Acracia's* peripatetic field reporter. They were later joined by Vicente Rodríguez García ('Viroga'), one of Peirats's friends from Barcelona and fellow autodidact.⁴⁰ The support staff included a local woman who cooked for the team and two 'reformed' prostitutes in the production team.⁴¹ Most telling of all, two protégés were employed in tasks such as proofreading: Dr Francesc Bordalba Armengol, Lleida mayor during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and former director of the local anti-tuberculosis clinic,⁴² and a conservative lawyer, Antoni Sas Cugat. Both were right-wingers threatened with paseos and received the full protection of the *Acracia* team.⁴³

Peirats described *Acracia* as 'a perfect community'.⁴⁴ Totally immersed in the production of the paper, he and his comrades forged a singular sense of purpose. Most of the team worked, ate, and slept at the premises, which had previously belonged to *El Correo*, a Catholic newspaper requisitioned by the CNT at the start of the revolution. Situated in a spacious building in a Lleida worker district, the print shop was on the ground and first floors and the journalists worked in a large room in a separate flat, which consisted of two big rooms and a sizeable sunny terrace where they would relax.⁴⁵ The energy and focus of the team ensured that *Acracia* became, according to Peirats, 'one of the worthiest defenders of that revolutionary era'.⁴⁶

Acracia's major 'scoop' was Peirats's article 'Palabras de Buenaventura Durruti', which included fragments from a famous speech by the mythical anarchist guerrilla leader in Bujaraloz on 4 November, the historic day that four libertarians joined the Madrid government. Peirats had followed the speech on the radio and the following day he published the article quoting Durruti as he lambasted the Generalitat government and the bureaucratisation of the anarchist movement.⁴⁷ Yet on 6 November, a full two days after the speech, the 'official' version of Durruti's address appeared in *Solidaridad Obrera*, significantly manipulated and embellished, stressing, nonetheless, the need for unity in order to emerge victorious from the war.⁴⁸ Peirats was adamant that Durruti did not utter these words; rather, he believed they were a fabrication by the CNT-FAI Propaganda Office to justify the entrance of anarchist ministers in the machinery of the republican state.⁴⁹ In an unsigned article almost certainly authored by Peirats and published in *Acracia* on the same day as the *Solidaridad Obrera* article, Durruti's speech was described as 'a diatribe against the

³⁹ MI T. 3, L. V, 210; see Antonio Téllez Solá, *Apuntes sobre Antonio García Lamolla y otros andares con un recuerdo del mismo por José Peirats*, Vitoria, 1992, and Jesús Navarro, *Antoni Garcia Lamolla: Biografía d'un pintor*, Lleida, 2011.

⁴⁰ MI T. 3, L. V, 209; José Peirats, 'Coloquio juliano', *Frente Libertario*, July 1972. See also 'Viroga', *Juventud e ideas*, Barcelona, n.d. (1937?)

⁴¹ The prostitutes later disappeared when they learnt the sex trade was tolerated again in Barcelona (Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 45).

⁴² Jaume Roca, 'Història de la veterinària en Catalunya (1400–1980)', PhD diss., Autonomous University of Barcelona, 1992, p. 371.

⁴³ MI T. 3, L. V, 212; Sagués, *Una ciutat en Guerra*, pp. 315–8.

⁴⁴ José Peirats, 'Antonio García Lamolla', *Cultura Libertaria*, January 1986.

⁴⁵ MI T. 3, L. V, 208; Navarro, *Antoni Garcia Lamolla*, p. 78.

⁴⁶ José Peirats, 'García Lamolla y el surrealismo', *Inquietudes*, June 1947.

⁴⁷ *Acracia*, 5 November 1936.

⁴⁸ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 6 November 1936.

⁴⁹ MI T. 3, L. V, 210; see also Ilya Ehrenburg, *Corresponsal en la Guerra Civil Española*, Gijón, 1979, p. 24.

bureaucratic offshoots of the revolution'.⁵⁰ As will be seen, this put *Acracia* and Peirats in the line of fire of the higher committees of the anarchist movement.

Further evidence of the courage of the line pursued by *Acracia* was its opposition to terror and the death penalty.⁵¹ An example of this was an editorial, most likely written by Peirats, which was published on 12 November 1936. Titled 'Jamás contra el hombre', it affirmed: 'Today we call for an end to the death penalty on the grounds that it is an inhumane and anti-social measure... Today, we are at the dawn of a fair society: we must build the foundations of this society with a just morality.'⁵² This campaign went beyond the printed word. As we have seen, the *Acracia* team protected two right-wingers directly threatened with retribution. Peirats's humanism led him to renew his conflict with Tomás, the former La Torrassa FAI leader who had been disgraced after his absence during the December 1933 insurrection. After the July revolution, Tomás and some of his cronies had converged on Lleida, establishing a rule of terror within a local 'people's court' (*tribunal popular*), whose 'justice' was audible throughout the city at night.⁵³ With Tomás as head of the People's Investigation Committee (Comité de Investigación Popular), in little more than a month, some 145 people were condemned to death by the 'Court'.⁵⁴ However, some of the violence was more summary. On one occasion, the *Acracia* artist, García Lamolla, whose love of art saw him travel around burnt-out monasteries and churches in Lleida province in the hope of saving religious paintings, was almost executed by these 'picadors', who mistook him for a priest in disguise. Fortunately, the young artist convinced his captors to call the *Acracia* offices, where someone vouched for him.⁵⁵

Peirats and other members of *Acracia* repeatedly stood up to Tomás and his group.⁵⁶ According to Lleida anarchist César Broto, threats were made on Peirats's life.⁵⁷ Undeterred, and at some personal risk, Peirats continued to visit the local People's Court to denounce those 'who confuse the revolution with slaughter'.⁵⁸ Despite the threats against him, Peirats's local popularity and his high calibre 9mm pistol seemed enough to ensure his safety.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, *Acracia* pursued a line of defending 'a new structure for individual and collective life' yet 'without violence and coercion'.⁶⁰

Besides his work on *Acracia*, Peirats devoted much energy to propaganda and organisational work throughout Lleida and in neighbouring Aragon. He gave speeches in villages and towns, at collectives, and at the Huesca front in a bid to bolster the movement. Peirats also helped set

⁵⁰ 'Durruti, altavoz de la anarquía', *Acracia*, 6 November 1936.

⁵¹ MI T. 3, L. V, 213.

⁵² *Acracia*, 12 November 1936.

⁵³ Peirats, 'Notas'; see also Jaume Barrull, *Violència popular i justícia revolucionària: El Tribunal Popular de Lleida (1936–1937)*, Lleida, 1995. The tribunales populares were set up in mid-August 1936 by the republican state in an attempt to prevent the paseos and extrajudicial bloodletting that had prevailed since July. There was a hope that at least people would get some kind of a trial. It didn't always play out that way, as was the case in Lleida.

⁵⁴ Sagués, *Una ciutat en Guerra*, p. 268; Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté and Joan Villarroya i Font, *La repressió a la rera guarda de Catalunya (1936–1939)*, vol. 1, Barcelona, 1989, p. 135. For Tomás's time in Lleida, see *Acracia*, 12 October 1937.

⁵⁵ MI T. 3, L. V, 219.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁷ Broto and Bergés, *La Lleida anarquista*, p. 93.

⁵⁸ MI T. 3, L. V, 211.

⁵⁹ Téllez Solá, *Apuntes*, p. 43; MI T. 3, L. V, 215.

⁶⁰ *Acracia*, 8 November 1936.

up a libertarian athenaeum, where he gave evening classes on anarchist history.⁶¹ So immersed was he in Lleida's revolutionary life that he has been taken as a native of the city.⁶² He became a central figure in the local anarchist youth movement, shoring up what had previously been a rather weak group. He even organised the construction of a swimming pool and a gymnasium for local youth.⁶³ Miró, his rival in the JJ. LL., nonetheless acknowledged that Peirats's work had 'significantly reinforced' Lleida's anarchist movement.⁶⁴ While the community of activists around *Acracia* was an example to many, there is evidence that José stood out – his abnegation providing a role model for younger activists then taking their first steps in the movement. Among these was Antonio Téllez Solá, future historian of the anarchist movement and a tireless fighter against Franco's dictatorship, whom Peirats inspired to pursue his first efforts at writing.⁶⁵

In the course of his activism, Peirats could not ignore the changes within the anarchist movement, whose leaders increasingly frowned upon grassroots initiatives. When he and revolutionary Mayor Lorenzo Páramo initiated a campaign to convert Lleida into a free commune (*municipio libre*), they received a visit from Josep Joan Domènech, CNT minister in the Catalan government, and Aurelio Fernández, anarchist 'man of action', ally of García Oliver, and recently appointed secretary of the Junta de Seguretat Interior de Catalunya (Internal Security Committee of Catalonia). Peirats's repulsion towards the wartime transformation of the movement was derived from his austere morality as much as his politics. When he arrived in La Seu d'Urgell to give a talk, he was dismayed to see 'all the CNT apparatus ensconced in the best hotel.'⁶⁶ On more than one occasion during the war, he recoiled at the sight of activists living in sumptuous 'requisitioned' flats, where they adopted bourgeois customs, 'looking at us condescendingly for remaining true to our tradition... For these people the revolution was a party, a game of "Move over, it's my turn."⁶⁷ It is most likely that his commitment to anarchist orthodoxy would only have been bolstered by the visit of celebrated Russian anarchist Emma Goldman to the *Acracia* headquarters.⁶⁸

The ongoing accommodation of the higher committees to the state raised Peirats's ardour, what he called 'the opposition to everything that smacked of revisionism, bureaucratism, and political intrigue'.⁶⁹ At a big rally in Barcelona, on 14 February 1937, he launched a frontal assault on state control of the revolution and the anarchist movement's creeping centralisation.⁷⁰ And at a meeting in Lleida to welcome a French anarchist delegation that included Pierre Besnard, international secretary of the International Workers' Association, the worldwide anarcho-syndicalist federation, he caused a furore by ending his speech with a fierce attack on CNT-FAI Popular Frontism. Outraged movement *apparatchiks* threatened to report him to the Catalonia Regional

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29 March 1937; Sagués, *Una ciutat en Guerra*, p. 485.

⁶² Thus, it is possible to read: 'Peirats was a Catalan anarchist, probably from Lleida, who edited a newspaper, *Acracia*, published in his home province during the 1930s' (James Cortada (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939*, Westport, Conn., 1982, p. 391).

⁶³ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 40; Antonio Téllez Solá, 'Recuerdos. Peirats, Lérida y las Juventudes Libertarias', *Anthropos*, no. 102, pp. 61–3.

⁶⁴ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 205.

⁶⁵ Téllez Solá, 'Recuerdos', *Anthropos*, no. 102, pp. 61–3.

⁶⁶ *MI T.* 3, L. V, 214.

⁶⁷ *MI T.* 7, L. XIII, 54.

⁶⁸ *MI T.* 3, L. V, 220 & 234.

⁶⁹ *MI T.* 7, L. XIV, 86.

⁷⁰ *Ruta*, 18 February 1937.

Committee of the CNT and warned him he faced expulsion from the movement. Peirats, possibly encouraged by the assent of French anarchist visitors, was typically bullish and challenged his detractors to fulfil their threat.⁷¹

Yet Peirats was far from uncomprehending of the need to win the war. In early November 1936, he and Bou, his colleague on *Acracia*, were part of a four-man delegation sent by the Lleida Provincial Committee of the CNT to Paris to purchase arms, in what was José's first trip outside of Spain (previously he had never ventured beyond the north-eastern triangle of Catalonia, Valencia, and Aragon). In the French capital, he addressed meetings and met with prominent anarchists, including Besnard, and was invited by the staff at *Le Libertaire*, the main French anarchist newspaper, to write an article on the Spanish Revolution.⁷² Although his Parisian sojourn was intensive, he found time to satisfy his curiosity for knowledge and pay a visit to the Louvre.

The delegation failed in its arms procurement mission. This was largely due to the impact of the Non-Intervention Treaty, which the British and French governments had brokered in a bid to appear even-handed over the Spanish Civil War; in practice, leading elites within the democracies favoured a Francoist victory in the war and blatantly ignored infringements of the treaty by Hitler and Mussolini.⁷³ Unable to purchase weapons openly, therefore, the Lleida delegates were forced into clandestine dealings with what Peirats described as 'armaments gangsters', who would only sell weapons at very high prices.⁷⁴ In the end, they returned home only with a donation of rifles from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1.⁷⁵

In his memoirs, Peirats makes brief references to amorous relationships during his time in Lleida. Before the war, he had had the occasional girlfriend, which is not surprising, since photos from the early 1930s reveal a handsome youth with a striking shock of light, curly hair, somewhat long for the period and slightly unkempt, giving him an insouciant, bohemian air.⁷⁶ This image is confirmed by a pen portrait of Peirats by Pedro Panés, who described him thus:

Slim, medium height, Mediterranean features and permanently frizzy hair, with passionate speech and very quick in his stride and his gestures. His restlessness, which at times tended towards exasperation, was contained by his absolute self-control. Despite his youth, he exhibited great maturity and considerable experience. When I think of him, I recall Peirats as someone totally anti-conventional. Modest, unassuming, without any affectation whatsoever, he always dressed simply.⁷⁷

While he had several meaningful friendships with female activists and clearly had no problems relating to the opposite sex, when it comes to amorous relationships, on many occasions in his memoirs, Peirats gives the impression of a somewhat indecisive young man.⁷⁸ Years later, in a letter to his friend Antonia Fontanillas, he confessed only to 'brief encounters' with women before the 1950s, when he met Gracia Ventura, his partner.⁷⁹ During his spell in Lleida, however, it appears he fell in love during a short romantic interlude with a young anarchist from La Seu

⁷¹ MI T. 3, L. V, 216.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 221–4.

⁷³ See Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, Basingstoke, 1998.

⁷⁴ Letter to José del Amo, 3 September 1971.

⁷⁵ Broto and Bergés, *La Lleida anarquista*, p. 98.

⁷⁶ See the photo published in *Tiempo de Historia* of a young Peirats flanked by two libertarian girls on an excursion, *Tiempo de Historia*, no. 62, January 1980, 40–51.

⁷⁷ Pedro Panés, 'Semblanza de Felipe Aláiz', unpublished manuscript (File 329, José Peirats Archive, IISG), p. 5.

⁷⁸ MI T. 3, L. V, 215, and T.5, L.X, 16, 18–9, & 21.

⁷⁹ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 18 February 1989.

d'Urgell. Some fifty years later, he acknowledged he was 'lovey-dovey' (*encaramelado*), although the affair did not progress, probably due to his multiple commitments at the time.⁸⁰

5.2 Censure: The triumph of the CNT-FAI leadership

In Peirats's memoirs, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest the movement leadership attempted to appease him by appealing to his personal vanity with offers of lucrative paid positions. An example came during the December 1936 reshuffle of the Generalitat government. Josep Xena, whom Peirats knew well from La Torrassa, apparently invited him to become a Catalan cabinet minister on behalf of the FAI. Certainly, Xena, a former anarchist 'purist' and rationalist teacher, was always well connected with the movement hierarchy and was particularly close to García Oliver. As expected, given his principles and his cultural stance, Peirats flatly refused to countenance this volte-face. Moreover, since he was not even a member of the FAI, he saw the offer as doubly absurd.⁸¹ In short, he shunned personal aggrandisement; as he put it, 'I prefer remaining true to my beliefs to dwelling in complacency.'⁸²

In spring 1937, with the republican war effort failing, the higher committees intensified their campaign to silence the dissidents.⁸³ In early March, a *Solidaridad Obrera* editorial spoke of the need for 'wartime censorship' to curb 'indiscretion'.⁸⁴ Increasingly, CNT-FAI leaders relied on bureaucratic measures to achieve this end. Given that the dissidents had firm ideological justifications for their resistance to all authority, including from within their movement, they were prepared for a fight.⁸⁵ A prime example of this dialectic came during 28–29 March, when the CNT-FAI Propaganda Office organised the National Anarchist and Anarcho-syndicalist Press Conference at Barcelona's 'Casa CNT-FAI', the movement's nerve centre. At a meeting packed with activists from across Catalonia and beyond, the contrast with the pre-civil war internal democracy was glaring. Abad de Santillán and his group had effectively controlled the FAI Peninsular Committee for quite some time, while the CNT National Committee had as its secretary-general the compliant Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez ('Marianet').⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the CNT-FAI Propaganda Office was under the tutelage of Jacinto Toryho, who was also the editor of *Solidaridad Obrera* and with whom Peirats had already clashed at several pre-war FAI meetings.⁸⁷ Toryho typified the ambition for and obsession with paid bureaucratic positions of the time. Converted into a *nouvel bureaucrate* at the start of the war, it is very telling that, shortly after falling from grace (he was abruptly removed from his position by the CNT National Committee), Toryho suddenly abandoned both Spain and the anti-fascist struggle.

Espousing a discourse of control from above and 'responsibility', the leadership relied on bureaucratic censure to intimidate oppositionists. Throughout the war, as Amorós has observed, conferences, meetings, and plenums were organised like witch-hunts.⁸⁸ The National Anarchist

⁸⁰ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 19 June 1985; MI T. 3, L. V, 215.

⁸¹ MI T. 3, L. V, 225.

⁸² Peirats, *Examen crítico-constructivo*, pp. 7–8.

⁸³ For the war and the problems facing the Republic, see Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War, 1936–1939*, Cambridge, 2002.

⁸⁴ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 6 March 1937.

⁸⁵ See *Acracia*, 21–27 March 1937.

⁸⁶ See Manuel Muñoz, *Marianet, semblanza de un hombre*, México, 1960.

⁸⁷ See his memoirs, *No éramos tan malos*.

⁸⁸ Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, p. 269.

and Anarcho-syndicalist Press Conference is a perfect example of this. Contrary to CNT norms, this was a 'top-down' affair, with no pre-circulated agenda, and those in attendance were not allowed to elect anyone to preside over the proceedings. Following brief preambles by Toryho and Marianet, Montseny – then minister in the central government – lectured those present for almost an hour on the need for 'discipline' to attain a 'single pace' in the movement's propaganda. Representatives from *Acracia* and other dissident publications were warned against breaking ranks with the leadership. Peirats was enraged and demanded the right to reply. He denounced the gathering as 'a fraud' and challenged Montseny to explain why the democratic norms of the movement were being trampled on. Reminding her they were in 'revolutionary Spain' not Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany, he stated that, while he would accept censorship for sensitive issues of military strategy, he would not countenance any limits to traditional anarchist shibboleths of critical independence and critique of all authority.

As Peirats later recollected, the conference was not without its lighter moments, such as when Montseny responded to his intervention with the words: 'I think highly of comrade Peirats. He's a good comrade but too young to understand certain realities.' Peirats retorted with irony and precision: 'I was born in 1908, you in 1905, so there's not much time separating us.'⁸⁹ Before the debate could develop, the meeting was guillotined by Toryho and Marianet.⁹⁰

Acracia was unbowed. Peirats likened his articles and the satirical notes of Viroga in *Acracia* to 'sulphuric acid' for the leadership.⁹¹ An internal FAI document revealed that, in the spring of 1937, the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT had written to the *Acracia* team in a 'very gentle and reasoned' manner, appealing to them to desist from sustaining their 'independence', which, it was alleged, belonged to 'other times'. The committee was unhappy both by the rejection of its overture and by the 'tone' of the reply from *Acracia*.⁹² Tension mounted at the National Plenum of Regional Committees of the CNT in April, where Marianet attacked *Acracia* for its critical line.⁹³

The ultimate triumph of the leadership came during the 'May Days' of 1937, a week of street fighting in Barcelona between, on the one hand, the state security forces and political parties hostile to the revolution and, on the other, the remaining neighbourhood revolutionary committees and the rearguard workers' militias, backed by grassroots cenetistas and the dissident communist POUM.⁹⁴ The origins of the May Days are complex. In the spring of 1937, with the war effort faltering, tensions rose between the workers' committees and the Generalitat and central government over how to conduct the war. This was exacerbated by the problems of feeding a growing refugee population in Barcelona, which raised bitter arguments relating to economic control. As the state sought to assert its authority, the advocates of popular power became frustrated.⁹⁵ In effect, May was an uprising of those who had grown disillusioned with the systematic erosion of the revolution and the strengthening of the old state apparatus following the exhila-

⁸⁹ Gómez, *Colección de Historia Oral*, pp. 30–1.

⁹⁰ MI T. 3, L. V, 226–8; Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 41.

⁹¹ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 41.

⁹² FAI, *Informe que somete el Comité Nacional a la organización para su discusión en el pleno nacional de regionales que tendrá lugar los días 5 y sucesivos en abril*, Barcelona, 1937 (FAI Archive, File 111, IISG).

⁹³ See CNT, *Acuerdos del pleno nacional de regionales de la CNT*, 15 April 1937 (CNT Archive, File 53A, IISG), and *Acracia*, 21–26 April 1937.

⁹⁴ Guillamón, *Barricadas*, pp. 139–90. For a Popular Frontist view, see Ferran Gallego, *Barcelona, mayo de 1937: La crisis del antifascismo en Cataluña*, Barcelona, 2007.

⁹⁵ Ealham, *Anarchism*, pp. 192–4.

rating days of July 1936. Although the balance of forces in the streets favoured the supporters of the revolution, the CNT-FAI leadership brokered a ceasefire that was sold to the grassroots by García Oliver, the former insurrectionist and, since the previous November, justice minister in the republican government.⁹⁶ May constituted the final act of Barcelona's revolution. The remaining workers' militias were now disarmed and many revolutionaries found themselves in jail alongside fascists.⁹⁷

Just days earlier, Peirats was involved in the 'Battle of Cerdanya', a prelude to the Barcelona events, sparked when Generalitat forces moved against the workers' militias in Puigcerdà, in a bid by the republican state to reassert control over the French border. Since the start of the civil war, the frontier had been controlled by the militias led by Antonio Martín, a veteran anarchist from Cáceres, known popularly as 'el Cojo de Málaga' due to an osteitis that affected his right leg and gave him a limp. A close affiliate of Durruti and García Oliver since the early 1920s, Martín used to smuggle arms across the Pyrenees for the Barcelona anarchists. He was renowned for his fierce, and sometimes cruel, repression in a zone where, according to one anarchist, 'he acted as lord and master, with more power than an ancient Chinese emperor.'⁹⁸ Inevitably, Martín had a highly conflictive relationship with local Catalanist and communist groups, although he was backed by the dissident communist POUM. When on 27 April the central government sent armed guards towards the frontier, a confrontation occurred in Bellver de Cerdanya, in which Martín was killed, whereupon paramilitary police took over Puigcerdà.⁹⁹

Lleida anarchists responded to a call for assistance and mobilised in Bellver de Cerdanya, almost 200 kilometres away, effectively securing the approach to Puigcerdà. Armed with a rifle and a pistol, Peirats was part of a patrol that included dynamiters and which controlled the main road from Barcelona. In a direct precedent for the outcome of the May Days, with state forces completely surrounded by anarchist militias, a CNT delegation hastily dispatched by the higher committees arrived from Barcelona to negotiate a ceasefire.¹⁰⁰

A major protagonist in the May Days was a new anarchist group, Los Amigos de Durruti, which had been founded two months earlier.¹⁰¹ Los Amigos were the only group from within the anarchist camp to attempt to convert the May struggle into what its activists called 'a new revolution' by establishing a 'revolutionary junta'.¹⁰² The group's rebelliousness meant that they and their newspaper, *El Amigo del Pueblo*, were quickly disowned by the CNT-FAI hierarchy. Since Los Amigos were the most theorised and organised a challenge to the anarchist leadership, it is worth noting that Peirats failed to identify with them. Certainly, he was well acquainted with Badius, the group's main theoretician from at least the time of their collaboration on *FAI* in 1934. It is highly likely that Peirats knew many of Los Amigos on the streets of Barcelona and La Torrassa in May. Another Los Amigos member, the Malagan Juan Santana Calero, also worked

⁹⁶ García Oliver, *El eco*, pp. 425–8.

⁹⁷ Pelai Pagès, *La presó Model de Barcelona: Història d'un centre penitenciari en temps de guerra (1936–1939)*, Barcelona, 1996, pp. 359–81.

⁹⁸ Ramón Liarte, *Entre la revolución y la guerra*, Barcelona, 1986, p. 94.

⁹⁹ Joan Pous i Porta and Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté, *Anarquía i república a la Cerdanya (1936–1939): El "Cojo de Málaga" i els fets de Bellver*, Barcelona, 1991, pp. 142–73; Gabriel Jackson, *Juan Negrín: Physiologist, Socialist and Spanish Republican War Leader*, Brighton, 2010, pp. 65–6.

¹⁰⁰ *MI T. 3, L. VI*, 228–30.

¹⁰¹ Agustín Guillamón, *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939*, Oakland, CA, 2001.

¹⁰² See *El Amigo del Pueblo*, 12 August 1937, and Agrupación de la Amigos de Durruti, *Hacia una nueva revolución*, n.p., n.d.

very closely with Peirats in 1937. Tellingly, while Peirats liked Santana Calero on a personal level, he felt no sympathy for his politics.¹⁰³ It is quite possible that, given Peirats's importance as a dissident propagandist and activist, he may have been approached to join Los Amigos at some point. Years later, he explained how 'I never came to have true sympathy' for the group 'because I found their inclinations very authoritarian... it seemed somewhat Bolshevizing to me.' He did acknowledge attending to some of their meetings, 'but always in a mood to debate with them'.¹⁰⁴ This reluctance to align with the most radical alternative to the CNT-FAI bureaucracy illustrates the limits of Peirats's opposition to the higher committees, as well as his inability to follow through his critique of the anarchist movement to a more consistent rejection of the leadership. It also reflects what another oppositionist from the era described as an enduring love for the movement and a fear that wartime divisions would result in a genuine internal split, which would weaken it at a crucial moment.¹⁰⁵

After May, the leadership tightened its grip over the base of the anarchist movement, and the tide now turned definitively against the dissidents. New efforts were made to silence their press. According to Severino Campos, a friend of Peirats and journalist on the oppositionist weekly paper *Ideas*, a visit from Marianet and a colleague left him with the impression that 'if we didn't finish with the propaganda we were disseminating, the government would finish with us.'¹⁰⁶ In Peirats's case, he received an ultimatum from the Catalan CNT: either toe the line or *Acracia* would cease to receive paper, whose supply was controlled by the Regional Committee. Using typically abrasive and undiplomatic language, José replied by attacking the 'dictatorial character' of the communiqué and accused the Regional Committee of breaking with the CNT's democratic federalist traditions. Finally, he was summoned to discuss the situation at a meeting of the Lleida Local Federation of the CNT, where Lorenzo Páramo, who had invited Peirats to join *Acracia* months earlier, now accused him of 'dogmatism' and requested he display 'greater flexibility' and comply with the Regional Committee's dictate. With older figures like Lorenzo Páramo having embraced circumstantialism and the JJ. LL. backing the *Acracia* line, a generational divide was evident within the Lleida movement. In his memoirs, Peirats comments how, after discussions with Aláiz and to avoid a damaging split, the dissidents saw no other option than to leave *Acracia* and return to Barcelona.¹⁰⁷ This was an ignominious and disappointing end to what had been the most invigorating period in his activist life. He was especially sad to end his work with the local JJ. LL. Moreover, since he and his associates had been unwavering against the 'cleaners', he was concerned for the lives of some of those he left behind.¹⁰⁸

No sooner had Peirats arrived in Barcelona – with elections imminent for the Catalan JJ. LL., then dominated by Miró – than he opened up a new front of resistance to the leadership.¹⁰⁹ At the start of the revolution, Miró had expressed concerns that the movement was losing its principles, before endorsing Popular Frontism and becoming secretary of the Catalan JJ. LL. and director of its influential newspaper, *Ruta*. At the May 1937 JJ. LL. congress, the Miró team was voted out in favour of a group consisting of Peirats and Viroga, both refugees from *Acracia*,

¹⁰³ Amorós, *La revolución traicionada*, p. 269; MI T. 3, L. VI, 237.

¹⁰⁴ Gómez, *Colección de Historia Oral*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁵ Interview by the author with Diego Camacho, 5 November 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Campos, *Una vida*, p. 105.

¹⁰⁷ MI T. 3, L. VI, 231–3, 43; Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 44.

¹⁰⁸ MI T. 3, L. VI, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 44.

and three of their allies, including Los Amigos de Durruti member Santana Calero.¹¹⁰ Supported by the L'Hospitalet and Lleida's radical youth, this group now controlled the Catalan Regional Committee of the JJ. LL., and José entered the *Ruta* editorial board, where he introduced his critique of Popular Frontism and government collaboration. All this occurred, as he put it, 'right under their noses',¹¹¹ inside the Casa CNT-FAI, where the higher committees of the anarchist movement had their offices.¹¹² Underscoring the siege mentality of the new committee, they established a 'guard' outside their offices.¹¹³

In the more repressive climate after the May Days, this was a pyrrhic victory for the oppositionists. Peirats's articles in *Ruta*, which revealed a growing hostility towards the Stalinist PSUC, led to serious problems with the censor. Sometimes the paper appeared with huge blank spaces, as articles, including their titles, had been suppressed.¹¹⁴ One day, unable to contain his rage, he set off to confront the censor. Indicative of the climate in the rearguard, where the harassment of revolutionaries by republican state intelligence services was rife, Peirats left a message for his comrades to look for him at the central police station if he did not return promptly.¹¹⁵

Yet the CNT-FAI censor was not idle. It 'mutilated' and stalled the appearance of a major pamphlet, *Los intelectuales en la revolución*, which Peirats completed during this period.¹¹⁶ Although dated 1938, adverts for the pamphlet appeared in the anarchist press as early as October 1937.¹¹⁷ This delay would have been immensely dispiriting for Peirats since he had nursed the project – an analysis of intellectuals and their attitude towards social transformation – for some time. Eighty pages long, *Los intelectuales en la revolución* was divided into twelve sections and carried a brief prologue by Aláiz. Dedicated 'To the man, the friend, the painter Antonio García Lamolla, whose conduct inspired these lines... in memory of unforgettable days of fraternal and revolutionary communion in Lleida', the study began by assessing 'the popular element' of revolutions, from the French Revolution into those of the twentieth century, which Peirats called 'the century of the intelligentsia'.¹¹⁸ In keeping with CNT workerist suspicions of middle-class intellectuals, Peirats juxtaposed the popular element with middle-class intellectuals and the 'counter-revolutionary mimesis' of 'intellectual fire corps whose duty has been to be the firefighters in every revolutionary pyre'.¹¹⁹ This contrast underlined Peirats's frustration with those leftist intellectuals associated with Popular Frontism and the democratic state, both in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. As far as the anarchist movement was concerned, he most likely had Montseny and Abad de Santillán in mind, both defenders of collaboration with the republican state.

There followed an analysis of 'the intellectualist preoccupation of Marxism and "scientific socialism"' (p. 21–5), which he argued attracted middle-class intellectuals under the promise of a dictatorship over the workers. (p. 23–4) He then turned his attention to social-democracy (p. 27–31) and how its rejection of 'class spirit' (p. 28) led it to reconcile with nationalism and militarism

¹¹⁰ Paz, *Viaje al pasado*, p. 205. See also Fernández, *Cultura*, pp. 73–96.

¹¹¹ Peirats, 'Antonio García Lamolla', p. 45.

¹¹² MI T. 3, L. VI, 234–5.

¹¹³ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 206.

¹¹⁴ Paz, *Viaje al pasado*, p. 210. For examples of censorship, see *Ruta*, 21 and 27 May, 3 and 24 June, and 17 July 1937.

¹¹⁵ MI T. 3, L. VI, pp. 239–40.

¹¹⁶ Peirats, 'Doña Anastasia', *Frente Libertario*, April 1973.

¹¹⁷ Adverts for *Los intelectuales en la revolución* appeared in *Esfuerzo*, 1 and 7 October 1937.

¹¹⁸ Peirats, *Los intelectuales*, pp. 9–14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

in 1914, before compromising itself again in the face of fascism. (p. 30–9) This analysis was a launch pad for a critique of ‘this tragic Spanish Revolution’ (p. 36), which he viewed as ‘the product... of the corrosive efforts directed at the bourgeois regime by a proletariat with its own unique physiognomy’. (p. 37) He proceeded to identify what he regarded as the threats to the revolution – the official communist movement, the republican state, and ‘intellectuals of pacifism’ who supported them (p. 38):

Where is our intellectual capacity to be found but in the seats of governments, fervently respected by the revolution? It is from these government dens that the counter-revolution organises itself, from where it extends its tentacles and gains ground. Red Spain witnesses today the greatest of sarcasms: the counter-revolution sponsored by dialectical communists, the assault and destruction of revolutionary collectives, the persecution and insidious murder of revolutionary cadres who are not happy to return to the bourgeois republic of yesterday. Prisons are overflowing with revolutionaries crammed among fascist supporters. (p. 39)

Having traced the ‘pacifism’ of Spanish intellectuals from the time of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship through the early republican years, he returned to the revolutionary period after the 1936 coup. Here, he argued, the growth of the ‘plant of guiding intellectualism’ inside the anarchist movement was central to explaining how

The CNT-FAI could, more or less unconsciously, fulfil the mission proposed by the state.... checking the revolution first, then attacking it openly. Government participation of the so-called anarchists was the first major revolutionary defeat. The state would never have been able to reconstruct its military and police apparatuses by its own means alone. The energies of the CNT and the FAI have been channelled towards this end. (p. 63)

Explosive and incisive in equal measure, his critique concluded with a reiteration of his belief in the working class. He issued a passionate call for workers to educate themselves: ‘We must all do something to teach and educate ourselves, even if we don’t know the exact location of Salamanca or Oxford’ (p. 76), adding that ‘If you don’t know how to read, it’s because you don’t want to.... Culture, like freedom, is there to be conquered.’ (p. 78) In short, hope for the future hinged on ‘the heroism of the self-educated’. (p. 71)

Although seized by the authorities, it is safe to assume that copies of *Los intelectuales en la revolución* was passed around in anarchist circles. Nevertheless, it would have had a very limited impact. Its real significance, however (in particular with its analysis of CNT ‘intellectuals’), is that it marked an important starting point for what would later develop into Peirats’s critique of *cenetismo*.

Despite controlling the Catalan JJ. LL., Peirats and his allies were increasingly isolated. The hostility of the movement leadership and the republican state censor were unrelenting. Miró, now secretary of the statewide anarchist youth body, the Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias (FIJL – Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth), took the initiative in the campaign against what he saw as the ‘ultras’ in the dissident Catalan JJ. LL. According to Miró, it was vital to rein in the Catalans and ‘prevent them from following a line opposed to that set out by the anarchist movement as a whole’.¹²⁰ As Peirats conceded in his memoirs, ‘They were conducting war against us from all directions.’ At FIJL meetings, the Catalans came under intense attack for their dissident stance, which was portrayed as ‘Catalan separatism’. Peirats, who never relished interminable meetings, likened the long debates to ‘those that took place in the Middle Ages between Jewish

¹²⁰ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 209.

Talmudists and the apostolic fathers'. Miró accused Peirats of being motivated by personal jealousies rather than ideology,¹²¹ although such a judgement did not tally with his apparent refusal of a ministerial position in the Generalitat in late 1936. Meanwhile, Peirats faced immense pressure from the likes of Xena, Marianet, and other CNT-FAI leaders to modify his position. On one occasion, a meeting with Montseny, García Oliver, and German anarchist Rüdiger dragged on throughout the night, with Peirats emerging unbowed.¹²²

Nevertheless, his rearguard opposition and the constant need to justify himself were taking their psychological toll. This would have been all the more unsettling in the context of the changed nature of the anarchist movement, which increasingly ceased to resemble the body in which he had immersed himself a decade earlier. The transformation was writ large at the FAI plenum held in Valencia in early July 1937, almost ten years since the creation of this exclusively anarchist organisation.¹²³ Here, the FAI leadership revealed its commitment to become a mass movement, pushing through a new structure based not on the traditional affinity groups (generally between 5–20 individuals) but on larger 'associations' (of anything up to 100 people). The FAI's statutes were also revised, in keeping with its wartime state collaboration: its declared aim now was the 'fight against the fascist state' – a formula that effectively justified cooperation with and defence of the republican state. Inevitably, this generated much disquiet at the plenum, culminating in a walk-out of dissidents, including Peirats, who left shouting 'Long live anarchy!'¹²⁴

The July plenum was followed by more unpleasant scenes at the Catalan Regional Plenum of the JJ. LL. held in September, where an infamous confrontation occurred between Toryho, who had supported the Popular Front line since early in the war, and Peirats. Toryho was an extremely talented journalist who, before joining the anarchist movement, was educated in an Augustine school and in the journalism college of celebrated Catholic monarchist cleric, Ángel Herrera. Some Barcelona cenetistas found it hard to look beyond Toryho's past and he was the brunt of many jokes.¹²⁵ Perhaps due to his social and educational background, Toryho had a reputation for haughtiness in his dealings with others in the movement, and this arrogance came to the fore in a clash with Peirats. When the latter questioned the reformist line of *Solidaridad Obrera*, Toryho remarked snobbishly: 'I don't need lessons from an apprentice brickmaker.' Peirats, unfazed and quick-witted, replied: 'I neither need them from an apprentice priest.'¹²⁶ A massive scandal ensued.

The final straw for Peirats came the following month, in October, when he and Santana Calero from *Ruta* were called to meet García Oliver, now secretary of the Comisión Asesora Política (CAP – Political Consultant Commission).¹²⁷ Established in June 1937 by the Catalan CNT, ostensibly to coordinate a coherent response to a rapidly changing political context, the CAP typified the bureaucratisation and proliferation of committees within the wartime anarchist movement. It

¹²¹ MI T. 3, L. VI, 241 & 245.

¹²² Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica...', p. 47.

¹²³ See FAI, *Memoria del Pleno Peninsular de Regionales celebrado en Valencia los días 4, 5, 6 y 7 de julio de 1937*, Valencia, 1937.

¹²⁴ MI T. 3, L. VI, 251.

¹²⁵ Peirats related how a group of comrades who 'wanted to play a trick on him' went to meet the former seminarian at the train station upon his arrival in Barcelona in 1933. Toryho expected them to take him to *La Soli's* office but, to his horror, they went to *La Criolla*, near the port, which was arguably the city's most infamous nightspot, renowned for its transvestite clientele (Peirats, 'Sueños...', *Frente Libertario*, September 1971).

¹²⁶ MI T. 3, L. VI, 253.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254; García Oliver, *El eco*, pp. 466–8.

increasingly sought to control the CNT-FAI press.¹²⁸ We should also recall that relations between Peirats and García Oliver had been extremely tense before the outbreak of the war due to their difference over the insurrectionary tactic, so dear to the latter before his spell as a government minister. According to Peirats, the meeting took a threatening turn when García Oliver advised the pair ‘that they cease from propagating their sickness’ or else face the ‘consequences’. Livid, Peirats demanded clarification of ‘what might occur in the likely case that we continue defending the true values of anarchism which you have abandoned.’ García Oliver refused to explain precisely what these consequences might be, but Peirats appreciated that ‘he let us know that our heads were in danger if we continued.’¹²⁹

In the end, Peirats was forced out of *Ruta* in the same manner he was earlier pressurised to leave *Acracia*. Since *Ruta* received paper from *Tierra y Libertad*, the ‘parent’ FAI publication, the editorial team was informed (most likely at the behest of the CAP) that, unless they modified their dissident stance, the supply of paper would be cut off.¹³⁰ By this point Peirats was, in his own words, ‘physically weary and morally depressed’.¹³¹ After many months of confrontations with comrades and recriminations from the leadership, he felt he had ‘run out of gas’.¹³² He decided to abandon the rearguard and volunteer in the republican army, joining the 26th Division, formerly known as the ‘Durruti Column’. Despite his re-election as secretary of the Catalan JJ. LL., he declined the position and, a few days later, he left for the Aragon front.¹³³ While it is possible that Peirats was shaken by his menacing encounter with García Oliver and the CAP, his life was probably not in any real or imminent danger. His decision to go to the front was most likely motivated by the cumulative strain of his opposition to the leadership and, in a general sense, his disgust at the continual suspicions and intrigues in the rearguard. He also appreciated his naïvety: ‘I felt like I was a little redeemer. I believed I could fix the situation, that I could successfully defeat the large and small rodents gnawing away at our revolution.’¹³⁴ His decision to volunteer had been slowly taking shape in his mind. Three months earlier, following the fractious FAI plenum in Valencia, he had gotten a lift back to Barcelona with a commissar from the 26th Division and they had had a long discussion about life in the trenches, the war, and the cultural work that was taking place among the troops.¹³⁵ Regardless of his reasons, Peirats felt that at the front, unlike in the rearguard, it would be easier to identify his enemies.

5.3 The war and defeat

Some fifteen months after storming the Pedralbes barracks at the start of the revolution, Peirats no longer felt himself to be ‘an enthusiastic youth’. He was fully aware that he was not fighting for the revolution anymore, for he knew the revolution was over and thus he went to the front ‘in search of death’. He also passed over the chance to work as a war journalist. Almost as an act of

¹²⁸ François Godicheau, *La Guerre d’Espagne: République et révolution en Catalogne (1936–1939)*, Paris, 2004, pp. 357–9.

¹²⁹ Letter to Pedro Panés, 1 February 1982.

¹³⁰ Paz, *Viaje al pasado*, p. 210; MI T. 3, L. VI, 249.

¹³¹ MI T. 3, L. VI, 254.

¹³² Letter to Vernon Richards, 13 March 1988.

¹³³ Letter to Pedro Panés, 1 February 1982; MI T. 3, L. VI, 255.

¹³⁴ MI T. 3, L. VI, 256.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

penitence for the failure of the revolution, he had the ‘desire to do something less comfortable’.¹³⁶ He left Barcelona, a city he loved, with a heavy heart. Some of his friends and comrades were horrified at his decision and there was a tearful farewell with his parents.¹³⁷

The only optimism he had was the possibility the front might allow him to raise the cultural level among the soldiers.¹³⁸ Following the militarisation of the militias from October 1936 onwards, the Durruti Column was transformed into the 26th Division, receiving conscripts drafted by the republican state.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, under the command of Ricardo Sanz, a historic militant, ‘man of action’, and close comrade of Durruti, who had assumed control of the column after its founder’s death in November 1936, the 26th retained an anarchist core.¹⁴⁰ During the May Days, part of the 26th famously planned to march on Barcelona to tip the balance in favour of the revolutionaries.

To reach the division’s headquarters in Monegrillo, a village in the middle of the Aragonese countryside, some fifty kilometres from Francoist-controlled Zaragoza, Peirats went by train to Lleida, where he had an overnight stay. He took the opportunity to meet old friends and comrades, who had organised a party. Highlighting the deficiency of the army supply lines, the new arrivals had to make their own way to the front from Lleida, getting lifts with lorry drivers headed towards Aragon. Finally, when Peirats reached the barracks, he was surprised to discover many familiar faces from Barcelona.¹⁴¹

The 26th consisted of three brigades, the 119th, 120th, and 121st. Peirats was assigned to the 119th. In his unit was Pepe Alba, a close comrade, who was later executed for his part in an armed robbery that left many fatalities. According to Peirats, Alba and his ‘tough guy’ friends in the 119th dedicated their leave to carousing in Barcelona and stealing cars. To save them from execution, Peirats persuaded his brigade commander to produce false alibis but to no avail.¹⁴²

Peirats was appointed ‘clerical sergeant’ in the command offices. He resented the rank and never wore the stripes, preferring to eat and fraternise with the privates. Not all anarchists eschewed military honours, though. Adolfo Ballano Bueno, a well-known Barcelona individualist, donned a captain’s uniform, much to Peirats’s consternation. José’s rank went with his communications position, which saw him drafting reports and telegrams or, as he put it, ‘making war with paper’. Although his experience made him more than qualified for these tasks, he was probably given desk work because of the tremendous pain he would have been experiencing at the time. By twenty-nine, the consequences of Perthes disease often lead to excruciating and quite persistent leg discomfort due to the deterioration of cartilage in the hip. Certainly, Peirats enjoyed no real privileges. His bed and his clothes were almost immediately flea ridden and he slept with his boots on as protection from possible bites from the rats that scurried around the camp, passing over the bodies and faces of sleeping soldiers.¹⁴³

¹³⁶ Ibid., 256.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 257 & 261.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 249.

¹³⁹ Carlos Engel, *Historia de las Brigadas Mixtas del Ejército Popular de la República: 1936–1939*, Madrid, 1999, pp. 5–9; see also Michael Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War: 1936–1939*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 59–84 & 202–17.

¹⁴⁰ See his memoirs, *El sindicalismo y la política* and *Los hijos de trabajo*.

¹⁴¹ MI T. 4, L. VII, 1–4.

¹⁴² Letter to Ignacio de Llorens, 5 May 1988.

¹⁴³ MI T. 4, L. VII, 5–7, 9, 70, & 81.

Despite the militarisation decree, there was no traditional army discipline nor parades in the division; instead, there existed a functional discipline based on respect for 'superiors'. When the 26th was visited by General Sebastián Pozas, commander of the eastern front, career army officer, and former director general of the Civil Guard, many refused to attend, with the approval of their 'officers'. Peirats and others went off to nearby Monegrillo and organised a party with local youths.¹⁴⁴

At the end of December 1937, Peirats was given forty-eight hours' leave to go to Barcelona to attend the funeral of Pedro Conejero, secretary of the Catalan JJ. LL., who had died in a car accident.¹⁴⁵ Conejero and Peirats had been friends since the 1920s in La Torrassa and fellow members of the Afinidad group. He was deeply affected by his death and gave a graveside address. This was followed by another confrontation with García Oliver, who, as founder of the Escuela Popular de Guerra (People's War School),¹⁴⁶ chided Peirats for wearing a private soldier's uniform when, in his view, he might have been a lieutenant. 'Is this why I created the War School?', enquired García Oliver, to which Peirats quipped, 'Yes, to lose!'¹⁴⁷

There was no easy retreat from the internal struggles of the anarchist movement. Ahead of the February 1938 FIJL congress in Valencia, Peirats was elected delegate for the 119th Brigade. The FIJL's internal differences had not abated in his absence. At the congress, the Madrid delegates denounced the Catalan delegates as 'nationalists', to which they responded by labelling their accusers 'apprentice politicians'. Peirats intervened in the debates and clashed again with his old friend Miró, who remained in the FIJL leadership. Yet José had no stomach for internal politicking any longer and he blocked a move to have his name put forward for election to the FIJL Peninsular Committee.¹⁴⁸

The congress coincided with the fracturing of the Teruel front, as the republican army finally yielded to the rebels, who were backed to the hilt by Hitler and Mussolini. When Peirats returned to his unit, the 26th was planning its retreat. The increasing air attacks from German and Italian war planes, which had left several of his comrades dead, reminded him of his own mortality. The air shelters only offered protection from fighter planes, not bombers, and he was lucky to escape alive.¹⁴⁹ As the rebel troops advanced, the 119th was in danger of being trapped and so began a long, disorderly retreat on foot through the mountainous Sierra de Alcubierre.¹⁵⁰ With no sign of spring, the weather was harsh, and supplies were frugal and almost non-existent after communications broke down with the division command. The retreating troops marched forty kilometres to Lanaja, followed by another fifteen kilometres to Sariñena, during long days of tramping in open countryside, deprived of sleep and food, all the while exposed to air attacks. En route, they were joined by other ragtag columns of retreating soldiers and civilians.¹⁵¹ According

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴⁵ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 30 December 1937; MI T. 4, L. VII, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Alpert, *The Republican Army*, pp. 145, 148; García Oliver, *El eco*, pp. 220–2.

¹⁴⁷ MI T. 4, L. VII, 14.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 19–21.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 22–3.

¹⁵⁰ Ricardo Sanz, *Los que fuimos a Madrid: Columna Durruti, 26 División*. <http://www.kclibertaria.comyr.com/lpdf/1085.pdf>, accessed 16 September 2014, 9.27 a.m., pp. 72, 83–6, & 94–5.

¹⁵¹ MI T. 4, L. VII, 31 & 34–6.

to José Borrás, another Barcelona anarcho-syndicalist in the brigade, 'For many, including Peirats, who, to cap it all, had leg problems, this was a tragedy.'¹⁵²

With his leg causing him agony, Peirats fell behind the rest and, finally, one night, became separated from the column. Without rations, for a few days he was alone in the sierra, hungry and cold, barely able to walk on his blistered and bloody feet. On one occasion, he was spotted by a fascist airman. Following the advice of a comrade that, in the event of an air attack, it was preferable to remain on foot rather than take cover on the ground, Peirats stood up to his assailant, watching in horror as the pilot threw a grenade at him from the window of the cockpit, before opening up with machine-gun fire. His escape was miraculous. More good fortune came when he was spotted by a brigade patrol car and taken to a makeshift camp at Monte Julia, some eighty kilometres from his starting point in Monegrillo. Such was his exhaustion that, later that day, when the camp was attacked by enemy warplanes, he had to be dragged by the armpits to safety.¹⁵³

The 26th then became embroiled in the Battle of the Segre, one of the most protracted military conflicts of the war, which played out between 4 April 1938 and 3 January 1939. With a 300-kilometre front, the encounter consisted of a series of fierce clashes as the republican army desperately rallied to protect the hydroelectrical installations of north Catalonia.¹⁵⁴ In what was a fluid situation, Peirats, who had recovered from his earlier ordeal in the sierra, was sent on foot to Balaguer, where the battalion was to establish its command position. Walking only with a blanket and a pistol and with no written orders, he was detained as a suspected deserter by a republican patrol. An indignant Peirats did nothing to defuse the situation, accusing his captors of heroically fighting the war behind the lines. Just as he was about to be shot for desertion, the officer in command, who knew Peirats from Lleida, appeared in time to save him from an inglorious death.¹⁵⁵

From Balaguer, the 119th was involved in a series of ferocious battles.¹⁵⁶ Coming under intense attack from German Junker bombers, which destroyed the bridges over the river Segre, Peirats's unit was effectively trapped, with Francoist troops on top of them. Amid intense firefight, death seemed imminent, until a company of young marines arrived to cover their retreat along the river bank. Peirats and the rest marched on to a new makeshift camp at Bellcaire d'Urgell, ten kilometres away, where they learnt that all the marines had perished.¹⁵⁷ The 119th was then ordered to reorganise some seventy kilometres away outside Tremp. Despite suffering very heavy casualties, including some inflicted by 'friendly fire' from republican bombers, they held their positions and repelled a ferocious enemy attack. Peirats claimed he was lucky not to have been wounded.¹⁵⁸

From his vantage point on the ground, Peirats believed the republican high command had issued many bad orders. While there is some evidence to support this claim, we need to recall that the Battle of the Segre was fiercely contested, with around 180,000 troops on each side. It is,

¹⁵² José Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo al socialismo radical y libertario: Memorias de un libertario*, Madrid, 1998, p. 77.

¹⁵³ MI T. 4, L. VII, 26, 36–40, & 44–5.

¹⁵⁴ Pol Galitó, Manel Gimeno, Rodrigo Pita, and Josep Tarragona, *Les batalles del Segre i la Noguera Pallaresa: L'atac final contra Catalunya (abril–desembre 1938)*, Lleida, 2006, and Engel, *Historia de las Brigadas Mixtas*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁵ MI T. 4, L. VII, 48–9.

¹⁵⁶ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 77.

¹⁵⁷ MI T. 4, L. VII, 50–3.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 65 bis, 66–7; Sanz, *Los que fuimos a Madrid*, pp. 92–4.

therefore, possible that the chaos he witnessed was, in effect, modern combat in full intensity.¹⁵⁹ Whatever the case, the fighting took a heavy toll on the 26th. So great were its losses that, in mid-April, it was withdrawn from the front for reorganisation.¹⁶⁰

Peirats enjoyed another short period of leave in Barcelona. In the course of a night out with friends, he displayed some uncharacteristic behaviour. Normally abstemious, he got tipsy in Oro del Rhin, a famous restaurant on Rambla de Catalunya and Gran Vía Streets, in the heart of bourgeois Barcelona, far removed from his usual down-at-heel haunts. From there, the group went to the Hotel Oriente on Les Rambles boulevard, which tended to attract a similarly privileged clientele, where Peirats provoked an encounter with some young males that got physical after he called them ‘home-front protégés’. Finally, he and his companions went to Cabaret Pompeya, a venue renowned for the naked eroticism of its female dancers, where they were ejected for being too rowdy. In his memoirs, Peirats attributed these antics to ‘the brutalising influence of the war and the cockiness of a man in uniform with a pistol’.¹⁶¹ While this may have had some bearing on his behaviour that night, it is likely that he was also deeply affected by the futility of the war and the inevitability of defeat. This inner frustration would only have been compounded by the sight of a Barcelona in which the majority, including his parents, faced misery and food shortages, while a minority lived more than comfortably, as Peirats witnessed that night.

When he returned to the front, Sanz had been promoted to lieutenant-colonel for his role in the Battle of the Segre. But now the 26th, like the rest of the republican army, experienced only defeat and retreat. When the division reached the Serra del Cadí mountain range in the Catalan Pyrenees, they assembled to discuss the possibility of creating the ‘Republic of Cadí’, which was conceived as a revolutionary canton that would be protected by the river Segre to the west, France to the east, the Andorran Pyrenees to the north, and the sierra to the south. Counting on the support of Aragonese and Catalan farmers who had accompanied them with their livestock on their retreat, the idea fostered naïve optimism. In the end, the plan was rejected both by the CNT and by the High Command. The 26th was ordered to retreat towards Puigcerdà, close to the French border.¹⁶²

Puigcerdà was teeming with refugees trying to enter France. Peirats was called to a meeting of the JJ. LL. in the foyer of the train station. Amid chaotic scenes, a comrade from Barcelona invited him into a small room and opened a drawer to offer him one of the passports issued by the republican authorities to the main anti-Francoist organisations to facilitate the safe passage of a select number of their activists over the frontier. The existence of differential treatment and privileged routes into exile explains how Miró, the FIJL apparatchik, ended up wandering the streets of Paris the very day after he left Spain.¹⁶³ Indeed, as early as 25 February, the Consejo General del Movimiento Libertario Español-CNT (General Council of the Spanish Libertarian Movement-CNT, or simply MLE-CNT) was created in Paris. A super-committee formed by the most prominent leaders of the CNT-FAI-FIJL, with Marianet as general secretary and Germinal Esgleas, Montseny’s partner, as vice-secretary, it was set up as an attempt by the anarchist movement to regroup across the border, with a view to assisting exiles and spearheading the resistance

¹⁵⁹ MI T. 4, L. VII, 68–9.

¹⁶⁰ Engel, *Historia de las Brigadas Mixtas*, p. 156.

¹⁶¹ MI T. 4, L. VII, 69–70.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 73, and L. VIII, 95–6.

¹⁶³ Miró, *Vida intensa y revolucionaria*, p. 261.

to Franco's dictatorship.¹⁶⁴ Moved by his austere morality, Peirats was disgusted at the different classes of exile and wanted neither privilege nor favour. He chose to try his luck with the rest – a gesture that ensured he would end up in a French concentration camp.¹⁶⁵

Along with the rest of the 26th Division, Peirats arrived at the French border with 'all his hopes broken'.¹⁶⁶ Some half a million refugees crossed the frontier in the biggest human exodus from Spain since the expulsion of the Jews in the fifteenth century. On 10 February 1939, having covered the retreat of civilians and just hours before Francoist troops closed the border, the 26th Division was the last republican military unit to cross into Bourg-Madame.¹⁶⁷ Peirats's last act in Spain was to destroy the old Walther pistol that had accompanied him since storming the Pedralbes barracks in July 1936.¹⁶⁸ He entered France as part of a defeated army, stateless, a non-person.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 40. For Esgleas, see Jordi Amat, *L'anarcosindicalisme a examen: Germinal Esgleas (1903–1981); Una vida en roig i negre*, Mataró, 1996.

¹⁶⁵ MI T. 4, L. VIII, 97–8.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁷ Sanz, *Los que fuimos a Madrid*, pp. 116–7.

¹⁶⁸ MI T. 4, L. VIII, 101.

¹⁶⁹ For the retreat, see Sharif Gemie, 'The Ballad of Bourg-Madame: Memory, Exiles and the Spanish Republican Refugees of the *Retirada* of 1939', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 51, no. 1, April 2006, pp. 1–40, and David Wingate Pike, *Vae victis! Los republicanos españoles refugiados en Francia, 1939–1944*, Paris, 1969.

Chapter Six: Exiled: The anarchist nomad in French concentration camps and the Americas (1939–47)

The nomad always has his eyes on his country of origin; and it is with regard to this that one suffers, one feels deprived, just working, working, and waiting.

—Letter from Peirats in Panama to his parents in Barcelona, 6 March 1943

People should not be uprooted from their land or country, not by force. People remain hurt, the earth remains hurt.

We are born and our umbilical cord is severed. We are banished and no-one severs the memory, the tongue, the heat. We must learn to live as the Spanish moss, off air alone.

I am a monstrous plant. My roots stand thousands of kilometres away from me and not even a stem unites us, we are separated by two seas and one ocean. The sun contemplates me when they breathe in the night, they hurt at night under the sun.

—Juan Gelman

Thirty-one years old and with just his clothes on his back, Peirats began an uncertain life as one of the ‘gypsies of exile’.¹ It is estimated that some 80,000 CNT-FAI militants entered France in 1939.² If we include movement sympathisers, the total number of displaced cenetistas would have been perhaps twice that figure. Having lost their revolution, the anarcho-syndicalists were losers in a civil war during which they were progressively marginalised and vilified by their erstwhile allies. Peirats’s years of rebellion had provided him with camaraderie and an enduring love of struggle. His activism also brought him real personal hardship and, whether picketing during strikes or rifle in hand during the revolution and civil war, his life and freedom had been threatened on several occasions. Now, he faced a new trial of strength in exile.

6.1 The Vernet d’Ariège concentration camp

Nothing would ever be the same for the generation of activists that crossed the Pyrenees. Driven by their schemes for a better, more just world, their utopia lay fractured behind them. They now faced defeat and ‘the death of hope’.³ For Peirats, it was the end of ‘our dream’, ‘a brutal collapse’.⁴ The anarcho-syndicalists entered France traumatised and demoralised. The first

¹ Letter to Mariano Aguayo, 1 November 1985.

² José Peirats, cited in Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 36.

³ Eduardo de Guzmán, *La muerte de la esperanza*, Madrid, 1973.

⁴ Peirats, ‘En este que parece amanecer’, *Frente Libertario*, June 1976.

experience of exile was the humiliating treatment they received from border guards, who often divested them of personal items and valuables, before they were herded like cattle into makeshift concentration camps. Conditions were abysmal, and no more so than in the notorious Vernet d'Ariège concentration camp, where Peirats and about 12–15,000 'dangerous anarchists' of the former Durruti Column were interned.⁵ Unused since World War I when it housed German prisoners of war, Vernet was a punishment camp with strict military discipline, reserved for the most 'dangerous' individuals, including common criminals and those 'undesirables'. The main punishment was 'the pit' (*el pozo*), a metre-and-a-half-deep hole with no roof, surrounded by barbed wire.⁶ When Peirats arrived, the camp was in a state of dereliction, and its half-square-kilometre perimeter was woefully inadequate for the thousands of detainees concentrated there.⁷ There were not enough wooden huts to accommodate detainees, and Peirats describes sleeping with others in a tent in winter, covered with a blanket seized from the Francoist army, a 'war trophy', as roof.⁸ Amidst snow and mud, living conditions were highly insanitary in the camp and there were no showers. Between their arrival in February and September 1939, fifty-seven internees died of a combination of hunger, disease, and shivering cold.⁹ Dysentery and typhoid fever were rampant, trapping the exiles in a cycle of death, loss, and grief.¹⁰ Food was also in short supply and detainees would divide up the scraps of food they had brought across the border which, of no real value, was one of the few things the guards had not stolen from them. According to the Hungarian-British author Arthur Koestler, who was interned in Vernet around this time, conditions were 'below the standards of a Nazi concentration camp'.¹¹

As Peirats was prone to say, 'One grows in the face of the weakness of others'.¹² In this profoundly dehumanising and brutalising institution, the anarcho-syndicalists set up democratic structures as a counterbalance to the hierarchical control to which they were subjected. Thus, each camp hut held its own assembly, which in turn elected a committee. In a structure that mirrored the federalist organisation of the CNT, the hut committees then elected 'sector committees', which voted for a camp committee that forwarded demands to the Vernet authorities.¹³ According to one detainee, it was in hut number 30, in which Peirats was billeted, where most meetings took place.¹⁴ He was also elected secretary of the 'camp commission'.¹⁵

To offset the prevailing misery and raise individual and collective self-esteem, great efforts were placed on dignifying the lot of the internees through cultural activities. Wall newspapers (*periódicos murales*) appeared which, generally hand-written, informed of the decisions reached in camp assemblies and detailed the myriad educational activities on offer.¹⁶ These included de-

⁵ José Luis Morro, *Campo de Vernet d'Ariège*, n.p., 2003; letter to Ramón Fortich, 8 May 1986; MI T. 5, L. 1 5–6. The figure of 15,000 is in Morro Casas, p. 30.

⁶ B. Torre-Mazas (pseud.), *Anales del exilio libertario (los hombres, las ideas, los hechos)*, Toulouse, 1985, p. 12.

⁷ See Ramón Liarte, *¡Ay de los vencedores!*, Barcelona, 1985, pp. 57–67; Marie-Claude Rafaneau-Boj, *Los campos de concentración de los refugiados españoles en Francia (1939–1945)*, Barcelona, 1995, pp. 168–81.

⁸ Letter to Benito Milla, 8 May 1966.

⁹ Morro, *Campo de Vernet*, p. 31.

¹⁰ Francie Cate-Arries, *Culturas del exilio español entre las alambradas: Literatura y memoria de los campos de concentración en Francia, 1939–1945*, Barcelona, 2012, p. 31; Liarte, *¡Ay de los vencedores!*, p. 65.

¹¹ Cited in Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio*, p. 69.

¹² MI T. 4, L. VII, 37.

¹³ MI T. 5, L. 1, 7; José Borrás, *Políticas de los exiliados españoles, 1944–1950*, Paris, 1976, p. 199.

¹⁴ Juan Giménez, *De la Unión a Banat: Itinerario de una rebeldía*, Madrid, 1996, p. 82.

¹⁵ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 88.

¹⁶ MI T. 5, L. 1, 11.

bates, discussion groups, and a series of classes, such as French language, general education, and more specialised ones in political theory and, of course, revolutionary history and ideology.¹⁷ This cultural labour benefitted from the presence of figures like poet, essayist, and former Duruti Column militiaman Francisco Carrasquer, who later obtained a doctorate from the Sorbonne before becoming professor of Spanish Literature in the University of Leiden,¹⁸ and, of course, Peirats, who had vast experience in organising pedagogical initiatives in the athenaeums.

Some activists were, however, completely overwhelmed by the succession of misfortunes and indignities that had befallen them. While militants generally preferred not to talk publicly about such cases, some forty years later, in a private letter to another exile, Peirats left a stark and honest appraisal:

In exile, we saw many men burn out, people we previously believed were solid. Banishment was too great a test for several who seemed really grounded. Elegant types, genuine dandies that I knew from Barcelona, were transformed in Vernet into flea-infested wrecks of a human being. Others rummaged around like pigs in piles of rubbish in search of a scrap of food. It was a most critical time, very tough, and the weakest were demoralised.¹⁹

Amid the scarcity and misery, a black market developed, based on usury, barter, and, in some cases, sexual services. In this clandestine trade zone, which was nicknamed ‘Barrio Chino’ in homage to the informal economy of Barcelona’s El Raval neighbourhood, it was possible to purchase almost anything.²⁰ The anarcho-syndicalists were horrified at what they viewed as an ugly lapse in human solidarity, while an avaricious clique profited from the agony inside the camp. Their dislike of the Barrio Chino was probably heightened by homophobic sentiments among the masculine CNT union militants. When warnings to halt the commerce went unheeded, the anarcho-syndicalists forcibly imposed their collective will on the Barrio Chino, organising a succession of punitive raids by groups armed with coshes and batons – the same rough justice employed previously in CNT strikes.²¹

José was one of the luckier ones in Vernet. In July, after five months there, he was transferred to a more relaxed regime in Laubaret, outside Cognac.²² There is a dearth of information on Laubaret, where the authorities had rented a derelict farm to take pressure off the overcrowded camps. It is unclear why Peirats was moved, although according to another Vernet detainee, he suffered greatly with leg pains, so possibly the camp authorities allowed him to leave on compassionate grounds.²³ Consisting of several buildings, Peirats described Laubaret as an ‘encampment’ housing a few hundred exiles: families, women, and children lived in the main building, while the men were scattered around the surrounding outhouses. Although they were not fenced in, they were accompanied by a guard, a retired army colonel, and were restricted to a 300-metre radius from the main farmhouse. The main division in the camp was between the anarchists and the communists, who occupied separate buildings.²⁴

¹⁷ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 88.

¹⁸ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 8 May 1986.

¹⁹ Letter to Manuel Seva, 25 January 1983.

²⁰ Ealham, ‘An “Imagined Geography”’, pp. 373–97.

²¹ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, pp. 88–89; MI T. 5, L. 1, 10.

²² Alain Léger, *Les Indésirables: L’histoire oubliée des Espagnols en pays charentais*, Paris, 2000, pp. 101–2.

²³ Giménez, *De la Unión*, p. 85.

²⁴ MI T. 5, L. IX, 1 & 3.

Like those in Vernet, conditions were primitive. Peirats described his days there as 'torrid'.²⁵ Equipped only with blankets, the exiles slept on straw in a large room with all its windows broken. Such was the cold that internees created a 'collective bed', enabling them to pool their blankets and overcoats for warmth. Food was also scarce, and many people were afflicted by scurvy; to quench the hunger, Peirats and a friend would clandestinely break the perimeter in search of snails and wild fruits. For entertainment, they organised football matches, generally anarchists versus communists, although on occasions the players switched teams, suggesting the ideological divide was far from hermetic. Peirats inspired another escapist pursuit: 'La Maraña', 'a band of musicians without instruments', which he directed with a magazine as his baton and a custom-built music stand, while the musicians blew on poles, used drums for percussion, and imitated the sounds of instruments with their voices. The 'orchestra' practised daily and gave concerts for the rest of the detainees, performing a mixture of pasodobles, waltzes, and Spanish songs. The anarcho-syndicalists, on their part, continued producing their own wall newspaper, with news stories detailing life inside the camp and beyond.²⁶

As Europe slid inexorably towards war in autumn 1939, insecurity grew among the Laubaret community. One day, a police chief arrived with gendarmes and invited the men to join the army in recognition of their 'debt' to France. When nobody volunteered, they were threatened that they would be returned to Spain so Franco could judge them for their 'crimes'.²⁷ These were agonising days for Peirats. Although now he could write and receive letters, most incoming news were troubling. His parents informed him that two of his female cousins were in French concentration camps. Worse still was the fate of his beloved uncle Benjamín, from La Vall, who had been jailed and savagely beaten by Francoists. He never recovered from his torture and was unable to work again, reducing his wife to beg on the streets. Peirats's parents also warned him never to return to Barcelona.²⁸ During the same time, he received a letter from his childhood friend Domingo Canela, who accused him of cowardice for deserting Spain and his parents. Peirats was furious and wrote back explaining that, had he done as little as himself during the revolution and the war, he would have been less inclined to go into exile.²⁹ They were to reconcile only in the 1980s.

Around this time, the anarcho-syndicalists in Laubaret received a letter from the MLE-CNT outlining the possibility of resettlement in the Americas as part of an agreement between the exiled republican organisations and various South American and Caribbean governments.³⁰ With regard to exile in the Americas, the anarchists were discriminated against. Of the two big organisations involved in resettling exiles, the Servicio de Evacuación de Refugiados Españoles (SERE – Evacuation Service of Spanish Refugees), set up by Juan Negrín, the last wartime prime minister of the Republic, favoured the communists and their socialist allies, while the Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles (JARE – Board of Aid to the Spanish Republicans), set up by moderate socialist Indalecio Prieto, preferred socialists and republicans.³¹ Therefore, the anarchists received a disproportionately lower number of visas in relation to other groups, despite consti-

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Ibid., 2 & 6–7.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 11 & 14.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 8.

³¹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 44.

tuting the majority of those in exile. Meanwhile, anarchist ‘notables’, such as former Minister García Oliver, drew the lucky straw of exile in Mexico.³²

Those in Laubaret were offered the chance to go to the Dominican Republic, then ruled by the violent pro-US dictator Rafael Trujillo, ‘the Tiger of the Caribbean’. Along with Mexico, his government admitted most Spanish exiles, although he selected agricultural labourers and single young males.³³ The latter were part of Trujillo’s racist plan to ‘whiten’ the civilian population near the frontier with Haiti – the same goal that saw his troops slaughter around 12,000, predominantly black, Haitians in 1937.³⁴ While some exiles were put off the trip by rumours of German submarines in the Atlantic, Peirats and a few others, including Juan ‘Pani’ Panisello, with whom he had become friends in Laubaret, decided to embark on ‘the dangerous adventure’. Weeks later, they received their shipping papers for Santo Domingo, which they presented to the camp guard. Before leaving, they were obliged to sign a note accepting they could not return to France in the event that the authorities in their planned destination refused to admit them. With money from a republican solidarity organisation, Peirats set off for the port of Bordeaux, where he bought some shoes and a thick sailor’s coat to counter the Atlantic chill.³⁵

6.2 Penury and exile in the Americas

Peirats left on the seventeen-day voyage to Santo Domingo aboard the ‘De la Salle’ on 2 December 1939. Among almost 800 exiles that set off for a new life in the Americas, there were many anarchists, including several families.³⁶ After eleven days, they neared the tropical zone, which was announced by storms and intense heat, finally reaching their destination on 19 December. Peirats and his friends were met at the port by Roberto Alfonso, a Barcelona CNT activist, who helped orientate them during a brief transitional period in Santo Domingo, before they set off to their new home, an isolated farm near San Juan de la Maguana, 200 kilometres from the capital and just 50 kilometres from the Haitian border.³⁷

Life in San Juan province was extremely harsh for these improvised agricultural labourers. In intense humidity, they cultivated potatoes and rice, using machetes to clear the land and wearing big straw hats to protect them from the unrelenting heat. Working intensively from dawn until 2 p.m., they lived in fear of tropical disease. After work, most days they ate lunch, then read and slept until dinner. Following their evening meal, they would sit and discuss the press before retiring. Sometimes, they could afford the luxury of a trip to Santo Domingo. More often, though, they rode their horses to the nearby town of San Juan de la Maguana to go to the cinema. Other times, they attended dances, which could end up in machete fights among the local men. However, following an amorous episode between one of Peirats’s comrades and a married local woman, the exiles closed ranks and found it prudent to stop attending these ‘fiestas’.

³² Milagrosa Romero, *El exilio republicano*, Madrid, 2005, pp. 110 & 318, n.100.

³³ Daniel Díaz, *L'exili català de 1939 a la República Dominicana*, Barcelona, 1995.

³⁴ Domingo Lilón, ‘Propaganda y política migratoria dominicana durante la Era de Trujillo (1930–1961)’, *Historia y Comunicación Social*, no. 4, 1999, pp. 47–71; see also Harvey Gardiner, *La política de inmigración del dictador Trujillo: Estudio sobre la creación de una imagen humanitaria*, Santo Domingo, 1979.

³⁵ MI T. 5, L. IX, 9 & 20. For his time in the Americas, see José Peirats, *Estampas del exilio en América*, Paris, 1950.

³⁶ Díaz, *L'exili*, pp. 36–9; Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 25–34.

³⁷ MI T. 5, L. IX, 22 & 24–5; Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 44–50.

Peirats never adjusted to life in the Dominican Republic. He was particularly appalled by the brutal everyday life of the local black community – the discrimination, beatings, and killings inflicted by the white masters. In the end, besides reading, his only diversions were horse riding, drinking coffee, and singing Spanish popular songs with friends.³⁸

It is generally accepted that the lot of the exiles in the Dominican Republic was impossible.³⁹ Despite some government aid, life was wretched: the soil was poor quality, the climate extreme, and there was little economic infrastructure. Peirats and his co-workers were barely subsisting in their exhausting daily battle with nature. Unable to afford meat, they became de facto vegetarians. Peirats could not even afford the cost of air mail postage, sending letters to his parents by sea, which was very erratic due to wartime attacks on ships. Driven by their European expectations, it is no surprise that, as soon as they were able, the majority of the Spaniards in the Dominican Republic re-emigrated, with the support of the CNT, to more developed neighbouring countries.⁴⁰ Peirats and his associates all dreamt of escaping to Argentina or Mexico.⁴¹

With no savings to move to another country, Peirats found an escape route when he met US writer and good friend of the exiles, John Dos Passos, president of the New World Resettlement Fund for Spanish Relief, which was involved in a new project in Ecuador, whose government wanted to admit Spaniards with agricultural expertise to colonise unpopulated rural areas. Following an interview with the Ecuadorian consul in Santo Domingo in which Peirats posed as an expert on orange production, he and various comrades, including his friend 'Pani', were selected.⁴²

In December 1940, a year after their arrival in Santo Domingo, Peirats and the rest set off by boat to Ecuador. They continued on by land to their destination in the jungle, where they began an adventure that proved even less viable than the previous one. With subsidies from the central government and the New World Resettlement Fund for Spanish Relief, they bought pigs and cows and set about building wooden houses for their small community. Yet work was exhausting in 'the republic of mosquitoes', where they were menaced by tropical diseases and poisonous snakes; their crops often destroyed by violent storms. Things improved after they made contact with the local indigenous population, who gave them advice, and gradually the commune stabilised. Peirats built an oven and became head baker. Others started a logging business and began selling wood. Nevertheless, they led 'a completely vegetative existence'; and, when the United States entered World War II, the New World Resettlement Fund for Spanish Relief proved less receptive to requests for financial support. Demoralisation set in and members of the community agreed to seek alternatives to their 'penury'.⁴³

Peirats and his friend 'Pani' set off for the capital, Quito, where, for a while, they worked as bakers, before becoming building labourers in Guayaquil and later in Durán. Their work was poorly paid and barely enough for subsistence.⁴⁴ While Peirats had always lived frugally or in

³⁸ MI T. 5, L. IX, 32, 35–7, 40, & 43.

³⁹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ MLE Comisión Intercontinental, *Reseña de la Conferencia Intercontinental del Movimiento Libertario Español celebrada en Toulouse en abril 1947*, Toulouse, n.d. (1947?), p. 31.

⁴¹ MI T.5, L.IX, 28–30 & 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40 & 44–5.

⁴³ Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 63–108; MI T. 5, L. IX, 47–8, 58–61, 63–4, & 68–9.

⁴⁴ MI T. 5, L. IX, 70, 73, 79, & 91–2.

semi-poverty, life in exile so far was characterised by a grinding poverty and offered little promise of escape.

Panama, on the other hand, seemed to offer a better prospect, and Peirats and 'Pani' now became keen on emigrating. They had passed through the Panama Canal en route to Ecuador from Santo Domingo and they expected the economy there would offer more favourable employment opportunities. They also knew the CNT had a stronger infrastructure in the country.⁴⁵ Having saved for the sea passage, after two years in Ecuador, they set off for their new 'promised land' on 1 January 1943. Despite the hard times, Peirats felt nostalgia for Ecuador, 'the country that won my heart the most during my American itinerary' due to 'the welcoming spirit of its indigenous people'.⁴⁶

The voyage from Durán to Panama, some 1,200 kilometres by sea, nearly turned into tragedy when the engine of their small ship failed after a heavy storm. Adrift in the ocean for thirteen days, the trip almost took as long as his transatlantic crossing in 1939. Unprepared for such an ordeal, food and water were rationed until they were rescued.⁴⁷ Having lost much of his luggage, as well as his passport and some notebooks in the storm, Peirats entered Panama illegally, with little more than the clothes he wore. After the authorities became aware of the situation, he was forced into hiding at the house of some Barcelona comrades until his immigration status could be resolved. Soon afterwards, he and 'Pani' found employment distributing ice to restaurants and bars, which in practice meant heaving large lumps of ice around – a task that was not helped by Peirats's leg condition.⁴⁸ Although work was better paid than in Ecuador, he quickly became disillusioned with the abject poverty he encountered in the country.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, things improved slightly when he became a baker again. With a 5 a.m. start, he was free after lunch, which allowed him to indulge his two main passions, cinema and reading. He built up a new library and started studying English at evening classes at a local university. With more disposable income, he donated to solidarity funds to help poorer comrades, as was common in anarcho-syndicalist *émigré* circles, also sending money to the anarchist press in New York and Mexico.⁵⁰

Since the anarchist movement had a more developed infrastructure in Panama, after a four-year interregnum in the Dominican Republic and Ecuador, with its 'reduced number of comrades'⁵¹ and during which time most energies were devoted to the struggle for daily survival, Peirats returned to CNT activities.⁵² In 1945, he gave a series of talks on the evolution of the Francoist state, which were subsequently published as a pamphlet called *15 conferencias breves: Disección del franquismo*.⁵³ Prior to this, it seems his only contribution to the anarchist press was an obituary for his friend Viroga from Barcelona, which appeared in New York's *Cultura Proletaria*.⁵⁴ Only thirty years old, Viroga, who had worked with Peirats on *Acracia*, died in the winter of 1941 of tuberculosis, which he contracted in a French concentration camp.

⁴⁵ Campos, *Una vida*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ MI T. 5, L. IX, 94.

⁴⁷ Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 109–22.

⁴⁸ Campos, *Una vida*, p. 88.

⁴⁹ Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 123–35.

⁵⁰ MI T. 5, L. IX, 96–100 and L. X, 1, 3–5, 7–8, & 10–11.

⁵¹ MLE Comisión Intercontinental, *Reseña...*, p. 27.

⁵² Torre-Mazas, *Anales del exilio libertario*, p. 229.

⁵³ José Peirats, *15 conferencias breves: Disección del franquismo*, Panama, 1946.

⁵⁴ *Cultura Proletaria*, 7 February 1942; MI T. 5, L. IX, 69.

A clear sign of his inner restlessness, Peirats struggled to adapt to life in Panama and eventually decided to move to Venezuela in 1946.⁵⁵ This decision was encouraged by Campuzano, a Barcelona comrade and journalist on Caracas's newspaper *El País*, who had invited Peirats to collaborate with the paper from Panama and would later convince him to move on the grounds of a paid position as journalist. In Caracas, he lived in a cheap hotel with many other Spaniards and Basques. Unable to afford a decent living from his occasional journalistic collaborations, he was obliged to take part-time jobs.⁵⁶ Once more, he was in the mire of poverty. Writing to 'Pani', who had remained in Panama, he acknowledged: 'I'm living on my last reserves... the day my shoes break will be a tragedy.'⁵⁷

Following his enforced absence from activism within the anarchist movement, which had been his lodestar for most of his life, Peirats seemed somewhat adrift. In Caracas, he developed an interest in boxing, a sport traditionally rejected by the Spanish anarchists as a brutalising spectacle. Equally out of character, one day at a bus stop he picked a fight with a stranger who attempted to jump the queue ahead of him.⁵⁸ Evidently, Peirats was gripped by several tensions at this time. While in Panama, he had described his 'hunger for a woman'.⁵⁹ This worsened in Venezuela, where, in a letter to 'Pani', he commented how his 'imposed celibacy, like that of a penitent monk', was generating new frustrations: 'You cannot imagine the price of maintaining chastity in this country. The street display in Caracas is capable of toppling the most stoical.'⁶⁰ Another source of frustration was his inability to find time to study and write. 'He who steals these two things from me, takes away my life', he wrote to his parents.⁶¹

If those who remained in Spain faced *direct* repression of their bodies in police stations, prisons, and in front of firing squads, the repression of exile was indirect, manifested through a succession of absences that left a void in the lives of the banished. Thus, one exile referred to 'the infinite number of accumulated memories from my youth which, little by little, became transformed into a series of yearning desires'.⁶² For activists like Peirats, whose everyday life once revolved around myriad affective human interactions at home and in the workplace, the athenaeum, or the union, their physical uprooting had destroyed the very fabric of their social existence. Removed from his loved ones and all that had constituted his very self, daily life was rendered alien, an uncertain and constant struggle for material survival. This left him with a recurring sense of loss and dislocation. As he wrote to his parents in 1943, 'The nomad always has his eyes on his country of origin; and it is with regard to this that one suffers, one feels deprived, just working, working, and waiting.'⁶³ This yearning made his time in the Americas 'seven endless years'.⁶⁴ If we exclude his time in Vernet, this was doubtless the worst period of his life; and, if compared alongside the extreme situations he faced at the front during the end of the war, he at least found there the warmth of camaraderie.

⁵⁵ Peirats, *Estampas*, pp. 137–52.

⁵⁶ MI T. 5, L. X, 29, 33, & 35.

⁵⁷ Letter to Juan Panisello, 9 February 1946.

⁵⁸ MI T. 5, L. X, 94–6; *Ruta*, 24 February 1938.

⁵⁹ MI T. 5, L. X, 12.

⁶⁰ Letter to Juan Panisello, 8 January 1947.

⁶¹ MI T. 5, L. X, 80.

⁶² Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo...*, p. 81.

⁶³ MI T. 5, L. X, 4.

⁶⁴ Peirats, 'Antonio García Lamolla', *Cultura Libertaria*, January 1986.

Caracas, though, gave him the chance to immerse himself more fully in MLE-CNT activities. From 1946, he contributed articles to *Ruta*, the FIJL newspaper, now based in Toulouse, which had become the de facto capital of the critical mass of Spanish libertarians exiled in France. He submitted a series of articles on his time in the Americas that were later compiled and published in 1950 as *Estampas del exilio en América*. He also developed a clearer picture of the condition of the anarchist movement. In 1945, while he was in Panama, the movement underwent a new split between ‘possibilist’ and ‘orthodox’ wings, the former supporting the republican government in exile, the latter defending traditional anarchist apoliticism. Like with the schism in the early 1930s, to which this split bore some superficial parallels, the causes were complex and not entirely ideological.⁶⁵

The outcome of World War II and the deaths of Hitler and Mussolini, Franco’s main benefactors, had produced huge optimism among exiles in France that they might soon overthrow the dictatorship and return to Spain. However, different factions within the MLE-CNT drew distinct tactical conclusions from the new context. Many of the French-based activists, particularly those who had fought in the successful armed struggle of the anti-Nazi Resistance, believed that Franco’s dictatorship could be easily overthrown. Besides the hopes that the Allied powers would turn their guns on Franco, the advocates of armed struggle believed a guerrilla intervention in Spain would most likely provoke a popular uprising against Franco. This interpretation was not shared by many of the militants inside Spain, who had direct experience of the fierce repression of 1939–45. Their daily struggle for material survival and preservation of the presence of the organisation in the most extreme circumstances inclined them towards a less insurrectionary, albeit more political, strategy based on the need for an alliance with other anti-Francoist forces. This tactical divergence laid the basis for a schism. As had been the case in the 1930s, Montseny was the demagogic pied piper of the *enragés*, closing the door to any possible reconciliation: ‘We must push to one side all that is bastard and mistaken’, she implored.⁶⁶

Montseny and her partner Esgleas emerged as the two most controversial and divisive figures in the long years of anarchist exile and were central to this split. A specialist in what Marín terms ‘manoeuvres’, Esgleas served as MLE-CNT secretary on twelve separate occasions during exile.⁶⁷ His first (unelected) spell as secretary came after the suspicious death of Marianet, the first MLE-CNT secretary, in June 1939, in an apparent swimming accident.⁶⁸ During this period, which coincided with the German invasion of France, the movement’s funds disappeared in circumstances that have never been clarified. Activists, particularly those in Spain, accused the MLE-CNT General Council of abandoning them to their luck, which was in short supply during what was the fiercest period of Franco’s repression.⁶⁹ Some even claimed Esgleas had collabo-

⁶⁵ Eduardo Romanos, ‘Factionalism in Transition: A Comparison of Ruptures in the Spanish Anarchist Movement’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2011, pp. 365–80.

⁶⁶ CNT, 10 October 1945.

⁶⁷ Marín, *Anarquistas*, p. 311.

⁶⁸ Since Marianet was known to be a strong swimmer, rumours abounded; see Ramón Álvarez, *Historia negra de una crisis libertaria*, México, 1982, p. 97; García Oliver, *El eco*, p. 529; and the letter from Manuel Azaña to Carlos Esplá, 26 June 1939, in Pedro Angosto and Julia Puig (eds.), *Una lealtad entre ruinas: Epistolario Azaña–Esplá, 1939–1940*, Valencia, 2003, n.p.

⁶⁹ Juan Manuel Molina, *El movimiento clandestino en España 1939–1949*, Mexico, 1976, p. 65; Cipriano Damiano, *La resistencia libertaria: La lucha anarcosindicalista bajo el franquismo (1939–1970)*, Barcelona, 1978, p. 57; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 89; Borrás, *Políticas*, p. 206.

rated with the Vichy authorities.⁷⁰ So great was the level of grassroots suspicion that, at the June 1943 Mauriac Plenum, it was decided that Montseny and Esgleas be barred from holding any position within the movement – a decision that was reaffirmed at the October 1944 Toulouse Plenum.⁷¹

After the liberation of France during 1944–45, the MLE-CNT was able to reorganise openly. According to Alicia Alted, there were 30–40,000 anarchists in France at this time, which meant that around half of those who crossed the Pyrenees in 1939 had either perished in World War II in Gallic or Nazi concentration camps or in the Resistance, both in France and in Spain, or gone into exile elsewhere, principally South America.⁷² At the February 1945 Plenum of the CNT National Committee and under pressure from the FAI, it was decided that Montseny and Esgleas be allowed back into the fold. This decision in itself was controversial and irregular, for, as Ángel Herrerin López notes, it constituted ‘an act of organisational illegality’, since ‘a plenary session lacked the power to revoke agreements made in a Plenum.’⁷³ Yet the couple’s reputation was far from intact. In keeping with anarcho-syndicalist traditions, activists demanded a formal explanation of the conduct of the MLE-CNT General Council during the war, when Montseny and Esgleas had been its only members at liberty. Rather than respond to these perfectly legitimate requests, the couple stonewalled their opponents with the argument that, after the fall of Franco’s dictatorship, ‘we will give an account of our activities to the Organisation in a full Congress in Spain.’⁷⁴

Tensions came to the surface at the MLE-CNT Paris Congress in early May 1945.⁷⁵ According to one of the orthodox delegates, ‘enthusiasm was everywhere, given that, with regard to the Spanish problem, we expected to return soon to Spain.’⁷⁶ In this climate of optimism, the more guarded proposals of the moderates seemed to smack of reformism, or even defeatism. Heavily supported by FAI groups, the Montseny–Esgleas faction won the day, yet their victory was marred by accusations that they had manipulated voting by creating fictitious local federations.⁷⁷ The rising discord inside the MLE-CNT was compounded by the issue of whether or not to participate in the republican government in exile.⁷⁸ Much of the organisation in Spain favoured participation, whereas most of the exiled movement in France was hostile to the idea.⁷⁹ Skilfully orchestrating the public debate of this question, the Montseny–Esgleas leadership claimed the orthodox mantle against the possibilists, whom they accused of guiding the anarchist movement towards reformism and betraying its most cherished beliefs, as had occurred so traumatically during the civil war. This was a conveniently exculpatory discourse for the former Minister Montseny and Esgleas, himself former mayor of Calella and minister for the Economy in the Catalan Generalitat

⁷⁰ Liarte, *¡Ay de los vencedores!*, p. 59.

⁷¹ Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 55; Abel Paz, *CNT, 1939–1951: El anarquismo contra el estado franquista*, Barcelona, 1982, p. 114; Borrás, *Del radical socialismo...*, p. 108.

⁷² Alicia Alted, ‘El exilio de los anarquistas’, in Julián Casanova (ed.), *Tierra y Libertad: Cien años de anarquismo en España*, Barcelona, 2010, p. 168.

⁷³ Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ Paz, *CNT, 1939–1951*, p. 117; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 106.

⁷⁵ MLE-CNT, *Memoria del Congreso de Federaciones Locales celebrado en París del 1 al 12 de mayo de 1945*, n.p., 1945; Paz, *CNT*, pp. 124–38; Molina, *El movimiento clandestino*, pp. 141–5.

⁷⁶ Manuel Sirvent, *Un militante del anarquismo español (Memorias, 1889–1948)*, Madrid, 2012, p. 315.

⁷⁷ For rival versions, see Álvarez, *Historia negra*, and Floreal Samitier and José Luis García, *Siempre volviendo a empezar: CNT dentro y fuera de España, 1939–2009*, Badalona, 2011.

⁷⁸ Juan García, ‘La CNT y Alianza Nacional de Fuerzas Democráticas’, in ‘El movimiento libertario español: Pasado, presente y futuro’, supplement, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, Paris, 1974, pp. 123–8.

⁷⁹ Paz, *CNT*, pp. 146–52 & 191–204.

government during the war, allowing them to reaffirm their commitment to anarchist principles after their questionable activities in both the civil war and World War II.

The final straw came with the publication of the manifesto *Con España o contra España* in October, five months after the congress.⁸⁰ Signed by many leading cenetistas inside Spain, the manifesto questioned the democratic legitimacy of the MLE-CNT and accused Montseny and Esgleas of holding on to money destined for the anti-Franco resistance. In response, the Montseny–Esgleas leadership ordered the expulsion of the signatories if they did not recant their claims, thereby prompting a new and damaging split. There were now two CNTs. In Spain, the exiled leadership effectively ceased to have any support, whereas in France, they retained around 20,000 activists. Some 4,500 cenetistas left the MLE-CNT to align with the ‘Interior’ CNT, and 3,000 activists left the movement altogether.⁸¹

In some respects, this mirrored the treintista-radical schism of 1932–6: the orthodox or ‘purist’ wing advocated insurrectionary methods to overthrow Francoism, whereas the possibilists favoured a more union-based approach and a Popular Front-style, anti-Francoist alliance.⁸² Yet the orthodoxy of the orthodox wing is thrown into doubt by suggestions that Montseny only became hostile to the possibilists’ support for the republican government in exile when she discovered, unlike in 1936, that there was no cabinet position for her.⁸³ Indeed, Margaret Torres Ryan has argued that ‘In substantive terms, the line of the “radical” sector in Toulouse did not differ from the “reformist” wing.... The dispute between the two wings of the CNT in exile was, in effect, more a conflict of clans and personalities than a political disagreement, because there was never an ideological debate.’⁸⁴

In Caracas, where the main MLE-CNT figure was Xena, a committed faïsta with whom Peirats was well acquainted from La Torrassa, most activists sided with the orthodox faction.⁸⁵ Shattered into fragments by internal schism and repression, and with its members scattered across the globe, the MLE-CNT planned an intercontinental conference in Toulouse for April 1947. The Venezuelan organisation selected Peirats as its representative. Travel documents were arranged, and Peirats was given \$300 for expenses. On the day his ship was due to sail for France, Xena accompanied him to the port. According to Peirats’s memoirs, it was only then that Xena informed him he was taking a one-way trip: ‘He commented that they weren’t sending me to return but to join the fight against the dictatorship.’⁸⁶ Thus, his sojourn in the Americas came to an end and, once more, his life became intimately intertwined with that of the anarchist movement.

⁸⁰ *España Libre*, 18 November 1945.

⁸¹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, pp. 79–80.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁸³ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 116; Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 75.

⁸⁴ Margaret Torres Ryan, ‘El exilio libertario y el movimiento obrero español’, in María Fernanda Mancebo, Marc Baldó, and Cecilio Alonso (eds.), *L’exili cultural de 1939: Seixanta anys després (Actas del I Congreso Internacional)*, Valencia, 2001, p. 166.

⁸⁵ *MI T.* 5, L. X, 37.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

Chapter Seven: Exile in France and the struggle against anarchist bureaucracy (1947–65)

The great disaster of dictatorships does not merely involve the violation of citizens' rights and against individuals, but rather the huge void they leave behind when they disappear. Everything needs to be improvised after the disruption of personal empowerment. And a great physical hunger is suddenly awakened, along with the hunger for freedom.

—José Peirats

Arriving back in France in early March 1947, Peirats would have felt huge excitement at returning to the hub of the anarchist émigré community. This would have been tempered, however, by what he knew to be a divided and fragmented movement, beset by bitter internal polemics. According to one of his activist friends, 'He never liked to see comrades fighting one another.'¹ Over the next three decades, Peirats emerged as one of the leading figures in the MLE-CNT in France, becoming one of its most prominent and talented polemicists, as well as its most renowned historian. Firmly committed to the reunification of the MLE-CNT, which finally occurred in 1961, his dissident spirit and his opposition to the sectarian practices of the faction led by Montseny and Esgleas resulted in near constant conflict and culminated in his expulsion from the movement in 1965.

Upon reaching Toulouse, 'the capital of émigré Spain',² Peirats made his way to 4 rue Belfort, a spacious three-storey building downtown that was the nerve centre of the MLE-CNT. Used by the Nazis in World War II, during the liberation of the city in August 1944, the building was occupied by Spanish anarcho-syndicalist fighters in the French Resistance and thereafter became known to the Francoists as the 'Toulouse school of terrorism'.³ There, he was reunited with Aláiz and Benito Milla, a FIJL leader and editor of its paper, *Ruta*, whom Peirats knew from the 26th Division. Milla arranged for Peirats to stay with his family in Cugnaux, just outside Toulouse.⁴

Peirats's attention was drawn to the proliferation of bureaucracy within the MLE-CNT. Unlike the exiled socialist and communist movements, who benefitted from their respective international connections, the anarchist movement, in theory at least, depended exclusively on contributions from its predominantly working-class supporters. It was then somewhat anomalous

¹ Interview by the author with Diego Camacho, 5 November 2005.

² Letter to Marcelino García, 8 May 1962; for the anarchists in Toulouse, see Alicia Alted and Lucienne Domergue, *La cultura del exilio anarcosindicalista español en el sur de Francia*, Madrid, 2012, and Chris Ealham, 'Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalists in Toulouse: The Red-and-Black Counter-City in Exile', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 91, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 95–114.

³ *ABC*, 5 May 1961.

⁴ *MI T.* 6, L. XI, 10.

that with approximately 23,800 members, of whom around 18,000 paid dues, the CNT National Committee had seven full-time paid staff (*liberados*) – before the civil war, when the union had over twenty times more members, there had only been one.⁵ Equally striking was the fact that the youth organisation, the FIJL, whose membership was far lower, had four full-time employees, while *CNT*, a major movement newspaper, had nine paid staff.⁶ After making enquiries, Peirats concluded that the bureaucracy, like many other movement activities, was sustained thanks to Laureano Cerrada. A former railwayman, Cerrada was a veteran of the anti-Nazi struggle in France, in the course of which he excelled as a forger and arms smuggler. During the German occupation, he generously funded the MLE-CNT through the sale of weapons, fake ration books, and other official documents.⁷ During the liberation of Italy, Italian anarchists seized the Poligrafico Calcografia e Cartevalori, a Milanese print shop which produced currency for the Spanish central bank in Madrid, passing the printing plates to Cerrada, who was then able to bankroll the anarchist opposition inside Spain.⁸ Following the revival of the MLE-CNT in post-liberation France, Cerrada, whose main power base was inside the Parisian FAI, effectively controlled the movement from the sidelines;⁹ for instance, at the 1945 congress, he met the expenses of many delegates and, crucially, backed Esgleas as candidate for secretary.¹⁰ As Irene Lozano observed, ‘One [Cerrada] put up the money; the other [Esgleas], his ability to pull the strings of the organisation.’¹¹

Peirats was appalled to discover the scale of Cerrada’s influence, dubbing him the ‘King Midas’ of the Montseny–Esgleas clique.¹² As we have already seen, Peirats had a history of opposing bureaucratisation, while his austere morality had earlier led him to reject the ‘anarcho-bandits’ as a mortal threat to the values of the movement. He resolved to abrogate these trends in France. This seemed a very distant project at the April Intercontinental Conference at which he was disappointed by the ‘pure monotony’ and lack of debate, which reflected Esgleas’s dirigisme style.¹³ The gathering would have reinforced his general aversion to the sterile politics of exile: while activists in Spain were struggling for their physical survival, the MLE-CNT leaders seemed more intent on excoriating dissidents.¹⁴

Peirats was assigned to write up the proceedings of the conference on behalf of the newly established Intercontinental Commission, whose creation provided him with additional evidence of what he saw as the ongoing and unnecessary bureaucratisation of the anarchist movement. He now had the chance to observe the apparatus up close, for his work took him to rue Belfort most days.¹⁵ His experience transcribing conference sessions was far removed from the hopes of his Venezuelan *compañeros* that he would be contributing to the anti-Francoist resistance in France.

⁵ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 196.

⁶ Juan Ferrer, ‘Prensa libertaria y cenetista en el exilio’, *Historia Libertaria*, no. 5, May–June 1979, pp. 25–7.

⁷ Íñiguez, *Esbozo*, pp. 141–2.

⁸ Irene Lozano, *Federica Montseny: Una anarquista en el poder*, Madrid, 2004, pp. 316–7.

⁹ Borrás, *Políticas*, pp. 227 & 257; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 101, 108, & 310.

¹⁰ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, pp. 112–3.

¹¹ Lozano, *Federica Montseny*, p. 312.

¹² MI T. 6, L. XI, 13.

¹³ José Peirats, ‘Requiem por un militante’, *Frente Libertario*, January 1972; MI T. 6, L. XI, 15. For the Intercontinental Conference, see MLE Comisión Intercontinental, *Reseña...*

¹⁴ MI T. 5, L. X, 53.

¹⁵ MI T. 6, L. XI, 18–9.

This situation changed drastically later in 1947, when Peirats was selected for a clandestine mission to Madrid. He was to help restructure the Interior CNT and convene a meeting of its National Committee, which had been severely buffeted by arrests. Since he had never been to the Spanish capital, one might question his suitability for such a dangerous endeavour at the beginning of what was known as the ‘triennium of terror’ (‘trienio del terror’), spanning the years 1947–9, when cenetistas faced either up to thirty years in jail if caught or outright execution.¹⁶ In less than a decade, sixteen clandestine CNT National Committees had been detained by the police.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Peirats was well aware of the risks. Just weeks earlier, ‘Amador’ Franco – his old comrade from La Torrassa whom he regarded ‘like a son’ – had been arrested and executed after a gunfight with the security forces in Irún, on the Franco-Basque border.¹⁸ In mid-June, Peirats was part of a group of eight militants, led by French Resistance veteran Francisco Martínez, which took the same route into Spain. Once in Irún, after crossing the frontier under the cover of night, the group split up and Peirats, armed with a pistol and carrying 15,000 pesetas destined for the Interior CNT, travelled to Madrid. On his way to the city, he experienced his first moments of real tension when he was stopped by police, who scrutinised his forged papers under the somewhat ironic name of ‘Juan España Iber’.¹⁹ Usually anything but a calm individual, Peirats later recognised that ‘I have nerves of steel when I sense I’m going down, and these nerves saved me.’²⁰

In Madrid, he went to a prearranged rendezvous with FIJL activists in a popular restaurant in the city centre, just north of Gran Vía, one of the major thoroughfares.²¹ He remained in the city for a month, staying at a comrade’s flat in the outlying district of Canillejas while working on his main mission, the coordination of a meeting of the Interior CNT National Committee – a task which, given the need for tight security, required time and thorough planning. In the interim, he met with leading figures from the Madrid anarchist movement, exchanging opinions and offering advice on clandestine organisation. Highlighting his aim of uniting the movement, he also met with possibilists, almost certainly without the approval of the rue Belfort leadership.²²

In his free time, he went for walks in El Retiro, Madrid’s great central park; he also visited the city’s main art museum, El Prado, and the flea market, El Rastro. Yet this was anything but relaxed tourism. Peirats lived under constant tension, gripped by the fear that he would be recognised. While he knew only clandestine activists in Madrid, he was aware that post-war population movements had brought an influx of migrants into the city. His fears proved well founded. Near El Rastro one day, he was spotted by a former comrade. Peirats responded by quickly disappearing among a crowd. Another day, he was approached on a tram by someone whom he knew from the civil war in Aragon. Peirats denied he had ever been there. After that, he was careful to evade the

¹⁶ Herrerin López, *La CNT*, pp. 118 & 154; Eduardo Romanos, ‘Emociones, identidad y represión: El activismo anarquista durante el franquismo’, *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, no. 134, 2011, p. 90. See also Ángel Herrerin López, ‘Reorganización y actividad de la CNT del interior en la primera década de la dictadura de Franco’, *Ayer*, no. 51, 2003, pp. 155–78.

¹⁷ Javier Tusell, *Los hijos de la sangre*, Madrid, 1986, p. 130.

¹⁸ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 15 June 1985.

¹⁹ MI T. 6, L. XI, 21–31, & 34.

²⁰ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987.

²¹ Juan Gómez Casas, *Los cruces de caminos (Antecedentes y pequeña historia de una década: 1966–1976)*, Paris, 1984, p. 42. This author erroneously dates the meeting as taking place in 1946.

²² Letter to José Gutiérrez, 15 June 1985.

gaze of others while on public transport.²³ He also heeded his parents' warning not to return to Barcelona. This would have been an extremely hazardous move at this time, since the police had an informant inside the Catalan CNT, Eliseu Melis. Indeed, while Peirats was in Madrid, Melis was assassinated by a commando sent from France.²⁴

Finally, the Interior CNT National Committee meeting took place in the back room of a bar on 18 July, a Francoist public holiday in commemoration of the 1936 coup that allowed delegates from outside Madrid to pose as visitors to the capital.²⁵ In the course of the meeting, Peirats noted repeated criticisms of the exiled leadership, especially that it was detached from local realities; for instance, the representative from Valencia stressed the need for balanced and accurate assessments from Toulouse, as opposed to circulars 'written with insane euphoria'.²⁶ With the meeting concluded, Peirats left for France that same day. Four months later, in November 1947, the members of the National Committee that he had met fell to the police.²⁷

7.1 Chief of the 'Toulouse school of terrorism'

Back in Toulouse, preparations were afoot for the II Congress of the MLE-CNT, the first since the 1945 split.²⁸ Held during 20–29 October, 18,774 French-based cenetistas were represented – a reduced number that reflected the impact of internal divisions.²⁹ The hoary issue of Montseny and Esgleas's role in World War II resurfaced, along with new calls for them to explain the fate of the movement's finances. They responded with their already worn mantra that they would do so when the CNT returned to Spain.³⁰ Although their silence successfully blocked scrutiny of their questionable wartime role, in the short term, at least, their stance was counterproductive. Their reluctance to clarify the issue of the missing money encouraged rumours of the couple's 'hidden treasure' in émigré circles.³¹ Certainly, it is a matter of record that Esgleas purchased two gites in the Dordogne early in World War II; one for him and Montseny, the other for a French friend.³² Peirats, for all his criticisms of the couple, nevertheless, doubted the stories of their hidden fortune – a view based on 'the miserable existence' he saw them lead in Toulouse over the years and which, in part at least, explained their desperation for a 'bureaucratic position that allowed them to survive'.³³ Yet the couple's contempt for open debate did not endear them to the grassroots, particularly inside Spain, where many felt it was further proof of their abandonment by rue Belfort.³⁴ During and after the war many grassroots activists inside Spain felt, perhaps unrealistically at times, that the exiled organisation might have done more for them during a time

²³ MI T. 6, L. XI, 38–41, & 43.

²⁴ Téllez Solá, *Sabaté: Guerrilla urbana en España (1945–1960)*, Barcelona, 1992, pp. 95–8.

²⁵ MI T. 6, L. XI, 45 & 76; *Solidaridad Obrera*, 30 October 1948.

²⁶ MI T. 6, L. XI, 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47, 54; Molina, *El movimiento clandestino*, p. 230.

²⁸ See MLE-CNT, *Dictámenes y Resoluciones del II Congreso del MLE-CNT en Francia, Toulouse, octubre 1947*, Toulouse, 1947; MI T. 6, L. XI, 58.

²⁹ MLE-CNT, *Dictámenes y Resoluciones*, p. 5.

³⁰ MI T. 6, L. XI, 59.

³¹ Letter to Francisco Botey 12 April 1979.

³² Lozano, *Federica Montseny*, p. 188; Francisco Olaya, *El oro de Negrín*, Madrid, 1998, p. 460, n. 20.

³³ Letters to Ramón Álvarez, 21 January 1981, and Germinal Esgleas, 16 October 1966 (Antonia Fontanillas Archive); the last of these letters is reprinted in Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 297–9.

³⁴ Paz, *CNT*, pp. 364–5.

when Franco's savage repression meant that they faced huge risks on a daily basis. The aversion of Montseny and Esgleas to open discussion compounded these feelings and deepened older feelings of estrangement among Interior militants. While Montseny was capable of enhancing her stature with her famed oratory, even those who admired Esgleas recognised he was dour, lacking in charisma; his detractors remorselessly referred to him as 'the monk' ('el Fraile').³⁵

When it came to the election of a new secretary, Peirats was put forward as candidate. Firm in his conviction that austerity and dignity were the movement's core collective values, he had made no secret of his intention to reduce bureaucracy and the 'parallel power' of the 'gangster' Cerrada and those, like Esgleas, who tolerated him.³⁶ In the vote, Peirats enjoyed a crushing victory over the other two candidates – Esgleas and the outgoing secretary, Pedro Herrera. He received 11,702 votes compared to their respective tolls of 1,853 and 2,222.³⁷ Testimony to his modesty, decades later he recognised the position was 'undeserved, given my limited experience', but he accepted, since he had promised his comrades in Caracas that he would work to the fullest for the organisation.³⁸ Thus, he became the new chief of the 'Toulouse school of terrorism'. He eventually moved into the rue Belfort building, sleeping on a camp bed.³⁹

Elected alongside Peirats was a new secretariat, which included Pedro Mateu as coordination secretary, responsible for the armed struggle in Spain against the dictatorship. A former metal-worker and man of action (in 1921 he was part of a commando that assassinated Prime Minister Dato in retribution for his fierce repression of the CNT), Mateu was a cult figure in cenetista circles. With considerable autonomy at the Coordination Department, he prepared guerrillas for their activities inside Spain and was the inspiration behind the abortive 'air attack' on Franco in September 1948.⁴⁰ While Peirats probably had limited input into these activities, a 1966 book written by 'José Francisco', an ex-guerrilla turned by Franco's police, relates how Peirats briefed his paramilitary group prior to a mission in Spain.⁴¹ Certainly, Peirats was well acquainted with the leading anarchist guerrillas of the period, including Francesc 'Quico' Sabaté, Josep Lluís Facerías, and Marcel·lí 'Panxo' Massana in particular.⁴²

Inside the MLE-CNT, Peirats's struggle against bureaucracy pitted him against entrenched adversaries. He later described 1947 as 'the most awful year of my life as a militant'.⁴³ Even before

³⁵ For all their animosity, Peirats still appreciated Montseny as 'a great orator... the best Spanish anarchism has had since the tragic death of Salvador Seguí' in 1923 (MI T. 7, L. XIII, 68) and retained a certain respect for her (interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009). In contrast, Peirats despised Esgleas, whom he viewed as a mediocrity. Indeed, one of Esgleas's adversaries observed he was 'capable of sending anyone asleep, even if they were standing, just so long as they had the patience to listen to him' (Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 188). According to his biographer, greyness stands out as the dominant colour in Esgleas's life (Amat, *L'anarcosindicalisme*, p. 9).

³⁶ Letters to Miguel Íñiguez, 22 August 1985, and Juan Gómez Casas, 24 November 1987.

³⁷ MLE-CNT, *Dictámenes y Resoluciones*, p. 51.

³⁸ MI T. 6, L. XI, 96.

³⁹ Interview by the author with Diego Camacho, 5 November 2005; Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 145.

⁴⁰ Antonio Téllez Solá, *Historia de un atentado aéreo contra el general Franco*, Barcelona, 1993. For the guerrillas, see Marín, *Clandestinos, passim*.

⁴¹ José Francisco, *Habla mi conciencia*, Barcelona, 1966, pp. 46–7. Peirats criticised factual inaccuracies in this 'libel' but did not deny the meeting with the Maquis took place (letter to José del Amo, 2 October 1966).

⁴² See the studies by Antonio Téllez Solá, *Sabaté and Facerías: Guerrilla urbana (1939–1957); La lucha antifranquista del Movimiento Libertario en España y en el exilio*, Paris, 1974; see also Josep Maria Reguant, *Marcelino Massana: ¿Terrorismo o resistencia?*, Barcelona, 1979; and Josep Clara, *Marcel·lí Massana, l'home més buscat: Un mite de la guerrilla anarquista*, Barcelona, 2005.

⁴³ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 16 February 1965.

becoming secretary, he found Esgleas obstructive; when Peirats was finally allowed access to the archives, he found them 'totally disorganised',⁴⁴ 'messed up... No two circulars were in order.'⁴⁵ He also noted the absence of any reports of the debates from the controversial 1945 congress, only the published compilation of resolutions. Upon taking up his post as secretary, he met with the *sotto voce* resistance of Montseny, Esgleas, and Herrera, who used their positions in the Intercontinental Commission to undermine his work. Once he set about pruning the bureaucracy, he made new enemies among those who had lost their paid positions in the organisation and now had to make a living.⁴⁶

His campaign against bureaucracy was also intimately linked to his move against Cerrada, whose economic resources funded many of the salaried positions. This brought Peirats into conflict with the FAI, particularly in Cerrada's Parisian stronghold. After attending a FAI meeting in Paris, Peirats was left suspicious of how well attended it was and how the audience consisted mainly of unknown faces: 'It was a completely new FAI, full of newbies.'⁴⁷ As he delved deeper into Cerrada's activities, Esgleas became very guarded. Finally, Peirats received a visit from Cerrada and the FAI secretary, who suggested 'we should make an effort to be good friends, leading me to understand that I might regret it otherwise.'⁴⁸ Clearly undeterred, according to Lozano, Peirats 'began to clip Cerrada's wings'.⁴⁹

Another of his objectives, albeit one that took longer to yield results, was to heal the breach within the anarchist movement.⁵⁰ Reunification became one of his obsessions, although it was a delicate operation and one that pitted him against the ultras in France, whom he dubbed the 'hatchet men' and who included Montseny and Esgleas, the architects of the 1945 split, amongst its ranks.⁵¹

This aim of unity took Peirats into Spain on a second clandestine trip in August 1948, making him the only secretary in exile to undertake such a dangerous mission. The main reason was that he did not trust the reports circulating in France about what was happening inside Spain. After the split, which saw most of the Interior movement side with the possibilists, Esgleas became obsessed with the idea that 'reformists' might 'contaminate' the base of the orthodox faction in exile. He therefore controlled the flow of information from Spain into the exile community, censoring details he deemed unacceptable, routinely identifying dissidents with 'Francoist elements', and 'selecting' Interior activists to attend congresses in France, where their interventions confirmed his own perspectives.⁵² Federico Arcos, an underground activist from the period, related to me how he was threatened by a *faísta* after submitting a report to a meeting of militants that was unpalatable for the exiled leaders.⁵³ In this climate, Peirats arranged a meeting in Berga with members of the Catalan Regional Committee to get a first-hand account of the problems the Interior activists were facing.

⁴⁴ MI T. 6, L. XI, 60.

⁴⁵ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 51.

⁴⁶ Letter to Juan Manuel Molina, 20 December 1963; MI T. 6, L. XI, 67–8.

⁴⁷ MI T. 6, L. XI, 61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁹ Lozano, *Montseny*, p. 329.

⁵⁰ Miró, *Anarquismo*, p. 216; letter to Marcos Alcón, 13 February 1963; MI T. 6, L. XI, 68.

⁵¹ MI T. 6, L. XI, 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 57; Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 95.

⁵³ Telephone interview by the author with Federico Arcos, 16 April 2010.

The trip was doubly secret. Such was Peirats's distrust of his adversaries inside the MLE-CNT that he announced he was ill and was going to spend a few days in the countryside to recuperate. Meanwhile, he made arrangements with Massana, a seasoned guerrilla, to spirit him over the frontier. After the civil war, Massana had formed a guerrilla group dedicated to kidnappings, smuggling, sabotage, and expropriations. A native of Berga, Peirats described Massana as 'a rocky product of the Pyrennees'. He enjoyed immense popularity with the local peasantry to whom, Robin Hood-style, he periodically donated the proceeds of his 'economic attacks', to which they responded by offering him food and shelter. Dressed like mountaineers and armed with pistols, the pair slept rough until they completed the sixty-kilometre walk from the frontier to Vilada, outside Berga, where they stayed with a peasant family prior to the scheduled meeting.⁵⁴ When, due to unforeseen circumstances, the appointment was postponed for forty-eight hours, Peirats asked a CNT liaison to organise an encounter with his sister Dolores, who came to the countryside for a brief yet emotional reunion after nine years apart. This was followed by an all-night conversation with Ginés Mayordomo and Generoso Grau from the Catalan Regional Committee inside a pantheon in the cemetery of Berga, one of Massana's favourite rendezvous.⁵⁵ The delegates relayed the terrible state of the Barcelona organisation and how anarchist expropriators were bringing repression to the movement, which alienated potential supporters and rendered workplace organisation difficult. They implored Peirats to do what he could to rein them in. After two more nights of sleeping rough, they arrived back in Toulouse. Thereafter, a great trust was built between the pair; and, years later, as guerrillas were increasingly falling to Franco's repressive forces, it was Peirats, along with Joan Ferrer, who finally convinced Massana to hang up his revolver.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Peirats began organising a new congress scheduled for October 1948. Preparations were disrupted when Mateu called Peirats to notify him of 'a hitch' – a fatality – in the course of a 'recovering operation', *cenetista* jargon for an expropriation. When police later raided rue Belfort, they found two sub-machine guns in Mateu's office. Although Mateu claimed the weapons were destined for the Spanish resistance, he was detained by police for a month. Despite their friendship, Mateu was evidently ignoring Peirats's line of ridding the movement of 'immoralities', and Peirats was furious. Besides his conviction that the MLE-CNT had to be self-funding and not 'mortgaged' to unaccountable armed groups, he was concerned the expropriations would provoke a clampdown on the movement by the French authorities. Moreover, as he recalled from pre-civil war Barcelona, the 'economic attacks' carried the danger of creating 'proselytes of robbery working for their own ends'.⁵⁷ Yet expropriations were a long-standing form of fundraising in anarchist circles and in these desperate times there was no swift resolution to the issue, as Peirats would later discover to his very detriment.⁵⁸

The ongoing debate over tactics spilt over into the III Congress of the MLE-CNT, where Peirats reiterated his call for an end to expropriations. Throughout the congress, he came under a sustained attack from Esgleas and his supporters, culminating in 'a very violent session' in which Esgleas denounced him for going to Spain to meet 'police agents' (a reference to Mayordomo and Grau from the Catalan Regional Committee). A tumult ensued thereafter. Esgleas's charge

⁵⁴ For this trip, see Clara, *Marcel·lí Massana*, pp. 61–6; Reguant, *Marcelino Massana*, p. 193; MI T. 6, L. XI, 70–80.

⁵⁵ Ferran Sánchez Agustí, *El Maquis anarquista: De Toulouse a Barcelona por los Pirineos*, Lleida, 2005, p. 132

⁵⁶ Baltasar Porcel, *La revuelta permanente*, Barcelona, 1978, p. 279.

⁵⁷ MI T. 6, L. XI, 86–8.

⁵⁸ Luis Andrés Edo, *La CNT en la encrucijada: Aventuras de un heterodoxo*, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 98–9.

was made all the more insidious a few months later when Grau was detained and tortured by police for several weeks.⁵⁹ In a bid to discredit Peirats, Esgleas called Facerías as a ‘witness’ to support his claims. The stunt ended in humiliation for Esgleas. When Peirats questioned Facerías, he forced him to concede that he was lying and that he had earlier vouched for the integrity of Mayordomo and Grau prior to Peirats’s meeting with them.⁶⁰

Peirats was duly re-elected secretary, although he refused to accept the position, in accordance with his principle that activists should not serve two consecutive terms in the same post. There is also evidence that he was burnt out due to the pressure of arbitrating the ongoing factional struggles. Despite encouragement from friends and comrades who, not without justification, warned that, by not taking a second spell as secretary, he would allow the *cerradistas* to regain positions of influence, Peirats remained steadfast. His final speech as secretary was a blistering attack on the machinations of the FAI and, more specifically, Cerrada, as well as those who had rallied to foil his assault on bureaucracy.⁶¹

After the congress, Peirats was named editor of *Ruta*, the anarchist youth movement newspaper, which was then experiencing severe financial problems. He set about raising the tone of the paper, which now published more researched articles; he also introduced new sections, including a medical column by a CNT physician and a story-writing competition. Although sales of *Ruta* increased, it was still necessary to reduce costs. Because the rest of the *Ruta* staff had dependents, Peirats chose to leave the paper.⁶²

7.2 The brickmaker becomes a historian

Peirats spent 1949 working as an agricultural labourer on a collective farm with a group of comrades in Charlas, ninety kilometres from Toulouse. Doubtless evoking memories of his dreadful experience in the Dominican Republic ten years earlier and despite long hours of work, the collective members barely subsisted. In the meantime, Peirats continued to contribute articles to *Ruta*, writing into the early hours of the morning.⁶³ Towards the end of the year, he quit the collective and returned broke to Toulouse.⁶⁴ Out of desperation, for the first time in his life, he asked a friend for a loan of 5,000 francs in order to establish himself in the city again. That same day, he passed by rue Belfort and bumped into Martín Vilarrupla, the MLE-CNT Culture and Propaganda secretary, who told him about his new plan for a history of the revolution. This initiative had originally been proposed by Peirats and his friend Milla in 1947, but nobody before Vilarrupla had taken it seriously. To Peirats’s stupefaction, Vilarrupla informed him that he indeed wanted him to write the history of the revolution. Until then, his only real excursion into history was a 1947 article in the FIJL magazine *Inquietudes*, analysing the ephemeral First Spanish Republic of 1873.⁶⁵ Ever modest, he pointed out to Vilarrupla that there were better writers in the movement than himself. ‘They may be better and they may be “able” to do it’, Vilarrupla replied, ‘but you

⁵⁹ Íñiguez, *Esbozo*, p. 285; Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 107; Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 136

⁶⁰ MI T. 6, L. XI, 83–5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 81 & 95–6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97–100, and L. XII, 1 & 4.

⁶³ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971; MI T. 6, L. XII, 5–7; letter from Gracia Ventura to the author, 27 November 2010; MI T. 6, L. XII, 7.

⁶⁴ Letter from Federico Arcos to the author, 21 February 2000.

⁶⁵ José Peirats, ‘Historia de una República que nació muerta’, *Inquietudes*, November–December 1947.

will do it. You will write the book because you're stubborn and you have self-respect!'⁶⁶ Little by little, Vilarrupla eroded Peirats's objections until he agreed, whereupon he was given 5,000 francs for expenses, which enabled him to return the loan he had received earlier in the day.⁶⁷

He immediately set about accessing source materials for the book. He issued a circular to all the local federations of the CNT in France and South America, calling on them to provide any information on the collectives they had withdrawn from Spain when they went into exile in 1939. He also made contact with Amsterdam's International Institute of Social History (IISG), where the archive of the anarchist movement was housed and which supplied him with photocopies of internal bulletins and other materials. Yet perhaps most decisive was the cooperation of French anarchist Aristide Lapeyre, who made available his extensive archive of Spanish labour newspapers. Since Lapeyre and the *Tierra y Libertad* newspaper archive were both in Bordeaux, he relocated there, residing in a cheap hotel.⁶⁸

It has been suggested tendentiously that Peirats was a 'salaried historian'⁶⁹ who exploited the movement and wrote 'for his private interest'.⁷⁰ However, the small subvention he received from Vilarrupla was anything but a meal ticket or a gateway to a comfortable existence. Throughout his time working on his history of the revolution, Peirats led a bohemian-like existence that was marked by unrelenting privations. In the especially harsh winter of 1949–50, he inhabited a Gorkian 'ice-cold Bordeaux', from which his 'thick, old winter overcoat' would not suffice to keep him warm, for he 'still shook with the cold'.⁷¹ The many days he spent in the *Tierra y Libertad* library, a building 'humid like a prison cell and as cold as a freezer', would certainly have aggravated his hip problem. The cold was only partially offset by the concierge who, ironically, given his previous work as a brickmaker, provided him with hot tiles on which he rested his feet as he wrote. Deriving strength from adversity and shut away in the unheated hotel room that served as his study, the icy night air was a willing accomplice as he stole countless hours from his sleep, working well into the early morning.⁷² He described this period thus: 'Working like a beast, eating little and badly, washing and darning clothes, making economies even with correspondence costs. A stamp for America was an expensive luxury.'⁷³ Finally, in the spring of 1950, as his funds ran low, he was obliged to make further economies, leaving his hotel to sleep on a bug-infested folding bed in a comrade's kitchen – a move that at least allowed him to devote his meagre resources to research expenses and writing materials. Meanwhile, Bordeaux cenetistas took turns inviting Peirats for lunch and dinner.⁷⁴

With his research completed, he returned to Toulouse, where he was so impoverished that he ended up sharing a bed with Arcos, his friend from Barcelona.⁷⁵ After all the hardships he had endured, in May 1950, Peirats attended an MLE-CNT plenum, only for Vilarrupla to inform

⁶⁶ Peirats, 'Una experiencia histórica', p. 101.

⁶⁷ MI T. 6, L. XII, 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁹ García Oliver, *El eco*, pp. 615–6.

⁷⁰ José Fortea, *Tiempo de historia: No hay más cera que la que arde*, Badalona, 2002, p. 133.

⁷¹ Letter to Marcelino García, 8 May 1962

⁷² MI T. 6, L. XII, 19.

⁷³ Cited in García, 'José Peirats', p. 18.

⁷⁴ MI, T. 6, L. XII, 20.

⁷⁵ According to Arcos, 'For some time, we were sleeping in the same bed, the only one we had in the very small place where I was staying' (letter from Federico Arcos to the author, 21 February 2000).

him that the funds for the history project were 'exhausted'.⁷⁶ After six months of intensive work, Peirats was devastated.

The plenum was dominated by the question of the split. Peirats, typically, was one of the many to argue for reunification of the movement, much to the chagrin of an energetic minority around the Montseny–Esgleas axis, who continued to block progress on this issue.⁷⁷ Peirats's allies put his name forward as candidate for secretary, and he was duly elected. He wavered. Besides being told by the outgoing secretary, Luis Blanco, how relieved he was to be leaving a position that had ground him down, Peirats was concerned about completing his book, which had swollen into two volumes.⁷⁸ In the end, Peirats gave the organisation an ultimatum: he would serve as secretary on the understanding that money be made available for him to complete his history of the revolution. Since by now he was known as a 'man of a single term' in these positions, he accepted in the knowledge that his tenure would end with the next congress the following year.⁷⁹

His hopes of combining his tasks as secretary with writing proved naïve. Things had changed little since his first spell as secretary in 1947–8. He was soon embroiled in the campaign to curb the expropriators and the cerradistas, who continued to exert influence over the higher committees, even if their star had waned after their failure to hand over money they had promised the organisation. Perhaps because of their relative fall from grace, the cerradistas contributed to what Peirats called a 'climate of violence' inside the movement. Peirats and Cerrada, the master forger, had at least one furious row during this time. In what proves to be a truly devastating insight into the MLE, on one occasion, tensions between Cerrada's group and the Toulouse FAI almost resulted in a gunfight out in the streets of the city.⁸⁰

The international context, meanwhile, was also conspiring against the movement. Post-liberation fervour in France evaporated under the rising heat of the Cold War, which left the Gallic authorities increasingly prepared to coexist with Franco's stridently anti-communist regime.⁸¹ This process was graphically typified by the trajectory of socialist Interior Minister Jules Moch: a supporter of the Popular Front in the 1930s, he allied with the Resistance in the 1940s, before becoming a cold warrior. As interior minister, he reopened the Franco-Spanish border in 1948, while in 1950, under pressure from Franco's dictatorship, he made the PCE a criminal organisation and ordered the arrest of several of its leaders. That same year, *Ruta*, the JJ. LL. newspaper and the publication most identified with the guerrillas, was banned by the French authorities. Meanwhile, in 1951, France and Spain re-established diplomatic relations, which inevitably offered new opportunities for the dictatorship to press Paris to curtail the activities of the anarchist exiles.⁸²

This new context had a profound impact on the MLE-CNT. Amid fears that the prohibition of the anarchist movement was on the horizon, Peirats and the secretariat formulated 'an emergency plan' should the French government move against them. Funds were set aside, and an isolated farmhouse outside Toulouse was equipped with typewriters and a mimeograph machine,

⁷⁶ MI T. 6, L. XII, 25–6; for the plenum, see MLE-CNT, *Acta del Pleno Intercontinental de Núcleos de la CNT celebrado en Toulouse los días 28 de mayo 1950 y sucesivos*, Toulouse, 1950.

⁷⁷ MI T. 6, L. XII, 14 & 21.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁹ Letter from Federico Arcos to the author, 21 February 2000; MI T. 6, L. XII, 26–7.

⁸⁰ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 128; MI T. 6, L. XI, 89 and T. 6, L. XII, 2 & 8.

⁸¹ David Messenger, *L'Espagne Républicaine: French Policy and Spanish Republicanism in Liberated France*, Brighton, 2008, pp. 97–138.

⁸² Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio*, pp. 212 & 260–3.

ready to function as the new headquarters of a clandestine secretariat. Peirats also signed a note transferring authority to a new secretary in the event of his arrest.⁸³

7.3 ‘The head of the CNT’ jailed and tortured

In early 1951, the worst fears of the cenetista exiles were almost confirmed. On 3 February, Peirats was arrested and accused by police of receiving six million francs from an armed robbery.⁸⁴ Ironically, right before to his arrest, Peirats had issued an internal circular in which he denounced the expropriators as ‘supposed comrades who are, in essence, agents provocateurs... likely to perpetrate all kinds of immoral acts that are completely at odds with our principles and true anarchist ethics’.⁸⁵ Yet the French police had been aware for some time that anarchist émigrés were involved in a range of ‘common crimes’, from contraband and forgery to armed robbery. Police in Lyon were especially on the alert after February 1948, when three men armed with sub-machine guns seized five million francs in an audacious assault on an armoured security van.⁸⁶

Peirats’s arrest was triggered by an episode that underscored all his misgivings about the expropriators. On 18 January, an armed gang launched an unsuccessful attack on another security van in rue Duguesclin, in Lyon city centre, leaving two policemen and a bystander dead. Eyewitnesses concurred that the assailants spoke with Spanish accents, resulting in media hysteria in which the MLE-CNT was identified with criminality. Over 2,000 policemen, including the paramilitary Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, were mobilised in the hunt for the ‘gang des espagnols’. The ‘gang’ in question consisted of ex-guerrillas, some of whom had been expelled from the Lyon FAI for retaining the proceeds of their ‘economic attacks’. In what was at best sheer irresponsibility and at worst an act of vengeance against the movement, they hid the weapons they used in the attack in the courtyard of a nearby CNT office.⁸⁷

The Lyon events served as a pretext for a clampdown on the anarchist movement. Two of the perpetrators – Juan ‘el Pelao’ Sánchez and Francisco Bailo – were detained and, under torture, implicated other activists, leading to the arrest of around thirty exiles in total, including prominent guerrillas, such as Massana and Sabaté.⁸⁸ At first, it seemed the police were exploiting the events to clear unsolved crimes (payroll raids, attacks on jewelers, and robberies of tourists) but it later became apparent that, in actuality, the authorities were looking for evidence to justify a ban on the MLE-CNT. In these circumstances, it was vital that Peirats, as secretary, maintain his innocence.

Peirats had been named by an individual called Poncel, who was linked to the Lyon expropriators, as a recipient of the proceeds from these ‘recovering operations’.⁸⁹ From Toulouse, he was taken to the main police station in Lyon, where he was shown a picture of Poncel, whom Peirats

⁸³ MI T. 6, L. XI, 65.

⁸⁴ Téllez Solá, *Sabaté*, p. 194; MI T. 6, L. XII, 32.

⁸⁵ MI T. 6, L. XII, 42.

⁸⁶ David Wingeate Pike, *Jours de gloire, jours de honte: Le Parti Communiste d’Espagne en France depuis son arrivée en 1939 jusqu’à son départ en 1950*, Paris, 1984, p. 224.

⁸⁷ Sánchez Agustí, *El Maquis anarquista*, pp. 28–9.

⁸⁸ José Bailo, the twenty-seven-year-old brother of Francisco, committed suicide rather than be detained (Téllez Solá, *Sabaté*, pp. 194 & 198–9).

⁸⁹ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 16 February 1965.

knew vaguely from anarchist circles. He did not acknowledge this to the police. He was then stripped and put in a cell, where he was verbally abused, threatened, and intimidated with sentry dogs. The tenor of police questions allowed him, little by little, to piece together the accusations against him. Poncel had declared he had given Peirats, 'the chief of the CNT', a 'package' containing six million francs. The police were determined to extract a confession from Peirats that he had received the money. When he protested his innocence, he was whipped, punched, and kicked, particularly in the chest and stomach.⁹⁰

He remained resolute. Fully aware of the stakes involved, he recognised that any admission of guilt would almost certainly lead to the movement's criminalisation. Indeed, it was later confirmed that Henri Queuille, the interior minister, had prepared a decree to outlaw the MLE-CNT as a threat to national security.⁹¹ Peirats insisted the movement was funded exclusively by the voluntary contributions of its supporters, whereupon the beatings resumed. Finally, the police brought in Poncel, who repeated his allegation. Under pressure from Peirats, Poncel changed his story. He now claimed he told Peirats to pass the money on to Mateu. Peirats protested. Although careful to protect Mateu, he emphasised the falsehood of Poncel's claims, pointing out that Mateu was invariably in rue Belfort, where he sometimes slept overnight on a camp bed.⁹² Following another beating and further death threats, Peirats was returned to the cells. After twenty-four hours without food, and with his entire body aching, he refused to implicate the organisation in the Lyon attack. He was eventually allowed to sign a statement that he had no recollection of ever receiving a package from Poncel and that if he had, then he was unaware of its contents.

Lyon police also interrogated Peirats about Cerrada's long involvement in illegal activities. Despite their many conflicts and, although Peirats most certainly felt that the legitimacy Cerrada had given to expropriations was in no small way responsible for his current suffering, he gave the police nothing. Cerrada, who had been jailed in 1950 for his role in the forgery of foreign currency, later communicated his gratitude to Peirats via his lawyer.⁹³

Following Poncel's new 'revelation', police attention shifted to Mateu, who was very tough and also refused to crack. However, Sabaté's ordeal seemed to have been greatest, with his body bruised and naked, attempting suicide, trying to throw himself from an upstairs window.⁹⁴ Therefore, with no evidence directly linking the MLE-CNT to the rue Duguesclin attack, Peirats, Mateu, and Sabaté were transferred to Lyon's Saint-Paul prison. They were all deeply affected. Peirats related that Sabaté was crushed by the experience, whereas Mateu was almost deafened by the blows he received to the head.⁹⁵ Peirats later wrote that the torture had 'marked him for the rest of his life'.⁹⁶ He complained afterwards that his leg pains increased, and he attributed the onset of a heart condition to the numerous blows he received in the chest.⁹⁷ The psychological impact of his ordeal was probably greater still.⁹⁸ One activist commented how Peirats was left 'deeply

⁹⁰ Wingeate Pike, *Jours*, p. 225; MI T. 6, L. XII, 31–6.

⁹¹ MI T. 6, L. XII, 68.

⁹² Letter to Fernando Gómez Peláez, 24 March 1972; MI T. 6, L. XII, 37.

⁹³ Letter to Miguel Íñiguez, 22 August 1985.

⁹⁴ Téllez Solá, *Sabaté*, p. 199.

⁹⁵ MI T. 6, L. XII, 49–52.

⁹⁶ Letter to Mariano Casasús, 4 April 1987.

⁹⁷ Letters to Jaime Padrós, 17 March 1966, and Mariano Casasús, 4 April 1987; interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

⁹⁸ He wrote the Lyon beatings initiated 'the decline of my life' (letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971).

affected'.⁹⁹ The incident also changed his relationship with Mateu, whom he knew to have an indulgent attitude towards some of the expropriators.¹⁰⁰

Peirats spent five months in prison, where he resumed writing his history of the revolution. He was spurred on when he discovered that Kropotkin, the 'anarchist prince', had been incarcerated in the same prison some seventy years earlier.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, a solidarity campaign put pressure on the authorities for his release. Various intellectuals and political figures were drawn to the cause, including José Antonio Aguirre, the Basque president in exile; Georges Brutelle, secretary of the French Socialist Party and Buchenwald survivor; and dissident communists like Jordi Arquer.¹⁰² Albert Camus also lent his immense voice to the campaign. In April 1951, the Nobel laureate author addressed a Paris meeting organised by the CNT and Les Amis de l'Espagne Républicaine, in which he denounced the 'torture' of 'irreproachable militants' like Peirats.¹⁰³

Of all the secretaries in exile, Peirats sacrificed most for the movement: he was the only one to be jailed and the only one to enter Spain.¹⁰⁴ Upon his release from prison on parole, he returned to Toulouse, where he was obliged to report to the police on a daily basis. In Toulouse, at least, the police – some of whom had fought in the Resistance – were respectful of the émigrés, shaking hands and enquiring after mutual acquaintances, while the *préfet de police* in Haute-Garonne, Émile Pelletier, was an anti-fascist who sympathised with the anarchists' plight. The charges against Peirats were dropped seven months later, a full year after his original detention. By then, he had been MLE-CNT secretary for over a year and when he was re-elected, in keeping with his convictions, he refused a second term.¹⁰⁵ Although the movement had been severely rocked by the repression, Peirats would have felt it was at least in a stronger position after the expulsion of Cerrada in 1951 for his 'inadmissible methods'.¹⁰⁶ In a sincere, albeit belated, attempt by activists to clean the shop, Cerrada's expulsion is the only instance in the history of the CNT of a militant being kicked out unanimously.

Liberated from both prison and the secretariat, Peirats displayed new determination to complete his history in the shortest possible time – an urgency fuelled by the continuing judicial and material uncertainties shaping his life. To speed up publication, the text was readied by CNT typesetters as each chapter was completed, so the book went to the press as soon as it was finished, finally appearing before the end of 1951.¹⁰⁷ With no fixed abode, Peirats was clearly tentative about the future of the project. In his introduction to Volume I, he reflected: 'It is our ambition, at the very least, to see the publication of a second volume... Time, along with the resources and goodwill of our supporters, will tell.'¹⁰⁸ These supporters were generous. As well as sending Peirats copies of CNT publications and bulletins, Frank González, a veteran New York-

⁹⁹ E-mail from Octavio Alberola to the author, 22 August 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Letters to Fernando Gómez Peláez, 24 March 1972; Progreso Fernández, 3 September 1976; and Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 23 June 1983.

¹⁰¹ MI T. 6, L. XII, 39,

¹⁰² Letter to Alejandro Gilabert, 3 January 1975; Wingeate Pike, *Jours*, p. 224.

¹⁰³ Freddy Gómez, 'Fraternidad de los combates, fidelidad de las soledades: Camus y *Solidaridad Obrera*', epilogue to *Escritos libertarios (1948–1960)* by Albert Camus, Barcelona, 2014, p. 266; letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 17 September 1987.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 5 May 1968.

¹⁰⁵ Wingeate Pike, *Jours*, p. 225; MI T. 6, L. XII, 65, 69, 74, & 77–8.

¹⁰⁶ Íñiguez, *Esbozo*, pp. 141–2; Edo, *La CNT en la encrucijada*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁷ José Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, Toulouse, 1951; MI T. 6, L. XII, 72 & 77.

¹⁰⁸ Reprinted in the revised edition, Cali, Colombia, 1988, p. 17.

based anarchist, donated his old clothes.¹⁰⁹ More important still was Peirats's greatest strength, his single-mindedness; he immersed himself fully in his writing, finishing the remaining two volumes, which were published in 1952 and 1953, completing his *magnum opus* that earned him the status of the 'Herodotus of the CNT'.¹¹⁰

The aim of *La CNT en la revolución española* was simple: 'Given the wave of books already published on the civil war in which we are ignored or slandered', Peirats sought to produce 'a book that would demonstrate that, as well as a civil war in Spain, there was a social revolution and that this unknown revolution was carried out by anarchists in the face of the opposition and hostility of those inside and outside their movement.'¹¹¹ *La CNT* is a book astoundingly rich in historical detail and reflects his inside knowledge of the CNT. No historian before or after him has benefitted from the same unrivalled access to rare or sensitive documents, internal sources, and official documentation. In addition, *La CNT* is enhanced by an experiential element: this is history written from personal experience and, to a degree, it is the political autobiography of a revolutionary determined to historicise the vicissitudes of the struggles through which he *lived* and which he helped *create*. He writes as one who experienced the glory of the revolution just as he later lived through its disfigurement and suppression at the hands of its enemies.¹¹²

La CNT is a case study of a mass anarcho-syndicalist organisation, of its militants, and of its supporters in revolution. It documents the hopes and desires for social transformation of hundreds of thousands of workers in the 1930s, making it the political autobiography of his generation, the Generation of '36, the 'lost generation' that Franco and his supporters sought to silence in unmarked graves, concentration camps, and foreign exile. The culminating point of Volume I is the far-reaching Chapter 15, which consists of a survey of the revolutionary social transformations in which the workings of the collectives are explored in all their local complexity.

When read today, it is incontrovertible that *La CNT* reflects some of the shortcomings of the first wave of labour history. However, the template for innovative working-class history, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, was not published until 1963 and did not appear in Spanish until 1977.¹¹³ Before Thompson, the first wave of labour history often consisted of a 'top-down' political history of trade unions and tended to suggest that *all* workers were consistently revolutionary in orientation. Peirats's study reflects these traits to an extent and offers limited insights into the *cultural meaning* of participation in the CNT-FAI for grassroots activists, barely exploring their everyday lives.

Nevertheless, when we recall the initial ambivalence and subsequent hostility of the CNT-FAI hierarchy to the July 1936 revolution, a revolution which, as Peirats reminds us, was – more than

¹⁰⁹ MI, T. 6, L. XII, 78.

¹¹⁰ Peirats was described as 'our leading historian, the "Herodotus of the CNT"' (García, prologue to Peirats, *La Semana Trágica*, p. 17) and as 'the Herodotus of the first libertarian syndicalist movement' (Carrasquer, 'José Peirats', *Polémica*, October 1989, p. 20).

¹¹¹ MI T. 6, L. XII, 19.

¹¹² Despite their different social origins and political convictions as revolutionaries and historians, certain parallels can be made between the work of Peirats and that of Leon Trotsky, another revolutionary-historian: both shared the same goals as writers which, in the words of the latter's most erudite biographer, amounted to 'a twofold *vis historica*: the revolutionary's urge to make history and the writer's impulse to describe it' (Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940*, vol. 3, London, 1963, p. 218). Deutscher also observed that the historian of revolutions has to 'enter into the nerves of millions of people in order to feel and convey the mighty heave that overturns the established order' (p. 232). Peirats achieved this and it stands as yet another of his achievements.

¹¹³ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1963. It was translated into Spanish as *La formación histórica de la clase obrera inglesa*, Barcelona, 1977.

anything – the spontaneous and unguided work of anonymous grassroots union militants, it is possible to see *La CNT* as a history of the landless labourers and industrial workers bereft of a voice, who lived and struggled ‘from below’, in the streets, in the fields, and in the factories of Spain and who set about establishing new revolutionary relations in agriculture, industry, and various areas of social life without assistance ‘from above’. For instance, the many written responses to the questionnaire he sent to exiled grassroots collectivists were crucial in detailing the aspirations of communities of anonymous workers framed in free assemblies, ‘from below’. Although he time and again refers to the ‘leaders’ of the CNT, he never writes a history of the heroic endeavours of great men; rather, he shows that the untutored energies and aspirations of the large collectivities of anonymous masses were indeed the human agency of the dispossessed, the driving force behind revolution and historical change, of those who invariably go unrecorded in written history but who, very rarely, such as in 1930s Spain, seldom grasp an opportunity to reclaim control of their lives and make their own history.

7.4 Love and family in exile

At the end of 1951, after a twelve-year separation, Peirats was reunited with his parents, now in their late seventies, who came to Toulouse, anxious to see their son after his incarceration. Although poor, his parents returned the following spring. Meanwhile, Peirats arranged meetings with his extended family – nephews, nieces, cousins, and his sister Dolores – at Bourg-Madame on the frontier. His parents made a final visit to Toulouse in 1954, and his father died the following year, aged eighty-three.¹¹⁴ Peirats was deeply pained at not being able to see him beforehand, and he confessed to crying for the first time since he was a young boy.¹¹⁵ His frustration at being a distant spectator of the deaths of close family members increased in 1956, when his uncle Benjamín, whom he had always regarded as a father, also died.¹¹⁶ Testimony to the accumulated tribulations of exile, in 1962, just before turning fifty-four, Peirats observed how the first half of his life ‘seemed to pass in a sigh; the other half, an eternity’.¹¹⁷

His personal sufferings were dramatically offset by the arrival of Gracia Ventura, his life partner, in Toulouse in 1954, ‘a crucial year in my life’. Born on 17 May 1918, in Burriana, a town with a strong anarchist tradition and just twelve kilometres from Peirats’s birthplace in La Vall d’Uixó, Gracia came from a libertarian family. Her father had died in the 1919 influenza epidemic, and she was brought up in hardship and worked as a seamstress from the age of nine, as her mother struggled to raise three daughters and a son, a CNT militant who was captured and executed by the Francoists during the war. Ten years younger than José, she was an eighteen-year-old anarchist youth militant when the civil war began. In April 1939, with the end of the war, she was denounced as a ‘red’ and sentenced to twenty years in jail, along with her mother and sisters, for ‘aiding the rebellion’, as the Francoists described those who resisted their coup d’état. In prison, she met Peirats’s aunt Isabel, a contact that would change the course of her life. After serving five years, she received a pardon as part of Franco’s ‘liberal’ overtures to Western democracies.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ MI T. 6, L. XII, 77, and T. 7, L. XIII, 94 & 96.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 20 October 1965; *El Luchador*, April 1973.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Rodolfo Llopis, 2 March 1956.

¹¹⁷ Letter to Amapola, 6 February 1962.

¹¹⁸ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009; MI T. 7, L. XIII, 1; Eulàlia Vega, *Pioneras y revolucionarias: Mujeres libertarias durante la República, la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo*, Barcelona, 2010, pp. 276–81.

Once free, she moved to Barcelona, where, through Isabel, she went to live with Peirats's aunt Carmen, as she attempted to 'remake her life after the hard years of political and economic repression faced by all members of her family.'¹¹⁹ Over time, she was introduced to José's parents, who naturally spoke to her of their son in France. Gracia's curiosity was piqued further when she saw the remnants of Peirats's library in the family home, and she decided to write to him.¹²⁰ Following 'a prolonged correspondence' that 'acquired a sentimental tone', she decided to follow him into exile in 1954, initially finding work in Paris, which enabled them to meet for the first time. After a whirlwind romance, Gracia moved to Toulouse, where she worked illegally as a seamstress. The couple now lived in a small flat at 11 rue de Thionville in a working-class district, a few minutes' walk from rue Belfort.¹²¹ Despite her record with the Francoist authorities, according to Eulàlia Vega, 'When Gracia travelled to Spain to visit her family, she often undertook a mission for the Organisation, taking either a document or whatever was required.'¹²² The couple would remain together for the next thirty-five years, until Peirats's death in 1989.¹²³

The costs of exile, meanwhile, were increasingly taking their toll on Peirats's anarchist family. As Franco was welcomed into the international community by the Western democracies, the dictatorship stabilised. It was clear there would be no swift return to Spain for the émigrés. The absences imposed by exile, the near permanent sense of estrangement, and the feeling of helplessness, all the greater among activists committed to changing the march of history, led to intrigues and rancours that poisoned relations between old comrades. Intrigues were nothing new in anarchist circles, but small trifles became magnified greatly in exile. According to Peirats, this context destroyed his long friendship with Aláiz, who discovered from a mischievous third party that Peirats had criticised him. Always somewhat irascible, rather than ascertain the veracity of the rumours, Aláiz broke their friendship. He would die alone in a Paris hospital in April 1959. Two years later, Peirats wrote the prologue to a new edition of Aláiz's celebrated novel *Quinet*, describing his mentor in glowing terms: 'He was not only the best of our writers but one of the best Spanish writers of his time... he would have shone among the greats but he preferred to live without glory among the meek.'¹²⁴ Peirats was left deeply hurt. According to a close friend, he loved Aláiz 'like a father'.¹²⁵ Some thirty years after the rupture in their relations, Peirats confessed that 'the remorse caused by my crisis with Felipe will remain with me for the rest of my life.'¹²⁶

7.5 The fight for culture and the unity of the CNT

At an organisational level, Peirats persisted in what he termed 'a constant campaign' to heal the rift that opened within the anarchist movement in 1945.¹²⁷ This finally bore fruit at the 1961 Limoges Congress but it led to new conflicts on the way and Peirats created 'many enemies',

¹¹⁹ Vega, *Pioneras*, p. 304.

¹²⁰ Letter to Ramón Fortich, n.d. (1988?)

¹²¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009; letter to José Alberola, 3 February 1961.

¹²² Vega, *Pioneras*, p. 305.

¹²³ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 2.

¹²⁴ Cited in MI T. 6, L. XII, 90.

¹²⁵ Letter from Antonia Fontanillas to the author, 28 November 2010; for Peirats's version of the split, see MI T. 6, L. XII, 81–90.

¹²⁶ Letter to Pedro Panés, 21 April 1977.

¹²⁷ MI T. 6, L. XII, 96.

especially among the Montseny–Esgleas faction. As Herrerín López observes, the basis for reunification existed since 1948, when the possibilists publicly rejected any future collaboration with the republican government in exile.¹²⁸ If Peirats is to be believed, that a ‘huge number of comrades wanted to break one and for all the vicious circle [of the split]’, it seems curious that unification did not come sooner.¹²⁹ Certainly, on the possibilist side, ‘they named various conciliation committees with the aim of entering into contact with the other side and preparing the terrain for the fusion of the two branches of the Organisation.’ Yet the grassroots desire for unity was blocked by the dogged sectarianism of Montseny and Esgleas, who refused to acknowledge the existence of the rival CNT. They also insisted that the moderates could only return to the MLE-CNT if they took the humiliating step of applying to join on an individual basis, whereupon rue Belfort could veto those deemed unworthy of membership.¹³⁰ Just months before the reunification of the movement, rue Belfort described the moderates as ‘splitters’ (*escisionistas*).¹³¹ Thus, ‘an insurmountable wall’ was erected between the two factions.¹³²

It is likely that Montseny and Esgleas felt more secure with two CNTs and that their personal concerns and vanities mattered more to them than the overall needs of the movement. Although there were clearly strategic issues behind the 1945 split, the schism was convenient for them, since it isolated those activists who had most interrogated their record in World War II and the matter of the missing MLE-CNT coffers. All along, these critics were outside of what they increasingly regarded as *their* organisation, so Montseny and Esgleas could avoid awkward questions that they had no desire to address. Meanwhile, Esgleas, who held the position of MLE-CNT secretary uninterrupted during 1952–8, surely felt his bureaucratic fiefdom threatened by the tendency of the pro-unity groups to address the base of the movement.¹³³ Nevertheless, in the end, the pressure for reunification was so great within the base that it threatened a new split between ‘the intransigent ones’ and ‘the tolerant ones’ if the leadership did not give its assent.¹³⁴

The main vehicle through which Peirats pushed for unity was *CNT*, which, under his directorship (1953–9), replaced *Solidaridad Obrera* as the main movement paper in exile. As editor, he criticised the ossified MLE-CNT leadership under Esgleas and his reliance on ‘the regional bosses’, whom he accused of manipulating congresses and plenary meetings in order to sustain their own positions of influence. He also pointed to the democratic deficits within a bureaucratized movement, increasingly dominated by committees made up of ‘almost always the same people’.¹³⁵

In terms of his temperament, Peirats was far better suited to writing than to committee work, which left him feeling caged. On top of this, he found exile politics corrosive and had little time for intrigues, personal rivalries, sterile polemics, or petty vanities.¹³⁶ Moreover, since his time on

¹²⁸ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 219.

¹²⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 70.

¹³⁰ Olegario Pachón, *Recuerdos y consideraciones de los tiempos heroicos: Testimonio de un extremeño*, Barcelona, 1979, p. 175.

¹³¹ CNT, *Memorias del Congreso Intercontinental de Federaciones Locales de la CNT de España en el Exilio*, Limoges, agosto 1960, Choisy-Le-Roi, n.d. (1960?), p. 14.

¹³² Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 220.

¹³³ Octavio Alberola and Ariane Gransac, *El anarquismo español y la acción revolucionaria (1961–1975)*, Paris, 1975, pp. 31–2.

¹³⁴ CNT, *Memorias del Congreso Intercontinental*, pp. 19–20.

¹³⁵ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 3 & 13.

¹³⁶ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

FAI in 1934, he had displayed tremendous editorial vision, as was confirmed during his time on *Acracia* in 1936–7. Unsurprisingly, then, Peirats revamped *CNT* and imprinted his journalistic stamp on the paper. This was set out in the first number he edited, in his Aláiz-inspired essay ‘Decálogo del perfecto colaborador espontáneo’. It began with a warning against long articles ‘that nobody reads’, arguing that it is preferable to write two articles if the material is good: ‘A newspaper also enters through the eyes. What is brief and good, is twice as good.’ The second point warned against ‘coarse adjectives... which impoverish the tone of the paper’. This was followed by an admonition against populist language (*lenguaje de galería*) and demagoguery, which ‘alienates sensitive readers with refined tastes. There are enough imbeciles in the world. We mustn’t make more.’ Point four eschewed ‘declamations and digressions... Read a lot, far more than you write.’ Next was a repudiation of a ‘homely tone [*tono casero*], except in cases of real necessity. While a *CNT* publication, our paper is a propaganda tool for ideals of human self-improvement and not of a class or a clan. Classes, races and sects are all part of the same abomination. Alongside the *CNT*, there is the world. Step into it.’ Point six counselled: ‘Avoid easy clichés like the plague. We are neither the majority nor the best. We simply aspire to this. And even if we were, to immodestly insist in this would mean we are not.’ This was followed by the practical wisdom of keeping copies of articles in case they went unpublished: ‘Don’t confuse the newspaper with a nursery.’ Point eight stated: ‘Don’t be argumentative. And if you do, don’t lower your tone.’ Linked to this was a rejection of ‘personal causes’: ‘We refuse to be a platform for private challenges.’ And, finally, there was an invitation: ‘Write and share with us your concerns, criticisms and suggestions’, although ‘don’t bombard us nor waste our time. Your time and ours are like gold.’¹³⁷

Peirats built up a network of correspondents and contributors in Paris, London, and across the Americas, bringing in contributions from prestigious figures that had become somewhat marginalised in exile, including Josep Viadiu, the last editor of *Solidaridad Obrera* in Spain.¹³⁸ He established a new section called ‘Divulgaciones’, in charge of celebrated anarchist geologist Alberto Carsí, and wrote all the editorials to the paper. He published around 400 articles in the ‘Crónicas’ section during those years. He also prepared the ‘Notas’ section, penning reports of speeches and meetings. For each number, he corrected the articles and the proofs and, on the day *CNT* went to press, he took everything to the printers on his bicycle. His final task was folding the papers and sending them for distribution.¹³⁹

With *CNT* established as the leading title among the Spanish anarchist exile community, Peirats emerged as one of the heavyweights of the anarchist movement and entered into a series of debates with other exiled leaders. For instance, during 1957–8, he participated in several polemics with veteran socialist leader Indalecio Prieto, from *El Socialista*, the official PSOE paper, over issues ranging from the nature of the Batista regime in Cuba across to historical themes like labour violence in Barcelona.¹⁴⁰ In short, Peirats became the most prolific journalist in anarchist circles; the only writer who came anywhere close to him was Montseny.

Peirats combined editing *CNT* with the cultural work he so cherished during his years in Barcelona. He was especially active with the FIJL, sometimes dedicating up to three evenings

¹³⁷ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 10–1.

¹³⁸ See Antoni Dalmau, ‘Josep Viadiu i Valls (1890–1973), publicista i director de *Solidaridad Obrera*’, *Revista d’Igualada*, no. 33, December 2009, pp. 31–54; MI T. 7, L. XIII, 11.

¹³⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 12–3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 37–44.

a week to the activities of the anarchist youth movement.¹⁴¹ He had long seen youth as vital to preserving the continuity of the movement, and he used his influence upon them to critique the insular ‘immobilism’ of rue Belfort.¹⁴² He helped the youth build up a library, joined them on excursions to the countryside, and gave talks on Spanish history. Since, for many, French was their first language, they requested he organise a course of Spanish writing. He encouraged them, in turn, to set up a theatre group, the Grupo Juvenil.¹⁴³ Besides directing their comedies and plays, he even found time to pen a couple of short works, such as *El diablo*, a comedy in one act, which was published in 1958.¹⁴⁴ His favourite work was the one-act drama *El lobo*, based on the experience of the anti-Francoist guerrilla, which was performed in public on several occasions. He also wrote a musical revue that was produced by the anarchist theatre group Terra Lluire.¹⁴⁵ Luis Andrés Edo, one of the youths who participated in some of these activities, noted that Peirats always conducted himself ‘with proverbial modesty’.¹⁴⁶

In response to the desire of the anarchist youth for a space in which to meet and develop their activities, Peirats became one of the architects of Toulouse’s Spanish Athenaeum. As he acknowledged years later, this was ‘one of the endeavours into which I poured all my affection and energy’. Aware that the anarchists alone lacked the resources to bring this project to fruition, in late 1958 Peirats drew up a blueprint that outlined the ideas of the planned athenaeum, which was conceived as a cultural and fraternal venue for exiles and immigrant workers alike. Accordingly, its doors were ‘open to all Spaniards of progressive and liberal spirit’. There were caveats, though: ‘There is no room for individuals who profess totalitarian ideas or who support organisations or parties of such characteristics, regardless of the pole of this totalitarianism, be it Eastern or Western.’¹⁴⁷ Peirats and his associates asked republicans, anarchists, socialists, and Catalan nationalists in Toulouse for financial support. Finally, with the help of a bank loan and the work of volunteers, they converted an old hat factory into the athenaeum, which was equipped with classrooms, a library, a gymnasium, and a hall for public talks, plays, and dances. While a variety of groups supported the initiative, the anarchists were the most involved, and, for many years, Ramón Liarte, a veteran of the Durruti Column, and Peirats alternated in the unpaid positions of secretary and vice-secretary.¹⁴⁸

The athenaeum had a profound impact on the cultural life of exiles and became a fulcrum of sociability, with its frequent dances, plays, debates, and adult learning programmes.¹⁴⁹ Its organisers also had contact with professors and students at the University of Toulouse. Reflecting its deep roots in the city, it continued to propagate progressive culture until its closure in 1999.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁴² Letter to Federico and Pura Arcos, 31 December 1962; Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 188; Edo, *La CNT*, pp. 100 & 119.

¹⁴³ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁴⁴ José Peirats, *El diablo*, Toulouse, 1958.

¹⁴⁵ MI T.7, L.XIII, 96–8.

¹⁴⁶ Edo, *La CNT*, p. 100.

¹⁴⁷ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 99.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 98–100. According to Peirats, ‘I was almost its permanent secretary and I continuously put forward new initiatives’ (MI T. 7, L. XIV, 39).

¹⁴⁹ Dolores Fernández, ‘Fuentes para el estudio del exilio español en Francia’, *Migraciones & Exilios: Cuadernos de la Asociación para el estudio de los exilios y migraciones ibéricos contemporáneos*, no. 8, 2007, p. 63.

¹⁵⁰ Lucienne Domergue and Marie Laffranque, ‘Los españoles exiliados en Toulouse y la cultura: El ejemplo de los anarquistas’, in Alicia Alted and Lucienne Domergue (eds.), *El exilio republicano español en Toulouse, 1939–1999*, Madrid, 2003, p. 247; Alted and Domergue, *La cultura del exilio*, p. 69.

A watershed moment in Peirats's activism came at the September 1959 Vierzon Plenum. In a secret session, Sabaté and other veteran guerrillas ensured that a motion was approved to revive the armed struggle against Franco. Montseny, who was hostile to the initiative, informed Peirats that the plan was to be funded by union contributions and by expropriations in France and Spain. She and Esgleas proposed Peirats to join them in launching a manifesto against insurrectionary methods, a course of action he opposed, fearing a further split in the organisation similar to that of 1931, following the treintista manifesto.¹⁵¹

A firm opponent of expropriations for most of his militant life, Peirats resigned from CNT in protest over the Vierzon accord, much to the chagrin of Montseny, who accused him of desertion at such a critical moment.¹⁵² According to one young advocate of armed struggle who knew Peirats well, 'after his prison experience in France', he had become convinced that this policy would trap the movement in a cycle of expropriations.¹⁵³ Certainly, he was convinced the Vierzon accord amounted to 'suicide for the Organisation'. While its advocates were doubtless buoyed up by the arrival of Castro's guerrilla army in Havana in January 1959, it was clear to many that Franco's Spain bore little comparison with Batista's Cuba, just as there was a world of difference between the fragile dictatorship of the immediate post-war years and the institutionalised regime of 1959, which had the firm support of the army and other social sectors in Spain, as well as the United States government. For Peirats, the way forward was not through armed struggle, but rather through a united CNT that could 'find a way of identifying Francoism's points of weakness.'¹⁵⁴ He was also mindful of the French political context: 'France was our last hope [*tabla de salvación*] and it was vital to preserve it.'¹⁵⁵ With de Gaulle at the peak of its power, Madrid was petitioning the Gallic authorities to ban the CNT. Consequently, he viewed the armed groups as 'an imminent danger to our Organisation's need for asylum'.¹⁵⁶ He later confessed the Vierzon accord led him into 'a deep crisis'.¹⁵⁷

While he remained a dues-paying member of the CNT, at almost fifty-two years of age, he left all positions of responsibility to become a construction labourer. For about six months, he cycled to building sites early each morning, before excruciating leg pains made it impossible for him to continue.¹⁵⁸ While Perthes disease had caused him profound pain from his mid- to late twenties onwards, by his fifties this agony would have been combined with increasingly limited movement, making it impossible for him to cross or open his legs fully. Although he qualified for unemployment relief benefits, he rejected these as petty 'alms'.¹⁵⁹ Proud and stubborn, he was determined to demonstrate his self-sufficiency.¹⁶⁰ Yet, in the end, with few suitable employment opportunities available, he stayed at home helping Gracia with her seamstress work, eventually learning to sew pants, running errands, liaising with tailors, collecting clothes, ironing them, and returning them to tailors. He also shopped and cooked.¹⁶¹ In their poorly heated flat ('very small',

¹⁵¹ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 71.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 72 & 83.

¹⁵³ E-mail from Octavio Alberola to the author, 22 August 2008.

¹⁵⁴ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 79.

¹⁵⁵ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 70.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵⁸ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971, and Pedro Brugarolas, 9 February 1973; MI T. 7, L. XIII, 82.

¹⁵⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 80.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

according to a friend), the bedroom doubled as their workshop.¹⁶² This is how the couple, in all their modesty, survived and made ends meet.¹⁶³

Their domestic relations were harmonious and fairly organised. According to Gracia, 'When something had to be done at home, we discussed it and moved on... He was a man who did everything in the house; if he had to cook, then he cooked.'¹⁶⁴ Their lifestyle was made easier by their decision not to have children: 'The world has enough people already', Peirats once observed.¹⁶⁵ Neither individual apparently regretted their choice. Gracia later reflected, 'Children are fine but one has to be aware of the sacrifice this involves and not to have them for the sake of it.'¹⁶⁶ In a letter to friends, Peirats recognised that, while 'we don't go short of anything, we just get by.'¹⁶⁷ This came with much hard work, though, sometimes starting at 6 a.m. and continuing to 11.30 p.m.¹⁶⁸ As he wrote to another friend, 'We have long hours of work. I can't do anything different now... my leg is almost useless.'¹⁶⁹ On another occasion he acknowledged, 'We only stop for meals', although 'we always steal some time to read a little in bed, before going to sleep.'¹⁷⁰ At weekends, they took walks around the old town, marvelling at its architecture and courtyards.¹⁷¹ The economic hardship of these years can be measured in Peirats's letters as well, which sometimes were written on scrap paper; his writing always covering the entire page, including the margins.¹⁷²

7.6 Reunification and division

Despite the resistance of rue Belfort, grassroots pressure for unity gathered pace during the 1950s, culminating in the healing of the fifteen-year rift during 1960–1, which was formally ratified at the 1961 Limoges Congress.¹⁷³ Along with Esgleas for the orthodox faction and Aurelio Fernández and Ramón Álvarez Palomo for the possibilists, Peirats was part of a four-man team responsible for drafting the motion on the reunification of the CNT.¹⁷⁴ However, despite the groundswell of support for a single movement, this was a fragile unity, without firm foundation, or, as Herrerín López puts it, 'It consisted more of an imposition than the result of a negotiation.'¹⁷⁵

At Limoges, Peirats committed an error that would prove fatal for the reunified MLE-CNT. Although 'elected by an overwhelming majority', and despite the fact that 'he had been asked to accept the position on several occasions', he turned down the opportunity to become secretary for a third time.¹⁷⁶ Even a fierce critic of Peirats believed he was the best candidate, describing

¹⁶² Letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010.

¹⁶³ Letter from Gracia Ventura to the author, 27 November 2010.

¹⁶⁴ Vega, *Pioneras*, p. 306.

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Gene (Juanita) Fried, 7 November 1965.

¹⁶⁶ Vega, *Pioneras*, p. 307.

¹⁶⁷ Letter to Federico and Pura Arcos, 21 December 1963.

¹⁶⁸ Letter to Progreso Alfarache 24 June 1963.

¹⁶⁹ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 25 March 1963.

¹⁷⁰ Letter to Amapola, 6 February 1962.

¹⁷¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁷² See, for instance, the letter to José del Amo, 22 March 1972.

¹⁷³ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 230–9.

¹⁷⁴ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 14.

¹⁷⁵ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 221.

¹⁷⁶ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 233.

him as ‘a point of reference’, since ‘many were convinced that, after the reunification, he would be the new secretary. On the one hand, he had the respect of the “two camps”, while, on the other, he had the meticulousness to implement faithfully the decisions of the Organisation.’¹⁷⁷ Peirats’s insistence on never serving as secretary again – something he had decided ten years before – made him appear unnecessarily inflexible to some of the congress delegates, as well as unconcerned with the immediate needs of the MLE-CNT.¹⁷⁸

Years later, he related how his decision reflected concerns that the influence of the FAI would undermine his work as secretary. Aware that he ‘had never been especially diplomatic’, he claimed a serious conflict would have ensued, something he argued needed to be avoided at all costs at such a sensitive juncture in the movement’s history. He also stated that he believed reunification to be ‘irreversible’.¹⁷⁹ His arguments are far from convincing, particularly since he was aware this was ‘a crucial moment’ in the movement’s history.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, if we compare the balance of forces in 1961 with those at the time of his first term as secretary in 1947, which coincided with the heyday of Cerrada’s influence, the power of the FAI had diminished considerably. Furthermore, Peirats would have enjoyed the solid backing of congress and the grassroots in the event of any such confrontation. At fifty-three years of age, it is quite likely that Peirats was jaded with exile politics and that he probably felt it was a position for a younger man. Yet at the same time, he would have known there was a dearth of capable activists to take the helm. We may argue that his public rejection of the armed struggle policy approved two years earlier at Vierzon weighed on his mind – a policy that was shored up at Limoges, with the creation of Defensa Interior, a new body that was to mastermind guerrilla actions inside Spain.¹⁸¹ Interestingly, however, there is evidence that, away from the secretariat and positions of influence, Peirats was (privately, at least) more indulgent towards the advocates of guerrilla warfare, having close relationships with some of their number.¹⁸²

By refusing to become secretary in 1961, Peirats effectively allowed the enemies of reunification to gain ground. From the outset, the ultras among the orthodox faction, many of whom were well organised inside the FAI, proved incapable of forgiving the ‘heresy’ of the possibilists, and their rebellion against reunification was ingeniously spearheaded by the Montseny–Esgleas clan.¹⁸³ Most of the ultras couched their opposition to reunification in terms of their self-perception as the essence of the sacrosanct principles of the movement, what

¹⁷⁷ Ángel Carballeira, *Apuntes sobre De mi paso por la vida: Memorias de José Peirats Valls; Comentarios acerca del prólogo de Enric Ucelay-Da Cal*, n.p., 2010, p. 86.

¹⁷⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 16–7; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 233.

¹⁷⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 29.

¹⁸⁰ Writing of the division, he noted, ‘If we prove incapable of transcending it, the few possibilities of historical continuity that we have will disappear’ (letter to Diego Camacho, 11 December 1961).

¹⁸¹ Octavio Alberola, ‘El DI: La última tentativa libertaria de lucha armada contra el régimen de Franco’, in Various Authors, *La oposición libertaria al régimen de Franco*, Madrid, 1993, pp. 343–87, and Juan Alcalde, *Los servicios secretos en España: La represión contra el movimiento libertario español (1936–1995)*, (e-book), Part 2, Chapter 2, Madrid, 2008, n.p. http://pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/eurotheo/e_books/jjalcalde/servicios_secretos/.

¹⁸² Marcelino Boticario, Félix Gurucharri, and Octavio Alberola are examples. According to Gurucharri, ‘Peirats was a kind of spiritual father and main advisor’ of Boticario, the secretary of the ‘Defence Commission’ (*Comisión de Defensa*), ‘and it does not seem that [Peirats] made any attempt to curb or rein in Boticario’ (letter from Félix Gurucharri to the author, 17 December 2010). According to Gracia Ventura, Boticario was one of his closest friends in exile (interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009).

¹⁸³ Herrerrín López, *La CNT*, p. 224; letter to Marcelino García 8 May 1962.

Octavio Alberola and Ariane Gransac dubbed ‘the old spectre of anarchist sectarianism’.¹⁸⁴ We also need to consider, how, as Eduardo Romanos has explained, the internecine conflict ‘served as an escape valve for rancour accumulated during the civil war and in earlier periods’.¹⁸⁵ Certainly, this became magnified during the long years of exile. Meanwhile, in the specific cases of Montseny and Esgleas, we can point to personal motivations, in particular when we recall that those activists who returned in 1961 were precisely those whose role in the disappearance of the CNT-MLE funds during World War II had been the most questioned.

The lingering tensions and rivalries between the two factions were manifest at the poorly-attended October 1963 congress when Esgleas, ‘the greatest enemy of unity’¹⁸⁶ in Peirats’s eyes, was elected secretary with the support of the FAI.¹⁸⁷ For the next ten years, besides a two-year absence in 1967–9, Esgleas was the ever-present MLE-CNT secretary, a position he occupied for more than half of the thirty-year period from 1945–75. As he and the bureaucrats around him grew old, they clung to their positions as their only viable source of income, constituting a semi-permanent elite. As Peirats put it, ‘They went on forever in these positions, year after year, constituting a type of ruling class.’¹⁸⁸

According to Herrerín López, Esgleas cemented his power by changing the voting system and other ‘forms of conduct alien to anarchist principles’, including press censorship.¹⁸⁹ Whereas before each local federation of the CNT had received congress votes in proportion to its total affiliation, they now possessed a single vote, regardless of membership. This meant that the Toulouse Local Federation, which represented 60 per cent of all activists in the region, could now be outvoted by tiny federations, some with just two or three members. Esgleas further cemented his control over the movement and democratic decision-making in congresses through the creation of ‘fictitious’ local federations.¹⁹⁰ A perfect example of these anomalies was Esgleas’s own local federation in Seysses, a tiny village nineteen kilometres from Toulouse. Since he lived with Montseny in Toulouse, they effectively ran the Seysses Local Federation like absentee landlords.¹⁹¹

Through these institutional changes and sleight of hand, Esgleas preserved his authority and his sectarian line, generating considerable disquiet among the grassroots, particularly the big local federations in Paris and Toulouse, where activists felt disenfranchised under the new voting procedures. At the same time, the young radicals were frustrated because rue Belfort had given nothing more than lip service to the anti-Francoist armed struggle.¹⁹² Internal tensions rose when Esgleas postponed the 1964 congress – a move that was perceived by his critics as a ploy to buy time as he plotted an all-out offensive against dissident voices.¹⁹³ Backed unconditionally by Montseny (who, we might recall, had cheered on two previous major splits in the movement), it

¹⁸⁴ Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, p. 39.

¹⁸⁵ Eduardo Romanos, ‘Emotions, Moral Batteries and High-Risk Activism: Understanding the Emotional Practices of the Spanish Anarchists under Franco’s Dictatorship’, *Contemporary European History*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2014, p. 557.

¹⁸⁶ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 6.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–8.

¹⁸⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 86.

¹⁸⁹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 251 & 253–54.

¹⁹⁰ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 188.

¹⁹¹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, pp. 194–5 & 251–3; Amat, *L’anarcosindicalisme*, p. 45. Peirats referred to ‘the phantasmagorical federation of Seysses, formed by [Esgleas] and his partner [Montseny]’ (MI T. 7, L. XIV, 8).

¹⁹² Herrerín López, *La CNT*, pp. 239–44.

¹⁹³ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 20; Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, p. 154.

was just a matter of time before a new schism ensued. Peirats confided to a friend his ‘fear of a catastrophe’.¹⁹⁴

This came at the August 1965 Montpellier Congress, with what Herrerin López describes as ‘the most important rupture the movement had endured during the entire period of exile, from which the Confederation never recovered’.¹⁹⁵ Before and during the congress, Esgleas came under severe criticism from various quarters. The radical youth accused him of cowardice for reneging on the armed struggle policy approved in 1959 and of starving Defensa Interior of funds.¹⁹⁶ Peirats had been very reluctant to attend but did so at the behest of comrades from the Toulouse Local Federation, who wanted him to deliver a report. He described the atmosphere at the start as ‘charged with electricity’.¹⁹⁷ This was not calmed by the tendency of the chair to curb debate by alleging dissidents were infringing the norms of ‘militant responsibility’.¹⁹⁸ Another dissident judged the congress to be ‘very violent’.¹⁹⁹ Some delegates were overwhelmed by the intemperate exchanges and the censure of debate. According to Peirats, Acracio Bartolomé, a veteran Asturian anarchist, had tears in his eyes as he warned the congress that ‘the day that tendencies disappear, the CNT will disappear with them.’²⁰⁰ His words went unheeded. When Peirats came to speak, which was not easy as he was suffering from influenza, he was met with barracking and personal insults; he later likened his adversaries to ‘a pack of jackals demanding scraps of meat’.²⁰¹ The intimidation he faced was so overwhelming that one delegation denounced ‘the attempted aggression against Peirats’.²⁰² Jolted by the attitude of his erstwhile comrades, Peirats even burst into tears.²⁰³ The vitriol of the *esgleístas* was so venomous that one of them dared shout to him: ‘Let’s see if you die! We’ll prepare an obituary and a bouquet of flowers for you!’²⁰⁴ At one stage, fights broke out inside the venue.²⁰⁵

With no possibility of an open discussion, the dissident local federations organised a collective walk out. Those who left were a mixture of young radicals; veterans like Cipriano Mera and Aurelio Fernández, both former comrades of Durruti, who had gravitated towards a more moderate stance; and others, like Peirats, who were disgusted at the demise of internal democracy inside the MLE-CNT.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁴ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 18 February 1964.

¹⁹⁵ Herrerin López, *La CNT*, p. 247; see also Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 250–60. For Peirats’s version, see José Peirats, ‘Informe del delegado de Venezuela de las tareas del congreso de la CNT de España en exilio a que pudo asistir’ (10–16 August 1965), in CNT, *Elementos para la comprensión correcta de 40 años de exilio confederal y libertario*, Paris, 1978, pp. 135–55.

¹⁹⁶ *El Luchador*, April 1973; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 19.

¹⁹⁷ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 20. Another dissident delegate referred to ‘the passionate climate created by the esgleístas’ at the congress (Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, p. 166). See also Salvador Gurucharri and Tomás Ibáñez, *Insurgencia libertaria: Las Juventudes Libertarias en la lucha contra el franquismo*, Barcelona, 2010, p. 178.

¹⁹⁸ *Esfuerzo*, May 1967; *El Luchador*, May 1971; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 19 & 23.

¹⁹⁹ E-mail from Octavio Alberola to the author, 22 August 2008.

²⁰⁰ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 24.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁰² Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 253.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 259. As he put it, he was moved ‘so deeply that, for the first time in my life, I sobbed uncontrollably, while some laughed and poked fun at me’ (MI T. 7, L. XIV, 24).

²⁰⁴ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 253; letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 20 October 1965.

²⁰⁵ Peirats, ‘Informe’, in *Elementos*, pp. 146–7.

²⁰⁶ Letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010.

Borrowing from the discourse of the 1945 split, the esgleístas presented the rupture as a clearing out of collaborationist elements which, they alleged, were in contact with Francoists.²⁰⁷ This misrepresentation was partially based on a meeting that took place between a minority of the dissidents and Francisco Royano, a Madrid CNT delegate and supporter of *cincopuntismo*, an anti-fascist alliance with dissident trade unionists from within the dictatorship based around a five-point programme.²⁰⁸ What the leadership concealed, however, was that Esgleas had also met with Royano. Moreover, the esgleístas ignored the fact that the majority of the dissidents, like the MLE-CNT, had no truck with *cincopuntismo*.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, this ‘heresy’ of *cincopuntismo* provided suitable cover for Esgleas’s campaign to discredit the dissidents and for Peirats to be accused of ‘treason’.²¹⁰

According to Gracia Ventura, who probably knew Peirats’s character best, he distinguished between ‘those who could be influenced’ and ‘those who influenced others’ – while he could excuse the former, he was implacable with the latter and could never forgive their betrayal and deceit.²¹¹ With Montseny and Esgleas entrenched in the CNT bureaucracy and one month after the Montpellier Congress, Peirats decided to leave the CNT after forty-three years of activism ‘while the existing circumstances continue.’²¹² In a letter to the secretariat, he accused Esgleas and his cronies of breaking ‘every norm of the organisation, while trampling on and selling out anarchist ethics’.²¹³

He spent several weeks assessing his activist life, but ‘the conclusion could not be more depressing’: ‘I had exhausted my energies, fought battles, made friends but also enemies’ in an effort to unite a movement that was more divided than ever.²¹⁴ Weeks later, writing to a friend, he summed up his despair: ‘I am tired of banging my head against a wall... The CNT in exile has become a madhouse of senile idiots and incurable lunatics... an organisation of the living dead... All it does is to generate masochism.’²¹⁵ He also looked to identify the reasons for his ‘fall’, which he attributed to ‘my rigidity, my independence [*no casarme con nadie*], my tendency to attack head-on’, which was very much his *modus operandi*. Although, he also recognised that his moves against Cerrada and what he called ‘FAI freemasonry’ (which was never far from Montseny and Esgleas) had, over time, earned him dangerous enemies.²¹⁶

It was manifest to the dissidents that the two principal activities of the MLE-CNT – propaganda and direct action in Spain – were now totally subordinate to the leaders’ obsession with preserving their positions and the name of the organisation. Two young radical critics of rue Belfort observed that 1965 confirmed ‘the bureaucratic-authoritarian degeneration of the CNT

²⁰⁷ Fortea, *Tiempo de historia*, pp. 155–8.

²⁰⁸ See Herrerin López, *La CNT*, pp. 266–86; for Peirats’s account, MI T. 7, L. XIV, 25–6. For *cincopuntismo*, see Carlos Ramos, ‘El cincopuntismo en la CNT, 1965–1966’, in Alicia Alted, Abdón Mateos, and Javier Tusell (eds.), *La oposición al régimen de Franco*, vol. 1, Madrid, 1990, pp. 137–55; and Ángel Herrerin López, ‘La CNT y el Sindicato Vertical: La quimera de la libertad sindical con Franco’, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie V: Historia Contemporánea*, no. 13, 2000, pp. 125–68.

²⁰⁹ Gurucharri and Ibáñez, *Insurgencia libertaria*, p. 181.

²¹⁰ Letter from Antonia Fontanillas to the author, 6 January 2011; letter to José del Amo, 3 April 1967.

²¹¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²¹² MI T. 7, L. XIV, 30 & 33.

²¹³ Cited in MI T. 7, L. XIV, 35.

²¹⁴ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 28.

²¹⁵ Letter to Francisco Botey, 7 September 1965.

²¹⁶ Letter to José Agustín, 26 October 1969.

elites'.²¹⁷ In fact, as we will see, it was just the beginning. While the esgleísta leadership had started expelling individual dissidents before the Montpellier Congress, this developed into what Peirats described as 'the eradication of the adversary, systematic intolerance, the prohibition of freethinking, the denial of the right to oppose'.²¹⁸ Before the end of the year, rue Belfort expelled Peirats from the CNT, despite the fact that he was no longer a member.²¹⁹ (When the Cugnaux Local Federation, to which Peirats had belonged, refused to implement the expulsion order, it then suffered the same fate.²²⁰) Gracia Ventura acknowledges that he found it extremely hard to come to terms with the circumstances of his departure from the CNT: 'He carried it in his heart'.²²¹ Thus began a new phase in his life, one in which he saw himself 'like an artificial satellite',²²² without a real presence in the organisation, and one which was characterised by a double exile: the banishment from his birthplace and the expulsion from the organisation that constituted his real motherland.

²¹⁷ Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, pp. 153–78.

²¹⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 39; Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, pp. 201–2.

²¹⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 36.

²²⁰ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, pp. 203.

²²¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²²² Letter to Joan Llarch, 9 May 1984.

Chapter Eight: The limits of the ‘New anarchism’ (1965–75)

All that remains is the past of those who fought for a noble cause and ended up in a ditch.

—Manuel Reyes Mate Rupérez

The year 1965 marked the end of Peirats’s organised activism inside the anarchist movement.¹ Thereafter, his pen became his principal form of expression. It is no coincidence that his letter-writing grew significantly after leaving the MLE-CNT; his few hundred correspondents constituting an alternative community. Meanwhile, he continued contributing to the anarchist press, right up until his death in 1989. Outside the MLE-CNT, Peirats developed his critique of *cenetismo*, an analysis that had slowly taken shape since his opposition to movement’s first experience of bureaucratisation during the civil war. As we will see, despite his distance from the organisation, he felt an enduring sentimental attachment to the CNT, to what it had been and what he believed it might become again, and this tie to the past, combined with his hopes for the future, constrained the scope of his critique.

This is somewhat surprising when we consider the denouement of the Montpellier Congress. Two years later, at the 1967 Marseille Plenum, the *esgleísta* leadership established the euphemistically named *Comisión de Asuntos Conflictivos* (CAC – Commission for Conflictive Issues). The CAC was integral to the leadership’s campaign to shore up its bureaucratic control over what remained of the movement. According to dissidents, it functioned as ‘a military tribunal’ on behalf of the Montseny–Esgleas clan. Indeed, over the next few years, around one-third of the total MLE-CNT activists (a few thousand) were purged. In some cases, entire local federations were expelled for resisting the CAC’s edicts, including the Paris Federation, with its almost 1,000 members, and the entire organisation in England.² In the image of its creators, the CAC operated in a very personalist manner. According to one of its victims, any ‘disagreement with the Esgleas family was considered an offence.’³ The leadership was ruthless in its pursuits of opponents. One loyalist, Joan Sans, despite having been friends with Esgleas for most of his life, faced ‘complete ostracism’ and was treated like ‘a dangerous dissident’ merely for suggesting a policy revision inside *rue Belfort*.⁴ Among the high-profile expulsions were Fernando Gómez Peláez, ex-editor of *Solidaridad Obrera*; José Borrás, former *Ruta* editor; Roque Santamaría, ex-secretary of the MLE-CNT; and Cipriano Mera, an anarchist militia leader from the civil war.⁵ Out of these, Mera’s case was the most scandalous. Former secretary of the Madrid Construction Union, Mera worked as

¹ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 20 October 1965.

² Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 203.

³ Cited in Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 292.

⁴ Joan Sans, *Comisario de guerra en el exilio*, Lleida, 2004, pp. 123 & 125; Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 151.

⁵ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 293.

a labourer right up until his death in 1975 and enjoyed huge popularity in CNT circles due to his long militant history. Typifying the capricious charges of the *esgleístas*, Mera was accused of embezzling thousands of francs from the organisation and expelled as a ‘thief’.⁶

Veteran Asturian anarchist Ramón Álvarez Palomo has offered an interesting interpretation of the persecution of *cenetistas* in exile.⁷ His *Historia negra de una crisis libertaria* is a passionate and unrelenting attack on the Montseny–Esgleas couple by one of their staunchest critics. For this reason, some might impugn its reliability. Nevertheless, Álvarez Palomo locates the conflicts in exile in terms of the long-standing tension in CNT circles between middle-class intellectuals and self-taught workers. Although Esgleas’s origins were working class, from the 1920s on, he participated in *La Revista Blanca*, owned by Montseny’s father, making him part of what Álvarez Palomo labels ‘a “dynasty” that lived off anarchism’.⁸ Beset by fragile health and prone to illness and depression, there is no evidence that Esgleas engaged in manual work after 1936, at the latest.⁹ In exile, when he was not occupying a paid position inside the MLE-CNT, his only attempt to earn a living independently of the movement came when he opened a second-hand bookshop, a commercial venture that did not have much success.¹⁰ As for *déclassé* intellectuals like Montseny, her ‘bourgeois packaging’, to quote Álvarez Palomo, ‘was at odds in our proletarian ranks’, which she never fully comprehended. He also suggests Montseny had a family vendetta against the typical working-class, anarcho-syndicalist militant, fuelled by the conflicts discussed above in Chapters 2 and 4.¹¹ To be sure, Montseny’s individualist anarchism never allowed her to embrace the revolutionary proletarian essence of the CNT or understand the working-class condition that shaped even the most anarchist *cenetistas* like Peirats. She felt the CNT’s struggle in defence of the material needs of the Spanish proletariat was too ‘Marxist’ an idea, and she emerged as a public figure within the movement before and after the 1932–3 split, when anarcho-syndicalist orthodoxy was being questioned. Her insurrectionary rhetoric before the war and in exile, combined with her powerful oratory, enabled her to play down her past as a minister and project an aura of ‘purity’ among the rank and file. Meanwhile, in exile, many of the tenets of the CNT had ceased to be about working-class politics, and this helped her maintain a leadership position within the exiled organisation.

8.1 The Grupos de Presencia Confederal and the New Left

The rallying point for many of those expelled from the MLE-CNT was the magazine *Presencia*, *Tribuna Libertaria*, which first appeared in November 1965, just three months after the Montpellier Congress. *Presencia* attracted young radicals and older dissidents alike. With its long, analytical articles, it became an important focal point for those concerned with re-evaluating anarchism ‘without fear of taboos or prefabricated concepts’. This was part of a bid to rescue

⁶ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 11 & 300.

⁷ See Ramón Álvarez, *Rebelión militar y revolución en Asturias: Un protagonista libertario*, Gijón, 1995, and Reyes Casado, ‘Ramón Álvarez Palomo: una biografía militante’, *Espacio, tiempo y forma. Serie V: Historia Contemporánea*, no. 15, 2002, pp. 407–20.

⁸ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 9.

⁹ Lozano, *Federica Montseny*, pp. 298–9; Amat, *L’anarcosindicalisme*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Amat, *L’anarcosindicalisme*, p. 41.

¹¹ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 30.

anarchism from the ‘intellectual autarchy’ and the ‘absolute dogmas’ of rue Belfort.¹² Edited by Luis Pasamar from the anarchist youth movement, the FIJL, *Presencia* reflected the so-called New Left currents, which sought to reinterpret Marxism and anarchism in the changed circumstances after World War II. In France, these trends were endorsed by a younger generation of anarchists, such as Defensa Interior activist Octavio Alberola and, in particular, Edgar-Emilio Rodríguez Zurbarán, a former *Ruta* editor, who embraced autonomism, with its promise to combine the best aspects of anarchism and Marxism.¹³ While the older exiles remained largely trapped in a world view framed by the civil war perfidy of Spanish Stalinists, Rodríguez Zurbarán published ‘La “herejía” del materialismo histórico’. Premised on the view that anarchism was ‘a synthesis of theories and contributions that demand, above all, an open and critical attitude’, he criticised ‘the anti-Marxist dogmatism’ of the older generation of libertarians as ‘an anachronism, proof of naïvety and ideological rigidity’. Therefore, he counselled that ‘anarchism, by definition an anti-dogmatic idea, should reject plain and simple all fanaticism, accepting the positive contributions of sociology, independently of all sectarian positions.’¹⁴

The tenor of *Presencia* reflected the desire of its founders to be a forum for discussion for *all* those committed to revolution. This was a pressing task, for ‘anarchism seemed to have become a dead language, fossilised since the early 1940s almost up to the end of the 1960s.’¹⁵ Contributions exhibited an open approach to issues of theory and organisation, and there was discussion of the strategic role of violence in social struggles, as well as a critical reading of revolutionary history, including, obviously, the 1936 revolution. Yet the gulf between the mummified ideas of the esgleístas and *Presencia* was most evident with the latter’s deep sensitivity towards the evolving political situation in Spain.¹⁶ This was most glaring with the emergence of the Comisiones Obreras (CC. OO. – Workers’ Commissions), a new clandestine union which, after their emergence in the late 1950s, became the new pulse of the Spanish working class, spearheading a rising wave of mass industrial conflict during the final decades of Franco’s regime.¹⁷

Wary of all it did not control, rue Belfort was hostile to the CC. OO., ignoring how in their infancy these decentralised, clandestine structures, rooted in assemblies of workers, had much in common with CNT traditions.¹⁸ While the CC. OO. reflected the birth of a new workers’ movement, labour protest culture clearly retained facets of the earlier direct action methodology favoured by cenetismo. As Torres Ryan has noted, the CC. OO. could have been ‘an ideal field for anarchist intervention, had anarchism been capable of updating itself.’¹⁹ At a time when rue Belfort conceded that ‘there is no Organisation inside Spain, beyond disconnected groups’,²⁰

¹² ‘Propósitos’, *Presencia*, November–December 1965.

¹³ See Margaret Torres, ‘La evolución de una nueva política: Los Grupos Obreros Autónomos en los últimos años del franquismo’, in Alicia Alted, Abdón Mateos, and Javier Tusell (eds.), *La oposición al régimen de Franco*, vol. 1, Madrid, 1990, pp. 157–65, and Espai en Blanc (ed.), *Luchas autónomas en los años setenta*, Madrid, 2008.

¹⁴ Edgar-Emilio Rodríguez, ‘La “herejía” del materialismo histórico’, *Presencia*, January–February 1966.

¹⁵ Tomás Ibáñez, *Anarquismo en movimiento: Anarquismo, neoanarquismo y postanarquismo*, Barcelona, 2014, p. 19.

¹⁶ *Presencia*, April–May 1967.

¹⁷ David Ruiz (ed.), *Historia de Comisiones Obreras (1958–1988)*, Madrid, 1993

¹⁸ One activist defined the CC. OO. as ‘an autonomous form of worker organisation’ (Jean-Marc Rouillan, *De Memoria (I). Los comienzos: Otoño de 1970 en Toulouse*, Barcelona, 2007, p. 181).

¹⁹ Torres Ryan, ‘El exilio libertario’, p. 171. Proof of this was the fact that the autonomous groups became ‘very strong’ inside the CC. OO. during 1969–75 (Pablo Carmona, *Transiciones: De la Asamblea Obrera al proceso de Pacto Social (CNT: 1976–1981)*, Madrid, 2004, p. 19).

²⁰ CNT, *Memorias del Congreso Intercontinental*, p. 14.

the inward-looking esgleístas revealed a ‘suicidal self-absorption’ that left them stoically hostile to any potential rival of the shattered fragments of the Spanish CNT.²¹ For Peirats, this was an ‘anti-Francoist operetta’.²² To a degree, the passivity of the Toulouse leaders reflected Montseny’s lifelong mystical essentialism about the Spanish, ‘a virgin and healthy people, adventurous, idealist, dreamy, undomesticated, dynamic and revolutionary’,²³ for whom anarchism is ‘the authentic Spanish national tradition’.²⁴ In contrast, *Presencia* encouraged activists to work inside the CC. OO. to expose the new working class to libertarian ideas, build on their militant struggles, and counteract communist influence.²⁵ In the case of L’Hospitalet, the CC. OO. there were founded by an anarcho-sindicalist, but this was one of the few exceptions; most anarchists remained aloof from the movement, effectively leaving space for the communists to hold sway.²⁶ This error seriously limited the CNT’s chances of regaining its hegemonic position within the workplace during late Francoism and beyond.

Peirats was deeply involved in *Presencia*. He was ‘seduced by the idea’ of ‘a broadly tolerant tribune’ motivated by ‘the goal of embracing the new winds circulating inside Spain’.²⁷ This was a circular process. Distributed clandestinely inside Spain, *Presencia* established a crucial audience among the developing New Left, ranging from social catholic-inspired clandestine unions across to autonomous groups.²⁸ According to one member of the *Presencia* team, Peirats provided vital Spanish contacts. What is striking, perhaps, is their diversity, which included, for instance, ‘the new crop of trade unionists emerging from Christian organisations’, such as the Hermandad Obrera de Acción Católica, who were active early on in the CC. OO.²⁹

Peirats contributed to most numbers of *Presencia*, and these writings reveal the evolution of his anarchism. For several years, he had criticised the ‘stupefying bureaucratic doctrinarism’ of rue Belfort and the inadequacy of their ‘antiquated methods in the face of a “new look” Francoist apparatus’.³⁰ For Peirats, ‘The touchstone for the evolution of militant anarchism is its contact with reality.’³¹ As he wrote to a friend in 1964, ‘Either we adapt... or we’ll be swept aside by the avalanche [of change] and disappear.’³² There is much evidence that he was very aware of developments among the New Left. He supported the French collective Noir et Rouge’s project of revising anarchism in the light of lessons from Yugoslavia’s post-war self-management experiment and critical analyses by dissident Marxist thinkers like Daniel Guérin and he even con-

²¹ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 30 July 1967.

²² Letter to Fernando Gómez, 8 May 1966.

²³ Federica Montseny, ‘Una lección de hechos’, *La Revista Blanca*, 15 February 1933, p. 557.

²⁴ Federica Montseny, *Crónicas de CNT*, Choisy-le-Roi, 1974, p. 145. She clung to this view, writing in 1976 that ‘the Spanish are anarchist due to their temperament, character, ferocity and love of liberty’ (Federica Montseny, *Qué es el anarquismo*, Barcelona, 1976, p. 9).

²⁵ See, for instance, *Presencia*, November–December 1966 and June–July 1967.

²⁶ ‘Conversación en la Federación local de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, Cerdanyola (Barcelona)’, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, no. 58–60, July–December 1977, p. 112.

²⁷ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 28 May 1967.

²⁸ Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, p. 196.

²⁹ David Antona, *Mi colaboración en la revista libertaria “Presencia”*. http://www.cedall.org/Documentacio/Castella/cedall203140300_David%20Antona.htm, accessed 8 October 2014, 9.14 a.m.; for the Hermandad Obrera de Acción Católica, see José Babiano, ‘Los católicos en el origen de Comisiones Obreras’, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie V: Historia Contemporánea*, no. 8, 1995, pp. 277–93.

³⁰ MI T.7, L.XIV, 51; letter to Marcelino García, 8 May 1962.

³¹ José Peirats, ‘Revisionismo, contrarrevisionismo y el sentido de la proporción’, *Comunidad Ibérica*, November–December, 1963.

³² Letter to Marcos Alcón, 16 June 1964.

tributed articles to their journal.³³ *Noir et Rouge* was created by the Groupes anarchistes d'action révolutionnaire (GAAR – Revolutionary Action Anarchist Groups) in 1956, although it was, in effect, an independent publication from 1961. Closely identified with former surrealist Christian Lagant, Daniel Cohn-Bendit had also contributed to the journal, which played an important role in the build up to the May 1968 rebellion. Peirats also admired the work of Murray Bookchin, a North American anarchist who had emerged from the communist movement.³⁴ Meanwhile, the Situationist International, who inveighed against the 'immobilism' of the MLE-CNT,³⁵ sided with Peirats against his detractors.³⁶ In France, these currents gave rise to the New anarchism, which bore many hallmarks of the Situationists and Guy Debord's critique of the 'spectacle' governed by the rising power of (pro-)capitalist media.³⁷

The first issue of *Presencia* included a piece by Peirats, 'Primero, restablecer los puentes', in which he addressed the new working-class culture in Spain. Shaped by the rising standard of living, now 'the class war is more nuanced' and direct action struggles less frequent. In the light of this, Peirats argued, it was necessary for activists to cultivate a 'creative spirit': 'Principles must be dynamic, not static... If possible, we need to readapt ourselves and face reality fully.'³⁸ Likewise, in his article 'El porvenir del Movimiento Libertario: Nuestras grandes opciones', Peirats rejected the stagnant tradition of 'the prophets' and 'absolute truth' in favour of 'the self-critical act'.³⁹

Yet his collaborations in *Presencia* also highlight the ambiguities and limits of his thinking. In 'Personalidad del anarquismo', for instance, while he announced that the future of the anarchist movement depended 'on its capacity for evolution' and its ability to transcend 'the old exclusive revolutionary thesis', he made no reference whatsoever to the CC. OO. Moreover, he went on to reaffirm his traditional anti-communism, comparing Marxism and anarchism to 'ships on the high seas': 'They come close, they cross and they separate' and 'they leave from different ports en route to distinct ports.'⁴⁰ Similarly, in a letter to a friend, while he praised Guérin's efforts to renovate anarchism and 'capture the best of Marxism', he noted 'how depressing it is that anarchism has to be defended by non-orthodox anarchists.'⁴¹ Although he respected the 'importance' of Guérin's thought, he never fully embraced it,⁴² in the same way that he rejected Erich

³³ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 4 September 1968, and letter from Frank Mintz to the author, 13 January 2010; see his articles 'A-t-on renoncé à la révolution?', *Noir et Rouge*, December 1966, and 'Mises au point sur des notes', *Noir et Rouge*, June 1967. See also Robert Graham (ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume Two: The Emergence of the New Anarchism*, Montreal, 2009, pp. 170–82.

³⁴ José Peirats, 'La nueva oleada marxista', *Frente Libertario*, December 1971.

³⁵ Internacional Situacionista, 'Precisiones sobre la traición de la CNT', *Textos completos en castellano de la revista Internationale Situationniste (1958–1969)*, vol. 3: *La práctica de la teoría*, Madrid, 2001, p. 526.

³⁶ Miquel Amorós, *Los Situacionistas y la Anarquía*, Bilbao, 2008, p. 49.

³⁷ For 'New anarchism', see Freddy y Alicia (Freddy Gómez and Alicia Mur), 'Apuntes sobre el anarquismo histórico y el neoanarquismo en España', in 'El movimiento libertario Español', supplement, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, pp. 141–5, and Margaret Torres Ryan, 'El anarquismo viejo y nuevo: La reconstrucción de la CNT, 1976–1979', in Various Authors, *La oposición libertaria al régimen de Franco*, pp. 653–74; for the Situationists, see Amorós, *Los Situacionistas*, and Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, CA, 2006. The best, although not flawless, study of Debord is Len Bracken, *Guy Debord: Revolutionary*, Venice, CA, 1997.

³⁸ José Peirats, 'Primero, reestablecer los puentes', *Presencia*, November–December 1965.

³⁹ José Peirats, 'El porvenir del Movimiento Libertario: Nuestras grandes opciones', *Presencia*, March–April 1966.

⁴⁰ José Peirats, 'Personalidad del anarquismo', *Presencia*, May–June 1966.

⁴¹ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 19 February 1967.

⁴² Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 24 April 1967.

Fromm's vision of a more existentialist Marx,⁴³ along with humanist, anti-Soviet communism.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, he embraced the staunchly anti-Marxist *Manifiesto Libertario* produced by the Grupo Anselmo Lorenzo (written by Juan Gómez Casas),⁴⁵ arguing that 'nothing as important has been written' since the 1930s. He was especially impressed at how the *Manifiesto* was destined to 'clarify our ideas and positions in the face of the Marxistoid intoxication inside Spain'.⁴⁶

The tension between the new radicals and the older activists within *Presencia* was incontrovertible.⁴⁷ Peirats acknowledged in private the existence of two camps: 'Neither seems entirely satisfactory. One is perhaps too heavily plated in the old way; the other is excessively accommodating to the intellectualist theses of neo-Marxism.'⁴⁸ Although they were friends, Peirats had heated arguments with Rodríguez Zurbarán, a defender of autonomy, over Marxism, which Peirats continued to perceive through the prism of the civil war as the creed of 'those who violate all agreements and innocence'. Despite these reservations, Peirats enthusiastically backed the creation of the Grupos de Presencia Confederal, a new association that developed from the networks established around the publication: 'There is a point of convergence that unites everyone: revolutionary euphoria.'⁴⁹

The Grupos de Presencia Confederal announced their existence in September 1967 with the manifesto *A la opinión confederal y libertaria*.⁵⁰ With between 300–400 affiliates, their structure mirrored that of the CNT (secretary general, treasurer, etc.) and members paid dues according to their financial circumstances. From the outset, and despite their sustained criticism of rue Belfort, the Grupos de Presencia Confederal were keen to stress their role as a pressure group, rather than a direct rival to the MLE-CNT.⁵¹ The following year, at their first national congress in Narbonne, they decided to organise meetings throughout France as well as an annual convention. They also agreed to set up a monthly newspaper called *Frente Libertario*, inspired by a Madrid civil war paper of the same name, to expand their influence inside Spain.⁵²

The first number of *Frente Libertario* (number zero) appeared in July 1970 under the editorship of Fernando Gómez Peláez, a corrector at Éditions Larousse in Paris and editor of *Solidaridad Obrera* during 1946–54.⁵³ Regarded by Peirats as 'perhaps the best journalist in exile',⁵⁴ Gómez Peláez had a history of working for the unity of the movement⁵⁵ and of dissidence towards the Toulouse leadership going back to at least 1957, when he established the monthly paper *Atalaya*

⁴³ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 25 March 1967.

⁴⁴ Letter to José Agustín, 27 July 1968.

⁴⁵ Grupo Anselmo Lorenzo, *Manifiesto libertario: Problemas presentes y futuros del Sindicalismo Revolucionario en España*, Paris, 1969.

⁴⁶ Letter to José and Odette Ester, 10 October 1969.

⁴⁷ Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, p. 196.

⁴⁸ Letter to Miguel Pérez-Turrado, 18 June 1967.

⁴⁹ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 28 May 1967.

⁵⁰ In May 1970 their name was changed to Grupos de Presencia Confederal y Libertaria.

⁵¹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, pp. 299–300. Herrerín López claims – incorrectly, in my view – that the Grupos were no different from the orthodox leadership and that they shared their 'ideological immobilism... This was so much the case that it makes one think that the only thing that separated them was the personal conflicts between the two' (Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 300).

⁵² Letters from Antonia Fontanillas, 8 December 2010, and Sara Berenguer, 27 January 2010, to the author.

⁵³ See Eduardo Romanos, 'Fernando Gómez Peláez: Crítica y disidencia en el movimiento libertario en el exilio', *Ayer*, no. 67, 2007, pp. 235–54.

⁵⁴ Letter to Pedro Ara, 31 May 1970.

⁵⁵ Pachón, *Recuerdos*, p. 176.

in response to the decline of internal democracy within the MLE-CNT. Similar in spirit to *Presencia*, *Atalaya* stood for the unification of the movement and ‘free discussion’ to ‘revive militant life’ and shake off ‘accommodating attitudes’.⁵⁶ In 1961, he founded the Centro de Estudios Sociales y Económicos in Paris as a new space for debate for those who found this was no longer possible inside the MLE-CNT – an initiative that produced an important regrouping of dissidents.

Like *Presencia*, the main focus of *Frente Libertario* was Spanish struggles and events, in stark contrast to MLE-CNT publications, which emphasised issues related to those in exile. Indeed, most of *Frente Libertario* was written by Interior activists. Over 50 per cent of the print run was smuggled into Spain, where it was distributed by autonomous groups and anarchists and was well received.⁵⁷ It loyally reflected the post-May 1968 formula of the New Left, combining ‘the work of the most experienced militants with that of young workers and students’. Such was its popularity that its print run rose from an initial 2,000 to 5,000 copies, exceeding that of the MLE-CNT press at the time.⁵⁸

At the outset, *Frente Libertario* hoped its pages would help put an end to the vegetative and aimless life of our classic organisations, in particular the CNT, who has fallen victim to tokenism or functional routines that bind her from fulfilling its high emancipatory mission which – sixty years so far – our predecessors have set themselves as their lodestar and guide.⁵⁹

This was vital to counter ‘a complex of impotency and a kind of conformism in our ranks which, if it continues, will lead us to disappear from the social stage.’⁶⁰ As Gómez Peláez explained in a letter to Peirats before the paper’s launch, ‘The intention is to gain stature and give new credibility to anarchist thought.’⁶¹ But this was to be achieved in a non-sectarian way by establishing objectives

regardless of colours, to reduce conflict between militants, promote common action, spread worker and anti-fascist struggles without falling prey to sectarian speculation, and extol at all times the goals of anti-authoritarianism in Hispanic anarcho-syndicalism... without watered-down recipes nor strict or definitive regulations.⁶²

While this approach contrasted positively with rue Belfort’s inquisitorial sectarianism, in practice at least, it limited the critique of the MLE-CNT. As was confirmed by a *Frente Libertario* activist, ‘In order not to damage the interests of the *real* CNT, at no stage, whether from the paper or on the part of [los Grupos de] *Presencia* Confederal, was any kind of polemic initiated with the *official* CNT.’⁶³ In short, the dissidents retained the hope that a revived CNT could be the key force in a future social transformation.⁶⁴

Drawn by the ‘laudible desire to infect the Spanish working class, to “politicise it”’,⁶⁵ Peirats was an assiduous contributor to *Frente Libertario*, attending all the group’s meetings in Narbonne

⁵⁶ *Atalaya*, December 1957.

⁵⁷ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971.

⁵⁸ Fernando Gómez Peláez, ‘De “Soli” a “Frente Libertario”’: Publicaciones libertarias en el exilio’, in ‘El movimiento libertario español: Pasado, presente y futuro’, supplement, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, pp. 132–3.

⁵⁹ Editorial. ‘Al salir a la palestra: nuestro objeto’, *Frente Libertario*, July 1970.

⁶⁰ José Peirats, ‘El tapujo y la moral’, *Frente Libertario*, July 1970.

⁶¹ Letter from Fernando Gómez to Peirats, 21 May 1970.

⁶² Gómez Peláez, ‘De “Soli” a “Frente Libertario”’, p. 132.

⁶³ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 204.

⁶⁴ Letter to Fernando Gómez, 26 April 1971.

⁶⁵ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971.

and publishing a major article in every number during 1970–7.⁶⁶ His essays, which were given prominence on the final page, ranged from long book reviews to assessments of new trends in anarchism and international politics. He also wrote historical pieces, including portraits of cenetistas from pre-civil war Barcelona, which constituted the seed of his 1978 book, *Figuras del movimiento libertario español*.

These articles reveal the development of Peirats's critique of the CNT. He recognised how the movement created in exile after 1939 was a vulgarisation of that which had existed in Spain: 'Strictly speaking, this was not the CNT. A CNT without unions is inconceivable.'⁶⁷ He later concluded it would have been better simply to have established a Spanish anarchist movement in France, without a CNT, which perforce could never function as a class-struggle union and which, over time, had become a monstrous parody of its former self, 'a kind of donjon'.⁶⁸ Indeed, in a report to the Venezuelan branch of the CNT in the mid-1960s, Peirats lamented that 'a CNT without unions or the struggle against economic problems is nothing but a cult to a glorious past.'⁶⁹ While exiles had successfully sustained the historical memory 'of a workerist and ideological tradition with more than a century of existence', for Peirats, they were constrained by their mysticism ('because we have a faith'), their traditionalism ('because we are inspired constantly by the annals of our own history'), and their messianism ('because, strong in our convictions, we endeavour to have as many proselytes as possible').⁷⁰

His most incisive piece was 'En este que parece amanecer', in which he reiterated his concern that the movement had to look beyond 'our traditional principles' because, at least since the civil war, these had included bureaucracy, 'and this was preserved intact by the most fundamentalist factions.' From here, Peirats developed some of the themes of his 1938 pamphlet *Los intelectuales en la revolución*. While recognising that in the post-war world 'the great halls of the universities are today accessible to many of the children of the workers', he retained a proletarian disdain for middle-class intellectuals, since 'they do not seem to us the most appropriate individuals to spread "Spanish style" anarcho-syndicalism', the historic strength of which 'has been its permanent connection with the working class' and its hands-on capacity to 'uphold and defend the people's best interests'.⁷¹

8.2 The inexorable decline of the CNT in exile

Inevitably, the exiled CNT underwent a profound membership crisis. Although the figures below are incomplete and probably somewhat inflated, they are, nevertheless, indicative of its inexorable decline:⁷²

⁶⁶ E-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

⁶⁷ José Peirats, 'La bienhechora tentación del riesgo', *Frente Libertario*, September 1976.

⁶⁸ Letter to José Agustín, 1 June 1970.

⁶⁹ Peirats, 'Informe', in *Elementos*, p. 147.

⁷⁰ Peirats, 'La bienhechora...', *Frente Libertario*, September 1976.

⁷¹ Peirats, 'En este que parece amanecer', *Frente Libertario*, June 1976.

⁷² Herrrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 196. The 1960 figure is from José Peirats, *La práctica federalista como verdadera afirmación de principios*, Paris, 1964, p. 11.

1947	23,800 ^a
1948	21,100 ^b
1956	9,880 ^c
1958	9,080
1960	5,000
1961	7,135 ^d

^a Of these, around 18,000 activists paid union dues. At the October 1947 congress, the figure given was 18,774 (MLE-CNT, *Dictámenes y Resoluciones*, p. 5).

^b There were some 13,000 dues-paying members at this time.

^c Tellingly, that same year fewer than 6,000 activists voted on the decisive issue of the reunification of the CNT.

^d The partial increase reflects the reunification of the two wings of the CNT at the 1961 Limoges Congress.

In the absence of figures for later years, we might speculate that with the expulsions and resignations after 1965 and the deaths of older members, membership fell to below 5,000 by 1967. In no small part, this collapse reflected a profound generational crisis.⁷³ As one candid cenetista declared in 1960, ‘Today the youth do not understand us, they overlook us.’⁷⁴ Having lost its class-struggle vocation, the CNT had no chance of attracting an influx of radicalised working-class recruits, as had occurred at decisive junctures in Spain (1918–9, 1931–2, or 1936, for example). This dearth of new blood also enhanced bureaucratic tendencies in exile, since the leadership was unchecked by a large body of activists or radical youth that might have scrutinised its policies. Now, the MLE-CNT base consisted of a stagnant pool of ageing activists, ‘a movement of passive classes’, a fossilised museum piece imported into France from Spain.⁷⁵ On another level, the activist potential of female exiles often went untapped, as was the case prior to exile, when CNT centres were essentially masculine spaces and the partners of many cenetistas rarely attended; Montseny was the exception, though, which largely confirmed this rule.⁷⁶ Without new recruits, as Peirats savagely acknowledged in 1965, the MLE-CNT was ‘a walking corpse’⁷⁷, led by ‘a clan of psychos’ and ‘mental midgets’,⁷⁸ ‘95 per cent of them old fools with shrivelled-up ideas’.⁷⁹

The generational crisis was replicated in the FIJL, which, by 1955, had under 2,000 members throughout France.⁸⁰ Faced with the lack of a new generation of militants, some organisers appeared to suffer from ‘Peter Pan syndrome’. According to the son of an exile active in the youth movement, ‘The guidance offered in the Assemblies came from comrades with grey hair.’⁸¹ Another FIJL militant referred to ‘veterans who don’t want to grow old’. Despite the presence of ‘restless youth with a desire to act and promote the revolution’, the FIJL base was heterogeneous and included ‘enthusiasts of football and other such pastimes’.⁸² Meanwhile, attempts to attract

⁷³ One activist described this as ‘the social and generational mutation of exile’, in Samitier and García, *Siempre volviendo a empezar*, p. 146.

⁷⁴ CNT, *Memorias del Congreso Intercontinental*, p. 71.

⁷⁵ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 June 1963.

⁷⁶ Ángel Herrero López, ‘La sociabilidad de los anarcosindicalistas en España y el exilio tras la pérdida de la guerra civil’, *Historia del presente*, no. 2, 2003, pp. 182; interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

⁷⁷ Letter to José del Amo, 28 September 1965.

⁷⁸ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 20 October 1965.

⁷⁹ Letter to José del Amo, 4 July 1966.

⁸⁰ Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio*, p. 232.

⁸¹ Carballeira, *Apuntes*, p. 133.

⁸² Samitier and García, *Siempre volviendo a empezar*, p. 146.

young, male economic migrants largely failed; when they attended FIJL-organised dances, they were more concerned with meeting young Spanish women than with anarchist ideals. Equally, if economic migrants wanted a trade union to defend their interests, they were more likely to turn to a French organisation, but even then it was not necessarily the anarcho-syndicalist sister of the CNT who they turned to for support. Thus, it was essentially the children of the exiles, inspired by the rectitude and enduring utopia of their parents and their parents' friends, who gravitated towards the FIJL. Even then, not all of them joined, some of these youths opting for French libertarian organisations, with the additional promise of action that this presupposed but without having to cross the Pyrenees.⁸³ Underlining the decline of the FIJL, its frequent organised excursions to the countryside more or less ended in the 1960s.⁸⁴

The timing was far from coincidental. The 1960s economic boom stimulated an unprecedented rise in social mobility. While it was always going to be easier for the children of the exiles to integrate in the receiving society, especially those born in France, the economic climate of the 1960s hastened this process. Integration was further facilitated by the successful French state education system, which older exiles, always passionate about knowledge, often praised. The combined impact of the anarcho-syndicalist stress on learning and culture and the general desire of parents that their children enjoy a better life ensured the offspring of the exiles acquired a level of education and a social status unimaginable in Spain.⁸⁵ If we take as examples Maya and Grecia, the two daughters of a lifelong anarchist and close friend of Peirats, Germinal García, who were raised among his comrades on both sides of the Atlantic, the first became a doctor of medicine in Caracas, while the second, an architect in Paris.⁸⁶ Peirats seized on the significance of this process for the future of the anarchist movement:

We have not been able to reproduce in exile the broad surrounding context that we had created in Spain, a climate that germinated almost spontaneously levy after levy of militants. In short, we have been capable of turning our children into educated and respected young people, teachers and even engineers, but not militants. And a movement without reserves, without successors, which is incapable of reproducing itself, is condemned, either in the short- or the long-term, to decadence and death.⁸⁷

He was obsessed with 'the missing generation: the key generation, the bridging generation between yesterday, today and tomorrow, the generation required to carry and pass on the torch, the firmest guarantee of the libertarian tradition'.⁸⁸ Indeed, before leaving the CNT, the Cugnaux Local Federation, to which he belonged, consisted of seven comrades, 'the majority old invalids... the floating remnants of a shipwreck'.⁸⁹ The decrepitude of the base was reflected on a propagandistic level, with the movement press relying on 'rehashes or the looting' of earlier publications due to the absence of 'fresh blood, [and] new writers'.⁹⁰

As if further evidence of the decadence of the MLE-CNT were required, in 1967 Peirats, along with some other dissidents, was summoned to appear before the Comisión de Encuesta, Archivo

⁸³ Ibid., p. 146.

⁸⁴ Carballeira, *Apuntes*, p. 110.

⁸⁵ Samitier and García, *Siempre volviendo a empezar*, pp. 114 & 146; José Peirats, 'El humus nutricional', *Frente Libertario*, July 1974.

⁸⁶ Letter to Conrado Lizcano and Salomé Moltó, 23 July 1988.

⁸⁷ Peirats, 'El humus nutricional', *Frente Libertario*, July 1974.

⁸⁸ Peirats, *Los anarquistas*, p. 402.

⁸⁹ Letter to Marcos Alcón, 16 June 1964.

⁹⁰ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 21 January 1963.

y Propaganda (CEAP – Enquiry, Archives, and Propaganda Commission), a body created by Esgleas in 1963 ‘to examine the assets and activities’ of the MLE-CNT during World War II.⁹¹ Since Esgleas had sidestepped this issue for the previous eighteen years, many suspected the real mission of the CEAP was to destroy any incriminating material.⁹² Peirats possessed documentation relating to an earlier investigation into this issue, which he retained after he left the MLE-CNT in 1965.⁹³ Esgleas doubtless feared this material might be damaging for him in some way.⁹⁴ It is also possible that Peirats had mischievously inflated the importance of these documents in a bid to unsettle Esgleas. Certainly, had he possessed anything compromising whatsoever, he would have made it known to the organisation earlier, rather than wait, as he did, to return it to the reconstituted CNT in Spain in 1978.⁹⁵

When the CEAP rejected Peirats’s request for a public hearing, he, along with Roque Santamaría and Marcelino Boticario, two former FIJL militants, appeared ‘before the court’ in rue Belfort on 18 February 1968.⁹⁶ When they arrived, the esgleístas, who were apparently shocked to see them, asked them to face the CEAP individually. The ‘defendants’ refused and, after some argument, they were allowed to enter as a group, whereupon they were addressed ‘in the sternest possible language’ and accused of the ‘theft of sacred organisational materials’.⁹⁷ In reply, Peirats, who took the lead in the encounter, read a statement in which he denounced what he saw as a witch-hunt by the CEAP against dissidents. He also pointed out the contradiction that the minutes of the 1945 Paris Congress – where Esgleas and his partner came under intense criticism for their role during World War II – were missing from the archive and yet those responsible (in effect, Esgleas) had never been called to task.⁹⁸ He then refused to submit any material to a committee controlled by Esgleas, on the grounds that he was named in the documents and, furthermore, because Peirats knew of instances in which he had previously ‘disappeared’ pertinent documentation: ‘If there’s a thief, he’s in your house’, he quipped.⁹⁹ Finally, parodying Esgleas’s mantra that he would account for his actions during the war at the next full congress of the CNT in Spain, Peirats announced he would return the documents at the same time, ‘at the disposal of the first regular congress that is held there’.¹⁰⁰

The CEAP was unsympathetic and ruled, ominously, ‘That comrade Peirats return to the Organisation what rightly pertains to it or face the consequences.’¹⁰¹ According to Salvador Gurucharri, the threat was taken seriously and, not long afterwards, a group of Peirats loyalists ‘showed up at rue Belfort and informed Esgleas and those close to him that they desist with their policy of intimidation’ and that ‘should Peirats be troubled in any way, they would face consequences.’¹⁰² The threats ended, but the ‘Peirats affair’ was on the agenda at the summer 1969 Bordeaux Plenum, where he was tried in absentia. After being vilified by his former comrades, Peirats was expelled

⁹¹ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 247; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 292; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 33–4.

⁹² Letter to José Agustín, 12 January 1969.

⁹³ Letter to Germinal Esgleas, 16 October 1966 (Antonia Fontanillas Archive).

⁹⁴ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 304.

⁹⁵ Letter to Ángel Aranzaez, 25 October 1979.

⁹⁶ Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 300–9; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 48 & 54.

⁹⁷ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 49; letter to Diego Abad de Santillán, 12 March 1973.

⁹⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 51–2.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Herrerín López, *La CNT*, p. 294; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 55.

¹⁰¹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 54; Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 307.

¹⁰² Letter from Salvador Gurucharri to the author, 16 January 2011.

from an organisation to which he had belonged for over forty years ‘for immorality’. To add further insult, the ‘sentence’ was circulated in the international anarchist press.¹⁰³ Peirats was deeply hurt, and he never forgave the ‘soulless’ (*desalmados*) and ‘counterfeiters of initials and stamps’¹⁰⁴ in the ‘Toulouse Kremlin’¹⁰⁵ for establishing a ‘penal code’¹⁰⁶ that saw him ‘burned in effigy’, as had occurred during the Spanish Inquisition.¹⁰⁷ Yet despite his indignation, he retained tremendous sentimental attachment to the CNT, confiding to a friend two years later, ‘I still love it.’¹⁰⁸

Shortly after being ‘tried’ by the *esgleístas*, Peirats faced an even greater threat from the French authorities. On 5 April 1968, he received an order to attend the central police station in Toulouse. When he arrived, he was informed of his imminent expulsion from France: at sixty years of age, he was deemed a danger to ‘public order’ and ‘national security’.¹⁰⁹ He hurriedly launched an appeal which, in the short term, bought him some time. He was issued with a new identity card showing his status as ‘monitored’ (*surveillé*) and ordered to reside in Le Mans, in northern France, nearly 700 kilometres from Toulouse, while his appeal was heard. In the meantime, Peirats mobilised friends to help him resist extradition. Among the many offers of moral and financial support he received, his former comrades in Venezuela offered to pay his expenses to relocate to Caracas.¹¹⁰ As was the case after his arrest in 1951, a range of people from across the political spectrum rallied to his defence, including Rodolfo Llopis Ferrándiz (Spanish socialist party leader and former prime minister of the republican government in exile), as well as the influential French labour union Force Ouvrière, while a group of Uruguayan intellectuals sent a protest letter to the government in Paris.¹¹¹ He was also supported by Josep Ester, a former FIJL activist, French Resistance veteran, and survivor of the Mauthausen Nazi concentration camp. After the war, Ester was secretary of the Federación Española de Deportados e Internados Políticos (Spanish Federation of Political Deportees and Prisoners) and he proved to be an influential ally, mobilising much support on Peirats’s behalf and securing him a lawyer.

Through his former French Resistance contacts, Ester made representations to a member of the Interior Ministry, through whom he discovered the reasons for the extradition order. The French authorities believed Peirats to be ‘the public face’ and ‘mastermind’ behind the Grupo Primero de Mayo, which had emerged from the anarchist youth movement in the mid-1960s and which announced itself on 30 April 1966 with the kidnapping of Monsignor Marcos Ussía, the ecclesiastical attaché of the Spanish embassy in the Vatican.¹¹² Disowned by rue Belfort, the group effectively disappeared with the events of May 1968, only to reappear in 1973.¹¹³ Given Peirats’s long-standing commitment to the anarchist youth in Toulouse, inevitably he was well acquainted with several members of the Grupo Primero de Mayo, especially its real ‘mastermind’, Alberola. It seems that the police had discovered an address book belonging to Alberola, and Peirats’s address

¹⁰³ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to José del Amo, 7 February 1989.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to Fernando Gómez, 6 September 1966.

¹⁰⁶ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to José Fernández, 31 May 1970.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 15 December 1971.

¹⁰⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 56–7.

¹¹⁰ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 5 May 1968.

¹¹¹ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 7 July 1968.

¹¹² Letter to José Agustín, 9 November 1970; Dreyfus-Armand, *El exilio*, pp. 300–1.

¹¹³ Alberola and Gransac, *El anarquismo español*, pp. 179–206.

figured among its contents. This, it seems, was the total police ‘proof’.¹¹⁴ After much pressure from his friends and with the support of some members of the local police, who vouched for Peirats, the authorities allowed him to remain in Toulouse while investigations continued, also warning him about his future conduct.¹¹⁵

In the hope that it might make extradition more difficult, on 1 August 1968, José and Gracia married in the civil service in Toulouse – a ceremony attended only by the witnesses Aurelio Fernández, a comrade from Barcelona, and his compañera, Violeta.¹¹⁶ Since Peirats was forbidden to leave the city, there was no honeymoon; the two couples celebrating the union at a local restaurant. Ten months after the initial extradition order, Peirats was still waiting for the outcome of his appeal, fearful his refugee status would be revoked.¹¹⁷ He was wracked with insecurity about the future and ‘tired of being a foreigner’.¹¹⁸

The only respite from his tribulations came with the May 1968 insurrection, courtesy of ‘the great gesture of the youth who confronted another generation in decline’.¹¹⁹ He was overjoyed with ‘the May revolution’, the way the universities ‘became the modern *Commune*’, and how anarchism offered new solutions to the youth, evoking memories of 19 July in his mind.¹²⁰ He was also pleased to see members of the youth section of the Spanish Athenaeum, to whom he had dedicated much time, active on the streets of Toulouse.¹²¹ Just as he was seduced by the general strike, so was he appalled by the role of the French communists, ‘sleeping under the effect of the opium of Moscow’.¹²² He followed events very closely from his ‘maddening regime of isolation’, although, aware of his precarious status, ‘I couldn’t, as I desired, nose around in the university faculties to see what was happening... [since] any indiscretion would have been disastrous for me’.¹²³ Finally, a year after the extradition order was issued, and to his immense relief, the authorities dropped the case against him.¹²⁴ Peirats then compared his recent experiences with the respective ‘authorities’ of rue Belfort and the French state. Since the latter, unlike his erstwhile comrades, at least allowed him the right to appeal, he concluded:

The anarchist organisation had shamefully placed itself way below the standards of capitalist justice, ignominiously tarnishing the sublime ideal of anarchism.¹²⁵

8.3 A restless pen confronts the deep condescension towards the past

In the years that followed, writing was Peirats’s principal activity. Banished from the MLE-CNT, he resigned from the Spanish Athenaeum after eleven years of active participation. This

¹¹⁴ Letter to José del Amo, 14 May 1968; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 58.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 25 April 1968.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Francisco Botey, 3 August 1968.

¹¹⁷ Letters to Josep and Odette Ester, 23 February 1969 and 7 April 1974.

¹¹⁸ Letter to Mariano Puente, 2 May 1968.

¹¹⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 64.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹²¹ Óscar Borillo and Tomás Gómez, ‘Toulouse y el exilio libertario’, in Alted and Domergue (eds.), *El exilio republicano*, p. 145.

¹²² MI T. 7, L. XIV, 66.

¹²³ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 7 July 1968.

¹²⁴ Letter to Gene (Juanita) and Arthur Fried, 6 May 1969.

¹²⁵ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 79.

institution was badly affected by the Montpellier split. In what was a transparent act of vengeance against Peirats, who was one of its main public faces, rue Belfort suddenly demanded immediate repayment of a loan it had earlier provided. In order to repay the loan, the athenaeum was forced to move to smaller premises. There were also internal divisions, with rival groups refusing to speak to one another – a situation that jarred with its stated aim of bringing people together. Feeling his project fractured, Peirats walked away.¹²⁶

His last talk at the athenaeum came in May 1969, after a year in which he had been unable to accept any public engagements due to the threat of extradition. After finishing his talk, he felt strangely tired and experienced chest pains. This marked the beginning of a cardiac condition.¹²⁷ Although he resisted what he referred to as ‘unity at the cemetery’ for another twenty years, his health now deteriorated sharply.¹²⁸

Since 1965, the leg pains that had bedevilled him throughout his life had reached new levels of intensity. Unable to stand for very long, he was worried about losing mobility in his leg altogether. Lacking the resources to pay for private healthcare, in 1966, Dr Amparo Poch arranged for him to have an operation, most likely a femoral head ostectomy (the ‘Girdlestone Procedure’), whereby the head and neck of the femur are removed to prevent bone rubbing on bone due to the total absence of cartilage. What he really required was a hip replacement – an intervention that was then in its infancy. The procedure, nevertheless, ended his leg pain, even if he still had limited mobility.¹²⁹ But a more serious health problem now afflicted Peirats, for his heart had weakened steadily since the late 1960s. In 1970, following a train and boat trip to give a talk in London, he required fifteen days of bed rest. While he had neither drunk nor smoked for some time, he was instructed to have regular blood tests and to reduce his intake of salt and fat, what he termed a ‘fascist nutritional order’.¹³⁰

Following his 1966 operation, the authorities deemed him unable to work. He received welfare benefits until he turned sixty in 1968, when he qualified for a retirement pension, which was roughly the monthly wage of an unskilled worker.¹³¹ Although he and Gracia’s main expense was the rent of their one-bedroom flat, they still needed to take in work from local tailors to make ends meet. After food, their remaining money was spent on books, classical music recordings, and correspondence, which gave Peirats great pleasure: ‘We don’t go to the cinema, we detest television. As we lead somewhat isolated lives, letter-writing stimulates our sociability.’¹³²

A major life change occurred in February 1971, when Peirats and Gracia moved to Montady, outside Béziers, some 200 kilometres from Toulouse. While, after twenty-four years, he regretted leaving behind his many friends in the city, he was happy to distance himself from a ‘rather ugly environment’¹³³ caused by the divisions inside the MLE-CNT, which had left old friends not talking to one another. They now lived in Villa Canaima, the house of close friend Germinal García, who worked and lived in Caracas most of the year, only visiting Montady in summer, and who was keen both to help out a friend and have somebody of trust taking care of the house.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 41, 43, & 44.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁹ Sara Berenguer, *Entre el sol y la tormenta*, Barcelona, 1988, pp. 261–3; interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹³⁰ Letter to Josep and Odette Ester, 20 December 1971.

¹³¹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 70.

¹³² Letter to María and Roberto de Alfonso, 10 April 1970.

¹³³ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 8 February 1971.

Their new abode, which had four bedrooms and comfortably accommodated Germinal when he visited with his partner and two daughters in summer, was a huge improvement for José and Gracia, who lived very happily in Montady into the 1980s, before returning to Spain.¹³⁴ Some twenty kilometres from the Mediterranean coast, Villa Canaima was located among vineyards in the countryside, and the orange blossom would have reminded the couple of their native Castelló province. Peirats used a moped to shop and run errands in Béziers, also cultivating potatoes, peas, and beans in a sizeable allotment, while Gracia continued working as a seamstress.¹³⁵ They were part of a small colony of Spanish anarcho-syndicalists, which included Sara Berenguer and Jesús Guillén, veteran activists and former members of the French Resistance, who had been expelled from the MLE-CNT in the mid-1960s.¹³⁶ Berenguer and Guillén were frequent visitors to Villa Canaima and they became very close to Peirats and Gracia, who joined Berenguer in launching the trilingual bulletin *Mujeres Libres del Exilio*, picking up the baton of the anarcho-feminist organisation from the 1930s.¹³⁷ Also among their many house guests was Émilienne Morin, Durruti's partner, who stayed with them most years for a few weeks at a time, as did Peirats's niece, Armonía, from Barcelona.¹³⁸ In summer, they organised parties with 'magnificent paellas and Spanish songs and with never-ending and unforgettable discussions'.¹³⁹

A great advantage for Peirats was that his and Germinal's books constituted 'a well-stocked library', and he spent hours reading and writing, which provided an outlet for his double exile from Spain and from the MLE-CNT.¹⁴⁰ As well as contributing to the anarchist press, both in France and internationally, he worked tirelessly on studies of revolutionary history. Of the latter, the work he regarded as most important was the pamphlet *Examen crítico-constructivo del movimiento libertario español*, which he described fondly as his 'little red book'.¹⁴¹ A critical analysis of the CNT's past crises, *Examen crítico-constructivo* was written to 'assist the birth' of a rejuvenated movement in Spain. (p. 9) Writing with great prescience, as later events confirmed, Peirats argued that, without an 'urgent surgical operation, our days on the social stage in Spain may be numbered.' It was necessary to recognise that 'yesterday's world into which we were born has slowly changed.' (p. 11) To demonstrate this, he provided an outline history of Spanish anarchism from its origins up to the 1936 revolution. Clearly thinking of the insurrectionalism of the 1930s and about the demise of the revolution, he concluded by recognising that the principal failure of the anarchists came down to their capacity of 'provoking major events and [being] incapable of finishing the job, [which] equates to working for the devil. The devil is dictatorship.' (p. 23) Unlike those anarchists who tended to blame exclusively (and conveniently) the communists for the failure of the revolution, Peirats was very self-critical, focussing instead on 'a rigidly exclusive and excluding standard' fostered by the FAI. Regrettably, he argued, this standard endured in exile, 'when we happily affirmed that we alone sufficed in the fight against Franco. It

¹³⁴ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 74 & 92-3; Carlos Díaz, *Victor García, "el Marco Polo del anarquismo"*, Madrid, 1993, p. 114; e-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

¹³⁵ Letters to María and Roberto de Alfonso, 3 March 1971, and Marcelino Boticario, 25 March 1971.

¹³⁶ Para Berenguer, see her memoirs, *Entre el sol y la tormenta*.

¹³⁷ Vega, *Pioneras*, p. 305.

¹³⁸ Letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010; letter to Julio Patán, 26 January 1973; letter from María Pilar Ibáñez to José Peirats and Gracia Ventura, 19 May 1973.

¹³⁹ E-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

¹⁴⁰ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 94; letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010.

¹⁴¹ Peirats, *Examen crítico-constructivo*.

was exclusive to the degree that we underestimated the importance of other groups, which we regarded as an obstacle to our own activities.’ (p. 31)

This analysis formed the basis for a consideration of the changes inside Spain and the challenges they presented for a new CNT. Peirats identified how ‘a change in the mentality of the oligarchies would have huge implications for the intellectual workings of the proletariat.’ (p. 37) Displaying considerable foresight, he warned how, with the transition from subsistence to consumer capitalism, the future ‘bête noire’ of revolutionary syndicalism would be ‘social security, unemployment benefit, worker participation, bureaucratized and state-guaranteed collective bargaining and arbitration’. These ‘immediate realities’ have ‘deeply subverted the terms in which classic anarchism situated the problem of the revolution.’ (p. 52) To avoid a ‘tinned’ anarchism, ‘without vitamins’ (p. 68), tactical revisions and ‘convincing and appropriate innovations’ (p. 47) were required, as it was no longer enough to go announcing that ‘all reformism is an opium den.’ (p. 40) Accordingly, ‘anarchism must demonstrate its imagination. A swift and thorough review is needed, otherwise it might be left behind, discarded and without influence in Spain and in the new world that is coming.’ (p. 62)

It was axiomatic, therefore, that a rejuvenated CNT, ‘realistic and productive’, augment its traditional class-struggle trade unionism with new initiatives, constructing cooperatives and collectives within capitalist society. (pp. 76–8, 82–3, & 90–3) He elaborated his vision of a great union with broad social functions:

We envisage a CNT working across several fronts: confronting the rapacity of the employers and the state, addressing labour salaried production, and responding to the needs of the people. That is to say, in the consumption sphere, struggling for the reduction of prices in consumer goods; in respect of real estate property, for the reduction of rent; and present in public campaigns of morality, against fraud and sanitary deficiencies. The range is wide. It must also promote its own solidarity economy, both of the city and the countryside, and of unions, cooperatives, and rural collectives alike. (p. 102)

Aware that anarcho-traditionalists trapped in the abstractions of yesteryear and those who clung to their ‘Boy’s Own’ insurrectionist fantasies would label him a reformist, he concluded by stating that ‘adapting does not imply capitulation and throwing in the towel, but opting for a new pace, showing you are mentally sharp.’ (p. 104)

His other main writings during this time were of a more explicitly historical nature and built on his classic *La CNT en la revolución española*, which had almost immediately sold out following its publication a decade earlier.¹⁴² In response to demand for the book, which had made its way into bibliographies of the most important works on the civil war, and given the refusal of rue Belfort to reprint it, Peirats published a 400-page synopsis in Italian in 1962, a book that appeared in Spanish two years later as *Los anarquistas en la guerra civil española (1869–1939)*.¹⁴³ Tellingly, Peirats’s critique of the wartime leadership of the anarchist movement in *Los anarquistas* was tougher than in *La CNT*.

¹⁴² Each volume had a print run of 3,000 copies. Curiously, a further 1,000 copies of Volume 1 were printed in Buenos Aires (letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 19 February 1967).

¹⁴³ *Breve storia del sindacalismo libertario spagnolo*, Genoa, 1962. The Spanish edition, first published in Buenos Aires in 1964, has been reprinted twice: Madrid–Gijón, 1976, and Buenos Aires, 2006. Translations in English (*Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, Detroit–Toronto, 1976; 2nd edition London, 1990) and French (*Les Anarchistes espagnols: Révolution de 1936 et luttes de toujours*, Toulouse, 1989; 2nd edition, *Une Révolution pour horizon: Les Anarcho-Syndicalistes espagnols, 1869–1939*, Paris, 2013) have also appeared.

Since the abridged edition lacked the documentary detail of the original book, Peirats continued to receive requests from university libraries for copies of *La CNT*.¹⁴⁴ Finally, in September 1968, he was contacted by José Martínez, founder of the celebrated exile publishing house Ruedo ibérico, who wanted to reprint the book.¹⁴⁵ Peirats, therefore, advised Martínez to contact rue Belfort, since he did not claim ownership of a publication that had been funded by the movement. When the esgleístas refused to negotiate with Ruedo ibérico, Peirats lost patience and told Martínez to organise a new edition, thereby prompting a new conflict with the rue Belfort leadership, who ‘threatened the publisher with the worst of reprisals’ if he proceeded with the project.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Peirats was branded a ‘double thief’ and ‘con man’.¹⁴⁷

Although it was essentially the same text, Peirats wrote a new introduction for the second edition of *La CNT*, correcting only factual errors and making minor modifications in the light of new source materials and documents. Due to ongoing health problems, he corrected most of the proofs from bed, and the book finally appeared in 1971, almost twenty years after its first publication.¹⁴⁸ Peirats was delighted with the reprint: each volume contained valuable graphic material, and this was the definitive version of his magnum opus, which was later translated into English, French, and Italian.¹⁴⁹

La CNT was *engagé* history, written as a vehicle to remember and relate the achievements of the revolution and to sustain the collective identity of the anarchist movement by asserting its rightful place in history – something more urgent still in the 1970s, following its decline during the long winter of exile. The second edition reached a new generation of readers at a crucial moment in the crisis of Francoism and was read avidly by younger activists. Following the death of the dictator, the book went on sale in Spain, where, in a climate of hope for imminent socio-economic change, there was great public interest in the revolutionary history of the country during the 1930s, a history that had been suppressed and falsified for the previous forty years. Unsurprisingly, *La CNT* quickly sold out, whereupon Ruedo ibérico reprinted the book.¹⁵⁰

In the sixty years since its first publication, *La CNT* has become an obligatory point of reference for all students of the civil war and essential reading for anyone interested in the development of internal politics of the anti-Francoist camp. With the exception of the ideological henchmen of the dictatorship and their revisionist fellow travellers today, who seek to revive many of the foundational myths of Francoism,¹⁵¹ most historians, regardless of their political baggage, have accorded importance to the study.¹⁵² For anarchist philosopher and historian Heleno Saña,

¹⁴⁴ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 68.

¹⁴⁵ Albert Forment, *José Martínez y la epopeya de Ruedo ibérico*, Barcelona, 2000.

¹⁴⁶ E-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

¹⁴⁷ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 69, 95, & 98–9; letters to Josep and Odette Ester, 5 February 1973, and Federico and Pura Arcos, 13 April 1987.

¹⁴⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 97–8.

¹⁴⁹ *La CNT nella Rivoluzione Spagnola*, Milano, 1976–8 (4 vols.), and *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, Hastings, 2001–6 (3 vols.). A French edition was published by Noir et Rouge as *La CNT dans la révolution espagnole*, vol. 1, Paris, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Volumes 1–3 were reprinted in Madrid, 1978.

¹⁵¹ For the crypto-Francoists, see Chris Ealham, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes: “Objectivity” and revisionism in Spanish history’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 48, no.1, 2013, pp. 191–202.

¹⁵² For a Francoist critique, see Ricardo de la Cierva, *Cien libros básicos sobre la guerra de España*, Madrid, 1966. He saw Peirats’s work as ‘essential’ because ‘it reveals an anarchist militant in his element’ (p. 193), yet he recognised ‘the paradox of an anarchist intellectual’ (p. 190), since anarchism ‘is a criminal nonsense... a mental deformity’ (p. 191).

Peirats was ‘the most qualified, authoritative and outstanding historian of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement’, ‘a natural writer, endowed with extraordinary sensitivity and literary power’. Another great attribute, in his view, was the author’s honesty: ‘He does not attempt to trick anyone’, and he does not write ‘to show off personally nor to channel concealed resentments, as, regrettably, other anarchist militants have done’.¹⁵³ Antoni Jutglar, a prominent intellectual from the period and professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, described Peirats as ‘one of the figures that I most respect’.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, according to Julio Aróstegui, professor of Modern History at the Complutense University of Madrid, for him and other young historians in the 1980s, ‘Peirats’s work was an essential reference.’¹⁵⁵ The liberal US historian Gabriel Jackson recognised *La CNT* as ‘intelligent, and humane’,¹⁵⁶ while Paul Preston, professor of History at the London School of Economics and, for many, the doyen of Hispanism, described it as ‘indispensable’.¹⁵⁷ Academic historians have also praised Peirats for his use of source materials. According to Julián Casanova, professor at Zaragoza University, *La CNT* is ‘the best documented work the pen of a militant has ever left’, and it has served as ‘the basis for numerous subsequent works’.¹⁵⁸ Typifying his modesty, Peirats wrote to one historian that the book’s real ‘importance’ was its documentary base.¹⁵⁹ With similar humbleness, he commented to a friend that the main merit of *La CNT* was ‘to conserve in book format a series of documents that otherwise would have been lost’.¹⁶⁰ Thus, Casanova has recognised how the book has been plundered heavily by subsequent ‘professional’ historians and by those who, perhaps due to snobbery, prefer not to cite an ‘amateur’ autodidact historian.¹⁶¹

Despite his health problems, Peirats freely and patiently shared his vast reservoirs of historic knowledge and documentation. While he had assisted historians of Spanish anarchism in their search for source materials since the 1950s, in Montadý, he received a succession of guests, particularly from Barcelona, which was just two and a half hours away by car.¹⁶² He was visited especially by younger scholars, both from Spain, such as Antonio Elorza, later professor of Politics at the Complutense University of Madrid, and from farther afield, such as Edward Malefakis, from New York’s Columbia University, and sociologist Carlos Rama, from Uruguay.¹⁶³ Anarchist writers also visited, including Francisco Carrasquer, professor of Literature at Leiden University.¹⁶⁴ But Peirats welcomed all into his home, including the priest, theologian, and historian Casimir Martí, who went on to be director of the National Archive of Catalonia.¹⁶⁵ Less welcome,

¹⁵³ Heleno Saña, ‘La obra histórica de José Peirats’, *Sindicalismo*, March 1977, pp. 77 & 79–80.

¹⁵⁴ Antoni Jutglar, ‘José Peirats y el drama de Pi i Margall’, *Triunfo*, 2 March 1974, p. 40.

¹⁵⁵ E-mail from Julio Aróstegui to the author, 21 January 2010.

¹⁵⁶ Gabriel Jackson, ‘The Living Experience of the Spanish Civil War Collectives’, *Newsletter of the Society for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*, 1970, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 4–11.

¹⁵⁷ Paul Preston, ‘The Historiography of the Spanish Civil War’, in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, London, 1981, p. 190.

¹⁵⁸ Casanova, ‘Guerra y revolución’, *Historia Social*, no. 1, 1988, p. 64.

¹⁵⁹ Letter to Albert Balcells, 28 October 1965.

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Mariano Puente, 19 January 1973.

¹⁶¹ Julián Casanova, ‘Anarchism, Revolution and Civil War in Spain: The Challenge of Social History’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 37, no. 3, December 1992, p. 399.

¹⁶² Interview by the author with Frank Mintz, 30 October 2008.

¹⁶³ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 82; letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010; letter to Ignacio de Llorens, 3 April 1989.

¹⁶⁴ Letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 19 January 2010.

¹⁶⁵ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 85–6.

though, was a secret policeman posing as a faculty member from the Autonomous University of Barcelona.¹⁶⁶

Aware of the importance of historical memory, Peirats regularly alerted researchers to the vital source of information that was disappearing, the memories of those who, like himself, had lived through the experience of revolution: 'Hurry, because the gold mine is running dry... Don't look for pearl oysters in our waters, but rather snorkel to the depths' where rank-and-filers are 'taking the secrets of the collectives to the grave with them'.¹⁶⁷ This very struggle against oblivion resulted in the publication of Peirats's *Figuras del movimiento libertario*, which consists of a series of short biographies of anarcho-syndicalist activists, from the 'giants', like Anselmo Lorenzo and Salvador Seguí, through mid-level activists such as Pedro Massoni and 'Amador' Franco, across to unknown militants, such as 'old Mari'.

Peirats also started work on a biography of legendary Russian anarchist Emma Goldman.¹⁶⁸ Having continued to learn English since his initial studies in Panama in 1943, he was able to read Anglophone biographies of Goldman and recognised that much was still to be said about her time in Spain. His friend Federico Arcos in North America provided him with copies of Goldman's voluminous correspondence from the University of Michigan Library's Joseph A. Labadie Collection, and he also acquired photocopies from the IISG in Amsterdam.¹⁶⁹ In the winter of 1972, his unrelenting search for source materials even led him to the Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme in Lausanne.¹⁷⁰

Peirats never entertained illusions of living from writing. He even wrote to friends, in all modesty, that there must be 'special qualities lacking in me'.¹⁷¹ In keeping with his rectitude, and scotching rue Belfort's insidious claims that he had 'stolen' *La CNT*, both the advance (300,000 francs, over a hundred times his monthly pension of 259 francs) and the royalties (around 100,000 francs) he received from Ruedo ibérico and from the foreign translations of the book were sent to Ester in Paris for safekeeping. He later handed them over to the reconstituted CNT in post-Franco Spain.¹⁷² Meanwhile, the royalties he received from his *Examen crítico-constructivo* were given to the Toulouse Local Federation, since they had helped him with legal costs incurred during his fight against extradition in 1968–9.¹⁷³

A new luxury for Peirats was the telephone, which enabled him to call his mother every week. He had already given up all hope of ever seeing her alive again. She died without realizing their much longed-for reunion in March 1970, at ninety years of age. His only relief was that he and his nephew could arrange a civil burial. His own health was also suffering, to the extent that he endured a series of small heart-attacks and was bedridden for long periods of time, unable to

¹⁶⁶ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁶⁷ José Peirats, 'San Pedro de Tarbes', *Frente Libertario*, May 1972.

¹⁶⁸ José Peirats, *Emma Goldman, anarquista de ambos mundos*, Madrid, 1978; 2nd edition as *Emma Goldman, una mujer en la tormenta del siglo*, Barcelona, 1983.

¹⁶⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 82 & 100.

¹⁷⁰ Letter from Sara Berenguer to the author, 27 January 2010.

¹⁷¹ Letter to Gene (Juanita) Fried, 7 November 1965.

¹⁷² Letters to Josep and Odette Ester, 15 September 1970, 26 September 1973, 5 February and 20 October 1976; Fernando Gómez, 16 September 1978; Julio Patán, 11 March 1977; and the National Committee of the CNT in Spain, 25 October 1976; letter from Pedro Barrio, CNT treasurer, to José Peirats, n.d. (1977?); Álvarez, *Historia negra*, p. 312; interview by the author with Marianne Brull, 6 November 2005.

¹⁷³ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 77.

receive any visitors. When he was better, he would paint, using watercolours and oil – a pastime he took up in his late sixties.¹⁷⁴

After being hospitalised in March 1974, and confronted with what in anarcho-syndicalist argot was known as ‘the Grim Reaper’ (*la parca*), he decided to write his memoirs.¹⁷⁵ Since the overwhelming majority of individuals do not undertake this self-reflexive documentary exercise, it is legitimate to question Peirats’s motives. He himself addressed the issue of vanity, observing that ‘false modesty aside, I believed that my journey through life was worthy of print and many close friends felt the same.’¹⁷⁶ The crucial encouragement of his friends was confirmed to me by Gracia Ventura.¹⁷⁷ As was the case with all of his endeavours, his inner circle supported him greatly. Moreover, as is hopefully clear to the reader of these lines, Peirats’s life was a full one, with many highs and lows, as he struggled for his ideals in the vortex of the twentieth century. It is less likely that he chose to write his memoirs out of self-love. He remained a fairly modest individual and, when receiving direct praise, he was apt to respond with the comment ‘Eulogies behind my back, criticisms to my face’.¹⁷⁸ In a moment of self-reflection, he confessed that his ‘great ambition was to write for the theatre’ but ‘instead of novels, I’ve produced some more or less decent paintings.’¹⁷⁹ Yet, as he explained in a private letter, ‘My greatest pride is to be a brickmaker, but among so much intellectualism, it wouldn’t have been bad to say that you can be a little intellectual coming from an honourable life of manual labour.’¹⁸⁰

Arguably, his most important motivation was his love of writing and storytelling. As he wrote to an old friend, ‘With ambitions, one writes memoirs to remember, which, according to the poet, is to live again.’¹⁸¹ But this was not an entirely new project for Peirats. Since his dispatches from the Americas to *Ruta* in the 1940s, through his collaborations to *Cénit* (one of the many bilingual journals published in exile) and his ‘Crónicas’ in *CNT* in the 1950s,¹⁸² right up to his writings in *Frente Libertario* in the 1970s, he had flirted with autobiography. He truly appreciated the importance of the genre as a vehicle to share experiences and ideas, as well as to preserve the collective memory of the exiles. Thus, a more all-encompassing autobiographical project gave him the opportunity to put his personal triumphs, defeats, and regrets in context, in the hope that the lessons contained therein might prove instructive to others. This doubtless struck him as all the more pressing, as those comrades of his generation slowly died around him.

He was also deeply aware of the long anarchist autobiographical tradition that extended back to Kropotkin, a century earlier,¹⁸³ and which had been sustained by Spanish anarchists from the time of Anselmo Lorenzo.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, with the crisis of Francoism, the renewed interest in Spain for the repressed political options of the past saw a veritable boom in anarchist memoirs in

¹⁷⁴ Letter to José del Amo, 2 November 1971.

¹⁷⁵ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009; MI T. 7, L. XIV, 83–4, 87, & 99; letter to Mariano Aguayo, 1 March 1975.

¹⁷⁶ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 99.

¹⁷⁷ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/flor-viento-publica-paso-vida-memorias-jose-peirats>, accessed 22 February 2010, 10.15 a.m.

¹⁷⁹ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 100.

¹⁸⁰ Letter to Benito Milla, 20 June 1964.

¹⁸¹ Letter to Mariano Puente, 19 January 1973.

¹⁸² José Peirats, ‘Zaragoza a la vista’; *Cénit*, January 1951; and ‘A los pies de mercurio’, *CNT*, 21 April 1957.

¹⁸³ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, London, 1899 (the most recent reprint is New York, 2014).

¹⁸⁴ Anselmo Lorenzo, *El proletariado militante*, Barcelona, 1901 (vol. 1) and 1923 (vol. 2); the most recent edition is Madrid, 2013.

the 1970s.¹⁸⁵ As was mentioned in the Introduction to this work, some of these memoirs, such as Toryho's *No éramos tan malos*, were far from reliable, and a quest for the truth surely motivated Peirats.

When he began his memoirs, he believed his life was near its end. His initial plan was to finish his story in 1965, the year of his departure from the MLE-CNT and the end of his militant life, since, as he later recognised, 'I have spent years somewhat removed from the madding crowd and for me, all that is not action lacks importance.'¹⁸⁶ However, as he rushed to complete the manuscript, writing sometimes twelve hours a day, the project expanded into the 1970s and came to consist of some 1,500 folios.¹⁸⁷ Completing the manuscript in February 1975, he never expected it to be published, 'due to its huge size' and 'through never having been a stylist, let alone a literary one'. Nevertheless, he was satisfied with his work and the opportunity it gave him to put his life in perspective.¹⁸⁸ That year he experienced an even greater pleasure with the death of Franco, which raised the real possibility of a return to his 'longed-for Barcelona' and, most of all, the conclusion of his long wait to see a reborn CNT in its birthplace over the Pyrenees.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Eduardo Pons Prades, *Un soldado de la República: Itinerario ibérico de un joven revolucionario*, Madrid, 1974; José García, *Teníamos que perder*, Madrid, 1974; Alberto Pérez, *Treinta meses de colectivismo en Cataluña*, Barcelona, 1974; Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra: Una contribución a la historia de la tragedia española*, Buenos Aires, 1940.

¹⁸⁶ MI T. 7, L. XIII, 100.

¹⁸⁷ Letter to Jesús Guillén, 12 March 1974; MI T. 7, L. XIII, 47 & 99–100.

¹⁸⁸ MI T. 7, L. XIV, 100.

¹⁸⁹ Letter to Juan Panisello, 5 June 1966.

Chapter Nine: The return of the ‘democratic danger’ (1975–89): The rise, splintering, and decline of the CNT after Franco

People have reached democracy in distinct ways. Some have arrived fresh, clean, in magnificent life boats. Others, however, have arrived defeated, exhausted, like shipwreck survivors, and some washed up on the shore, already drowned.

—Andrés Trapiello

9.1 Hope

By the time Franco died in November 1975, Peirats had spent almost half his life nursing the ‘golden dream of returning to Hispanic places’.¹ As was the case with all exiles, Spain was ‘a permanent reference point, a kind of obsession’.² Early in 1975, with the dictator and his regime in their death throes, Peirats described his ‘genuine yearning to return and walk on that land... [M]y main aspiration is to be able to cross the frontier for good to settle in Barcelona and, above all, visit La Vall d’Uixó, the town where I was born.’³ He also wanted to travel: ‘To be able to know properly the land where I was born is one of the hopes of the twilight of my life.’⁴ Yet these dreams were tempered by trepidation, the realisation that ‘we are already foreigners in our country... Everything has changed, including the mindset. The return, then, would be a vacuum.’⁵

Spain also represented a collective dream. The workers’ movement was a major protagonist in the crisis of the dictatorship. With the death of Franco, regime transition was inevitable. However, the violent rupture with Francoism that most of the Left had advocated for decades did not materialise. Instead, as is widely known, the transition from dictatorship to democracy followed the formula of an ‘agreed reform’ (*reforma pactada*) between the moderate anti-Francoist opposition and ‘progressives’ from within the dictatorship. This ‘holy democratic alliance’, which spanned lapsed fascists on the Right across to the PCE on the Left, sought to broker an orderly and timorous process of change from above.⁶ It was also a highly circumscribed change. Based on the pact of oblivion, the political elites that controlled the transition from ‘smoke-filled rooms’⁷ projected a form of democratic anaesthesia that denied justice or reparation to the victims of the dictatorship and allowed for the survival of Francoism’s repressive economic structure.

¹ Letter to José and Odette Ester, 5 April 1976.

² Alted and Domergue, *La cultura del exilio*, p. 26.

³ Letter to María de Alfonso, 12 May 1975, and interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

⁴ Letter to José del Amo, 21 December 1970.

⁵ Letter to Mariano Puente, 19 January 1973.

⁶ Genaro Campos, ‘La Santa Alianza Democrática’, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, no. 58–60, July–December 1977, pp. 4–31. Among the many general studies, see Paul Preston, *The Triumph of Democracy in Spain*, London, 1986.

⁷ Preston, *Triumph of Democracy*, p. x.

Yet, the pilots of change from above faced a genuine challenge from the streets, where, during the death agony of the regime, a deep desire for justice had built up. This resulted in a veritable explosion of social and labour struggles during 1975–7. Some of these conflicts were very radical, especially the wildcat strikes that developed outside existing union structures, whether because the unions were still illegal or because the workers preferred the freedom of movement offered by these autonomous struggles.⁸ The conundrum for the architects of the transition was how to seize the initiative from the streets and establish new democratic structures to placate the myriad hopes for change that had accumulated under the dictatorship.⁹ The gradual legalisation of leftist political and syndical organisations ahead of the June 1977 general elections, the first since 1936, was a step in this direction. But it was also combined with brutal repression. In March 1976, in Vitoria-Gasteiz, police killed 5 workers and wounded another 150 in an apparent bid to send a message to strikers and wrest control of the streets.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the ascendant curve of labour protest showed little sign of abating. In 1976, the number of working hours lost through strike actions was ten times higher than the previous year, while, in 1977, the total number of strikers rose significantly.¹¹

This combative labour climate inspired high hopes that a rejuvenated CNT would re-establish its former strength. In late February 1976, just weeks after Franco's death, Interior activists, including many *Frente Libertario* militants, gathered at the historic Sants Assembly in Barcelona, where they resolved to rebuild the CNT.¹² Peirats, who was in contact with some of these front-line activists, was gripped by the new possibilities. This was evident in his 'Carta abierta a los militantes libertarios', in which he expressed the view of many exiles that Spain was the 'centre of our concerns'.¹³ He expected a swift and emphatic revival of organised anarcho-syndicalism.¹⁴ Before the summer, he wrote in *Frente Libertario* that 'the resurrection of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain is no longer a chimera.' He was, nonetheless, realistic enough to recognise the 'many difficulties' occasioned by 'almost forty years of chronological rupture', in particular the 'tremendous exhaustion of human reserves' and the 'severe ideological devaluation'. Now, he added, it was time for a changing of the guard within the movement and for a new generation to take the helm: 'We are no longer the viceroys that we thought we were. If we want to help climb the hill, we need to step aside and play an unassuming secondary role.' However, in a clear reference to the Toulouse leadership, he warned that 'some will find it difficult to renounce the hegemony of exile.'¹⁵

He saw no role for the exiled leaders: 'The greatest source of annoyance for these people is the death of Franco... Not only have they been left without their reason d'être, but they now fear for their salaries and their positions. A flourishing CNT in Spain cannot justify the colossal

⁸ See Francisco Quintana (ed.), *Asalto a la Fábrica: Luchas autónomas y reestructuración capitalista, 1960–1990*, Barcelona, 2002; Colectivo de Estudios por la autonomía obrera, *Luchas autónomas en la transición democrática*, Madrid, 1977; *Historia Libertaria*, no. 3, February 1979, pp. 45–67; for an example of an autonomous struggle, see Asamblearios de Banca, 'Un testimonio: sobre la huelga de la banca', *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979, pp. 54–7.

⁹ Emmanuel Rodríguez, *Por qué fracasó la democracia en España: La Transición y el régimen del 78*, Madrid, 2015.

¹⁰ See Gasteiz (Joaquín Estefanía and Javier Sá), *Vitoria, de la huelga a la matanza*, Paris, 1976.

¹¹ Manuel Pérez Ledesma, *Estabilidad y conflicto social: España, de los iberos al 14-D*, Madrid, 1990, pp. 242–3; Mikel Aizpuru and Antonio Rivera, *Manual de historia social del trabajo*, Madrid, 1994, p. 355.

¹² Joan Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria: Catalunya, 1976–1979*, Badalona, 1999, pp. 67–70.

¹³ José Peirats, 'Carta abierta a los militantes libertarios', n.d. (1976?)

¹⁴ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 14 April 1976.

¹⁵ Peirats, 'En este que parece amanecer', *Frente Libertario*, June 1976.

organisational apparatus of exile.¹⁶ Yet after decades controlling the MLE-CNT in France, the Montseny–Esgleas axis inevitably sought to assert its leadership over the young movement developing in Spain and, when it was challenged, it damned the new militants as ‘reformists’.¹⁷ Although, as we will see, Peirats later struggled to step back from his position as one of the elders of the anarchist movement, at this time, he exhibited untrammelled faith in the capacities of ‘a new anarchist generation’, which he believed ‘capable of carrying on its shoulders the legacy of our historic anarcho-syndicalism’.¹⁸ In a letter written during this period, he noted that ‘the most encouraging thing is that the new anarchist movement is made up of young elements. The old militants from the civil war have either died or are immersed in old age.’¹⁹

As one of ‘the victims of the despairing 1930s’,²⁰ Peirats faced new conflicts in his bid to return to Spain. In material terms, since he depended on a French pension, it was impossible for him to return permanently.²¹ It was not easy to secure travel documents to cross the Pyrenees either, for it involved a struggle with the Spanish state bureaucracy. According to the Spanish vice-consul in Béziers, all those Spaniards who arrived in France before 1 April 1939 had ‘refugee’ status and, therefore, a right to a passport. Peirats believed he entered France on 10 February, but he was unable to prove this.²² Since there was official record of his return to France from the Americas in 1947, he was classed as an ‘undocumented’ entrant.²³ Following a violent argument with the vice-consul in which Peirats proffered ‘a few swear words’, a Madrid journalist friend (most likely Eduardo de Guzmán) made arrangements with the sub-secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Spanish capital for him to be issued with a passport.²⁴

On 1 August 1976, some eight months after Franco’s death, he reached Spain for the first time since his 1947 clandestine mission. Arriving by train at Barcelona’s Estació de França, he was received by a group of around 200 people, among them family, friends, and comrades, who greeted him with renditions of the CNT hymn, ‘A las barricadas’, and the anarchist anthem ‘Hijos del pueblo’. Unlike some of the more high profile anti-Francoist exiles who returned to meet the press in lavish hotel rooms, Peirats, true to his proletarian-bohemian traditions, held court in the humble setting of his sister’s flat in L’Hospitalet, where he received a stream of journalists and well-wishers.²⁵

Emotions ran very high. He visited old haunts ‘in search of the springs of my childhood’.²⁶ These included the site of the CNT centre where he first joined the union in 1922.²⁷ He nurtured the hope of one day returning to Barcelona and rejoining the L’Hospitalet CNT.²⁸ However, his earlier prediction that he would feel a ‘foreigner’ in his own country proved prescient. In

¹⁶ Letter to Mariano Aguayo, 24 June 1976.

¹⁷ Letter to Francisco Botey, 24 May 1979; Marín noted ‘the excessive weight of the old activists, with their desire to control, particularly when it came to the youth’. Meanwhile, she described Montseny as ‘exultant but divorced from reality’ (*Anarquistas*, p. 331).

¹⁸ Peirats, ‘En este que parece amanecer’, *Frente Libertario*, June 1976.

¹⁹ Letter to Heinrich Koechlin, 13 April 1976.

²⁰ Letter to Gene (Juanita) Fried, 11 February 1967.

²¹ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 14 April 1976.

²² Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 29 January 1976, and Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 13 February 1976.

²³ Letter to José and Odette Ester, 5 April 1976.

²⁴ Letter to Juan Panisello, 21 May 1976.

²⁵ *ABC*, 3 August 1976; *Triunfo*, 21 August 1976; Vega, *Pioneras*, pp. 304–5.

²⁶ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 6 August 1978.

²⁷ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 24 September 1976.

²⁸ Letter to José Torremocha, 14 July 1976.

Barcelona, he ‘found everything very changed, even chic... I didn’t like it at all. It’s been converted into a big racket.’²⁹ Although he returned to Barcelona in successive summers, he was confronted with a profound dislocation and inner sadness.³⁰ In 1978, after the death of his sister Dolores, he became the sole survivor of his immediate family, facing the ‘painful scenario’³¹ of inhabiting ‘a kind of dead city’.³² With the disappearance of friends and places, he felt ‘a huge emptiness’, a stranger in the city.³³ Writing to his nephew, Federico, he described the old family home in Collblanc as ‘a cemetery. And Barcelona, the Barcelona of my childhood, with all my old friends dead... it’s no longer my Barcelona.’³⁴

Socio-cultural and spatial changes enhanced this sense of alienation. Instead of the raw and rebellious Barcelona of his youth, he found a spectacular city of consumerism: ‘The people don’t read anything unless it’s related to football and the signs of the bars’, he complained to a friend.³⁵ For the man who spent nearly all his disposable income in anarchist literature as a youth, it was ‘an immense disappointment’ to see people investing their hopes in a new car and consumer goods rather than dreams of revolution. He also found the city too big and too polluted.³⁶ ‘Barcelona attracts and repels you at the same time.’ All he felt was ‘a deep nostalgia’.³⁷

Back in France, now nearly seventy, Peirats was energised by the fluidity of the new political situation across the Pyrenees, and he addressed meetings in France and in Spain.³⁸ Following the legalisation of the CNT in Spain on 14 May 1977, he participated in some of its major mobilisations. The first, in early June, related to the struggle for the return of the assets of the movement (printing presses, cultural centres, union offices, and other resources) seized by the Francoist authorities in 1939 – a matter that remains unresolved today.³⁹ Besides the question of historic justice, it was vital for the fledgling CNT, which had few economic resources, to be compensated for its loss of assets, were it to stand a chance of competing with its rivals on the Left, the PSOE and the PCE, which were bolstered by the largesse of wealthy foreign benefactors (the Socialist International and the Soviet state respectively). Therefore, on Sunday 5 June, CNT activists occupied the Barcelona offices of *Solidaridad Nacional*, the press organ of the Francoist state-run union apparatus housed in the former headquarters of *Solidaridad Obrera*. To maximise the impact of this protest, Peirats was brought by car from Montadry to Barcelona to address a press conference in the occupied building.⁴⁰

Peirats’s health was increasingly precarious. Early in 1977, he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, which forced him to give up painting. Later that year, he was hospitalised for a

²⁹ Letter to María de Alfonso, 28 October 1976.

³⁰ Letter to José del Amo, 23 May 1979.

³¹ Letter to Juan Panisello, 8 March 1979.

³² Letter to Francisco Botey, 12 February 1985.

³³ Letter to Juan Panisello, 1 June 1981.

³⁴ Letter to Federico Peirats, 9 October 1986.

³⁵ Letter to Francisco Botey, 12 February 1985.

³⁶ Letter to Juan Panisello, 11 March 1980.

³⁷ Letter to Domingo Canela, 11 May 1986.

³⁸ Letter to Martha Ackelsberg, 17 June 1977.

³⁹ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, pp. 136–8. As Marín explains, ‘The struggle for these assets has been one of the battle horses of the CNT right up to our times and its return is a matter that is still to be addressed’ (*Anarquistas*, p. 352).

⁴⁰ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 15 June 1977; *La Vanguardia* and *El País*, 7 June 1977; a video of the protest is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxEGfEZIX4Y>.

month for a prostate operation.⁴¹ He and Gracia hoped to spend their final years together in La Vall but this was materially impossible until 1983, when she turned sixty-five and qualified for a French state pension.⁴² Peirats was uncertain he would survive the wait. In early 1981, he reflected how 'every day I look upon the small cemetery we have in Montady with more affection.'⁴³

Although he had planned to lay down his pen at sixty-five, 'so as not to make a fool of myself',⁴⁴ Peirats continued writing, and with the post-Franco publishing boom, he confessed that 'publishers are besieging me' with proposals.⁴⁵ He was commissioned by the publishing house Dopesa to prepare a *Diccionario del anarquismo* which, with a large print run, was aimed at the popular market.⁴⁶ Although poor, he donated the generous advance of 40,000 pesetas to the L'Hospitalet CNT.⁴⁷ He rejected an invitation from Bruguera publishers to write the history of the CNT in exile as he felt too close to the topic: 'It's something that has caused me so many upsets and I wouldn't know where to begin.'⁴⁸ Meanwhile, as publishers sought to cash in on the popular demand for the unheard voices of exiled Spanish men and women during the decades of dictatorship in the country, Peirats entered into lengthy and, ultimately, fruitless negotiations with the prestigious Planeta publishers regarding his memoirs.⁴⁹ While he stood to make a substantial sum of money from this endeavour, he rejected the publisher's plan to cut his manuscript, 'as if it were a sausage'.⁵⁰ He was realistic enough to appreciate that a manuscript of 1,500 pages would never make it into print, so, when urged by Rafael Borrás, then director of Planeta, to reconsider, he cut some 250 pages. Yet when Planeta requested further cuts to chapters relating to his early years, he withdrew the manuscript, convinced that the life of any individual only made sense if seen through these crucial formative experiences.⁵¹

The CNT, in the meantime, grew in strength throughout 1977, and Peirats addressed its most important mass rallies. In May, he addressed around 40,000 people in the Valencia bullring. Also on the platform that day was Montseny, who beforehand had sent Peirats an olive branch after their years of conflict in exile. Unable to forgive or forget the calumnies he had endured from her and Esgleas, Peirats demanded a public retraction of the claims they made in the international anarchist press that he was a 'fraudster' and 'thief'.⁵² As he wrote to Ramón Álvarez, another opponent of the couple, he rebuffed the overture also out of loyalty to the other comrades expelled from the CNT: 'There is no worthy peace after the insults and s[hit] they've hurled at me.'⁵³ Nor had he forgotten Montseny's refusal to clarify the great enigma of exile: 'We will all die without getting to the bottom of the mystery of the CNT's finances.'⁵⁴ Indeed, the matter remains unsolved.

⁴¹ Letters to Juan Panisello, 10 February 1977, and Ramón Álvarez, 19 December 1977.

⁴² Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

⁴³ Letter to José del Amo, 16 February 1981.

⁴⁴ Letter to Fernando Gómez, 30 May 1974.

⁴⁵ Letter to Heleno Saña, 5 March 1977.

⁴⁶ José Peirats, *Diccionario del anarquismo*, Barcelona, 1977.

⁴⁷ Letter to Heleno Saña, 14 May 1977.

⁴⁸ Letter to Heleno Saña, 5 March 1977.

⁴⁹ Letter to Pablo (?), 17 September 1974.

⁵⁰ Letter to Carlos Rama, 15 May 1977.

⁵¹ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 3 November 1976, and Heleno Saña, 26 May and 28 July 1977.

⁵² Letters to Federico and Pura Arcos, 13 April 1987, and Juan Gómez Casas, 21 November 1987.

⁵³ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 18 July 1977.

⁵⁴ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 4 November 1980.

9.2 Disillusionment

Two months after the Valencia rally, on 2 July, Peirats appeared at the historic Montjuïc rally in Barcelona with Montseny again, 'without even looking at each other'.⁵⁵ Attended by around 300,000 people, this was, according to Joan Zambrana, 'the high-water mark of the Catalan CNT' in the 1970s.⁵⁶ Peirats later described the event as 'my Waterloo'.⁵⁷ To understand fully what transpired that day, we need to appreciate that, during the resistance to Franco's centralising regime, nationalist demands had become accepted by most of the Catalan Left, including much of the anarchist movement. By the time of the Montjuïc rally, broad social sectors within Catalan society were pressing the new authorities in Madrid for an autonomy statute that would allow for the re-establishment of the home rule Generalitat government abolished by Franco in 1939.⁵⁸

From France, Peirats, who never forgot the Generalitat's anti-cenetista repression in the 1930s, had watched the rise of Catalanism with great concern. In the late 1960s, he expressed his 'horror' to Madrid-based anarchist Juan Gómez Casas at 'the rebirth of a new regionalist wave in Spain'.⁵⁹ Writing in *Frente Libertario* in 1974, he elided the distinction increasingly evident in New Left circles between oppressed and oppressor nationalisms, arguing that all nationalisms 'threaten humanity with macabre points of view'.⁶⁰ He also made no distinction between the 'new' insurrectionary Basque nationalism of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA – Basque Homeland and Freedom), which, from the 1960s on, had attempted to raise social issues and attract non-Basque immigrants to its banner, unlike the more ethnically-based first wave of Basque nationalism, which championed the supremacy of the Basque people.⁶¹ With little conceptual precision, Peirats argued that 'ETA are not only racists but also fascists'.⁶² He rejected Catalan and Basque demands on the central state for 'autonomy statutes' (*estatutos de autonomía*), something which, for Peirats, smacked of 'autonomist centralism' and which would lead to the establishment of a new local state: 'This is nothing more than a big sophism to confuse the exploited and perpetuate the historic exploitation of man by man under a new flag.'⁶³ Instead, Peirats defended federalism, 'the classical anarchism' of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or the Iberian variant represented by Francesc Pi i Margall,⁶⁴ arguing that 'true autonomy is inseparable from socialism, in other words, the socialisation of social wealth'.⁶⁵

At Montjuïc, as he surveyed the crowd and the banners surrounding him before he rose to address the rally, he could not have ignored the presence of Catalan and Basque flags. This doubtless raised his ardour. He might have also been encouraged by the fact that the crowd before him was twice as large as that which attended a major Catalanist rally a month earlier.⁶⁶ He began sen-

⁵⁵ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 18 July 1977.

⁵⁶ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, pp. 139–41.

⁵⁷ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 18 July 1977.

⁵⁸ See Carme Molinero and Pere Ysàs, *La cuestión catalana: Cataluña en la Transición*, Barcelona, 2014.

⁵⁹ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 25 March 1967.

⁶⁰ José Peirats, 'Macro y micronacionalismos', *Frente Libertario*, March 1974.

⁶¹ For the evolution of Basque and Catalan nationalisms, see Juan Díez Medrano, *Divided Nations: Class Politics and Nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia*, Ithaca, NY, 1995.

⁶² Letter to Gene (Juanita) Fried, 14 April 1981.

⁶³ Letter to Pascual Broch, 27 November 1977. In the original, he used the word 'senyeres', Catalan for flags.

⁶⁴ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 25 March 1967, and Ramón Álvarez, 18 July 1977; José Peirats, 'El drama de Pi y Margall', *Triunfo*, 9 February 1974, pp. 26–7. See also Peirats, *España*, pp. 39–44.

⁶⁵ Letter to Pascual Broch 27 November 1977.

⁶⁶ Edo, *La CNT*, pp. 282–4.

timentally: 'I've been dreaming of this meeting for more than forty years.'⁶⁷ He then proceeded to define his identity as a 'Valencian, in non-political terms', recognising that he retained 'an internal debt of gratitude to Barcelona' as 'here I spent my youth and I gained a culture', acknowledging, though, that he didn't 'feel Catalan'.⁶⁸ He then went on to raise the issue of an autonomy statute, reminding the audience of the experience of the 1930s: 'We already know what an autonomy statute is... [It is] an apparatus', he sentenced, and his words elicited a round of applause. Finally, he reminded the mainly youthful audience of the CNT's federalist past, advocating the 'free municipality', 'the alternative of the anarchist movement' to a statute. Echoing celebrated Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, he concluded: 'My homeland is the world, humanity is my family.'⁶⁹

His open rejection of the autonomy statute and popular Catalan demands provoked fury inside the Catalan CNT and beyond. After his address, Peirats was 'severely rebuked' by members of the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT.⁷⁰ In the days that followed, Peirats's speech was censured in the CNT press,⁷¹ while the Catalan organisation issued a statement distancing itself from his position and underlining the extent of its own dalliance with nationalism:

[T]he CNT of today does not confuse the concepts of nation and state.... It rejects the second as it is an instrument of oppression in the service of the ruling class, [but] the nation is a combination of men and women with a will to exist, a cultural and linguistic communion that defines it ethnologically as a natural entity, and as such we must therefore strengthen it as far as possible.⁷²

There were calls for Peirats's expulsion from the CNT, although in fact he had not rejoined the organisation, despite his very close ties to the L'Hospitalet union.⁷³ Inevitably, he also had his defenders, including the then-CNT Secretary Gómez Casas,⁷⁴ the first secretary of the post-Francoist CNT, and Edo, a member of the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT, who regarded the speech as 'brilliant'. He later resigned his position in protest at the criticisms levelled against Peirats.⁷⁵ Ironically, by 1983, the CNT embraced Peirats's position on the Catalan question.⁷⁶

Outside the CNT, the press projected the image of a divided movement. The conservative newspaper *ABC* noted, incorrectly, that 'the CNT discredits one of its leaders', describing Peirats as the 'leader of historic anarchism'.⁷⁷ In Catalan nationalist circles, it was open season on Peirats. Aspirant twenty-five-year-old writer Quim Monzó, whose grasp of working-class history equalled his knowledge of Nanophysics, published an article identifying Peirats with earlier anti-Catalan movements and, what he imaginatively labelled, 'anarcho-fascism'.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Alfons Quintà, *El País* newspaper's correspondent in Catalonia and later supporter of conservative Catalan Presi-

⁶⁷ Letter to Gerardo Patán, 26 July 1977; there is a video of the meeting at <http://roiginegre-videos.blogspot.com.es/2009/05/mitin-de-la-cnt-celebrado-en-montjuic.html>.

⁶⁸ Letter to José Gutiérrez, n.d.

⁶⁹ 'La CNT renace', *Triunfo*, 9 July 1977, p. 17; letter to Pascual Broch, 27 November 1977.

⁷⁰ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 15 November 1979.

⁷¹ Edo, *La CNT*, pp. 283–4.

⁷² Cited en Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, p. 141.

⁷³ Letters to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 12 January 1977, and Acracio Ruiz, 20 February 1978.

⁷⁴ Juan Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento de la CNT: 1975–1979*, Móstoles, 1984, p. 77.

⁷⁵ Edo, *La CNT*, pp. 282–4.

⁷⁶ CNT-AIT, *El anarco-sindicalismo en la era tecnológica*, Madrid, 1988, pp. 163–4.

⁷⁷ *ABC*, 6 July 1977.

⁷⁸ Quim Monzó, 'Don José Peirats, anarcolerrouxiste i de las JONS', *Canigó*, 16 July 1977.

dent Jordi Pujol, displayed his own peculiar interpretation of social movement dynamics, attributing the eventual decline of the CNT to Peirats's speech.⁷⁹

The 'atomic bomb' set off by his Montjuïc speech had a lasting effect on Peirats,⁸⁰ and he was deeply hurt by the reaction of the Catalan CNT. For him, this was proof of its 'nationalist deviation',⁸¹ which he described as 'the new "circumstantialism"', comparable to the movement's governmentalism during the civil war.⁸² Following his 'heresy', Peirats resolved to put his health first, and he never spoke again at a Catalan CNT meeting.⁸³ Years later, he still commented about the episode with acrimony.⁸⁴ In 1979, as the Catalan statute was being finalised by the central government, he sometimes dated his letters with the ironic inscription 'HOME STRAIGHT TOWARDS THE STATUTE'.⁸⁵

Later on, in that same month as the Montjuïc rally, Peirats's disillusionment with the new CNT was deepened with the Jornadas Libertarias Internacionales (International Anarchist Convention), which took place in Barcelona between 22–25 July 1977.⁸⁶ Combining debates on a range of political, philosophical, cultural, and social issues with ludic activities, such as plays, musical performances, and fiestas held across the city, in many senses the convention was a contemporary version of the social-cultural and political activities Peirats had once organised in the athenaeums of Barcelona and Toulouse. Certainly, the event did much to raise the profile of the anarchist movement, and, according to the organisers, as many as 600,000 people attended during the four days, including foreign activists like Daniel Cohn-Bendit and leading Spanish cultural figures like Emma Cohen and Fernando Fernán Gómez. As one participant stated, it was 'one of the cultural events with most resonance' that year. In a spirit of absolute freedom, parallel to the convention there were 'several days of *happening* and uninhibited fiesta' at Park Güell in Barcelona.⁸⁷

After decades of regime-sponsored sexual repression and Catholic fundamentalism, the prurient, sensationalist press was fixated with sexual experimentation, drug consumption, and what it represented as the general depravity of young anarchists in Park Güell. Among the more restrained commentaries, *La Vanguardia* paper expressed concern with 'the conduct and sexual practices' of the participants.⁸⁸ According to one young activist from the time, this discourse shaped the views of some veterans 'from a more markedly working-class social background', who were concerned about the image of the movement.⁸⁹ Peirats fell into this category, and in his private letters he described the convention as 'a load of crap [*mariconadas*]',⁹⁰ 'where anarchism overflowed with sodomy and whoring [*putería*]'.⁹¹ He crudely described the Park Güell happen-

⁷⁹ Alfons Quintà, 'Del antinacionalismo y el pasotismo al atentado de la sala barcelonesa Scala', *El País*, 28 April 1979.

⁸⁰ Letter to Federico and Pura Arcos, 31 July 1977.

⁸¹ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 18 July 1977.

⁸² Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 5 September 1977.

⁸³ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 15 November 1979.

⁸⁴ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 25 September 1985.

⁸⁵ Letter to Ángel Aranzaez, 25 October 1979.

⁸⁶ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, pp. 142–8; *Barcelona Libertaria*, 23–25 July 1977.

⁸⁷ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, p. 143.

⁸⁸ *La Vanguardia*, 12 August 1977.

⁸⁹ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, p. 146.

⁹⁰ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 5 September 1977.

⁹¹ Letter to Progreso Fernández, 2 October 1977. For the view of another veteran, see Álvarez, *Historia negra*, pp. 333–6.

ing as ‘the sodomite celebration’.⁹² This same rejection of new sexual mores saw him refer to the popular tourist destination of Benidorm as ‘the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Mediterranean’.⁹³

This commentary reflects several factors. First, and most importantly, it reveals his frustration with the reborn CNT. Although, as we saw earlier, he went some way towards embracing aspects of the New Left in exile, he struggled to appreciate the post-1968 context in which the CNT now operated in Spain. When the movement showed sensitivity towards other forms of oppression beyond the workplace and addressed feminist, gay, and ecological groups, Peirats denounced this as ‘dog’s dinner’:⁹⁴ ‘All these factions are disgusting.’⁹⁵ The tensions in his thinking were evidenced at the end of 1977, when he wrote: ‘We need an anarchism that is neither the hippiedom in fashion now nor one that fits like a glove with the hallowed classic texts... [but] an anarchism for today, functional more than dogmatic.’⁹⁶ Yet he feared that, by embracing new ideas, the CNT would be enfeebled. He was not alone. Other radical commentators believed the CNT’s diverse and somewhat divergent constituencies presented ‘a confused image for revolutionary militants’.⁹⁷ Increasingly terse and forthright in his commentary, Peirats saw the movement to be undermined by ‘nationalism, queerism [*mariconismo*], tomboyism [*marimachismo*] and para-Marxism’.⁹⁸ In one letter, he expressed his stupefaction at members of the *Solidaridad Obrera* editorial board who want ‘to provide a haven for homosexuals, [while] they indirectly defend the Leninist-fascists of ETA and feminist dykes [*feministas tortilleras*]’.⁹⁹

This was not uncommon among Peirats’s generation.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, his comments lay bare his deeply entrenched prejudices. For instance, his homophobia is most evident in his memoirs. While a baker in the early 1930s, he met a gay cook whom he and his fellow workers nicknamed ‘Vicenta’: ‘For the first time’, he reflected forty years later, ‘I saw the aberrant mystery of homosexuality.’¹⁰¹ At the massive May 1977 Valencia rally, he caused uproar when he referred to fascists as ‘queers’ (*maricones*).¹⁰² Meanwhile, his apparent sexism and his forthright hostility to post-1968 feminism reflected a similar incapacity to reconstruct his world view and transcend the prejudices of the era in which he grew up. In a 1982 letter to a male comrade, he opined candidly:

I am not opposed to women... they surpass us in terms of their psychological awareness in their areas of strength. They have proprietary rights in anything related to love and to the home. They outpace us all the way. You fall in love with a woman to discover she had already seen this coming for some time. This talent for awareness is found in all women. Once I wrote about this and a group of dope-smoking, shag-happy [*folladoras*], jean-wearing feminists clawed at me like cats, labelling me a sexist and then some. Since then, I have drawn away from putting my fingers

⁹² Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 29 September 1977.

⁹³ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 17 August 1985.

⁹⁴ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 13 September 1983. Perhaps fortunately, Peirats made no comment when the CNT came out in defence of ‘exhibitionist males’ (CNT-AIT, *El anarco-sindicalismo*, p. 165).

⁹⁵ Letter to José Torremocha, 16 November 1978.

⁹⁶ Letter to Félix García, 9 December 1977.

⁹⁷ Colectivo de Estudios por la autonomía obrera, *Por la organización autónoma de los trabajadores*, Madrid, 1977, p. 52. According to Carmona, ‘The CNT reconstructed itself on foundations that were too unstable’ (*Transiciones*, p. 69).

⁹⁸ Letter to Ramón Álvarez 19 December 1977.

⁹⁹ Letter to Julio Patán, 18 November 1978.

¹⁰⁰ Campos, *Una vida*, p. 99.

¹⁰¹ MI T. 2, L. III, 100.

¹⁰² Interview by the author with Frank Mintz, 30 October 2008.

in that hornet's nest. If they want to be equal to men, then they should open their legs and prove it. I have always loved femininity in women. Some tomboys find this offensive and they call me a male chauvinist pig.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, with the CNT facing intense competition from the anti-Stalinist Left, Peirats's anti-communism came to the fore. He believed 'the Chinese' (*los chinos*), veteran anarchist argued to describe communists, 'are infiltrating all the Spanish [anarchist] publications.'¹⁰⁴ While, in exile, some of Peirats's comrades in *Presencia* had exposed him to the autonomist project of unifying aspects of Marxism with anarchism, he now rejected this out of hand as a chimera of 'anarcho-Trot-Maoists'.¹⁰⁵ Curiously, his aversion to such hybrids did not prevent him from having a close relationship with the philosopher Carlos Díaz, whom he regarded as an anarchist, 'despite his mystical Christianity'.¹⁰⁶ Yet, overall, he reverted to the traditional anarcho-syndicalism of his youth, which effectively closed his mind to newer ideas. Despite his staunch opposition towards anarchist bureaucracy in the war and in exile, he rejected New Left movements inspired by council communism and the workers' assembly movement, along with their critique of union bureaucracy, which he dismissed perfunctorily as 'Byzantinism'.¹⁰⁷ At times, he fell into self-justification, seemingly discarding the very possibility that ideas might evolve through a process of individual reflection. In a highly instrumental way, he explained the fact that many of his generation had 'the same mentality as before' in terms of their forced removal from direct class struggles in France, 'where we grew old without any real stimuli'.¹⁰⁸

His ascetic brand of old school anarcho-syndicalism made him ill-disposed to many of the sectors encadred within the new CNT.¹⁰⁹ Having attracted many young supporters of the New anarchism, which was inflected by post-1968 Situationism, the CNT was now far *more* diverse than it had been in the 1930s. While it had always had tendencies, now it was, in the words of one commentator

a hotchpotch in which the first cousins of May '68, unionists and unionisers, 'orthodox' anarchists, Christian technocrats attempting to adapt anarcho-syndicalism to modern society, idealistic ecologists, sexual minorities and Trotskyist infiltrators all coexist in conflict.¹¹⁰

Likewise, one young militant from the era describes the newer activists as

a diverse conglomerate of cultural transgression, anti-authoritarian workers' culture as well as a critique of everyday life which presupposed social and sexual liberation.¹¹¹

Certainly, there were individuals in the CNT's orbit that approximated to what Murray Bookchin described as 'lifestyle anarchists', whose 'anarchism' extended little beyond their countercultural appearance and daily practices.¹¹² This was recognised by the autonomous groups, who noted in the CNT:

¹⁰³ Letter to Vicente Sánchez, 3 January 1982.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 21 July 1976.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to Francisco Botey, 27 January 1978.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 24 November 1978; also interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Luis Ballester, 30 June 1978; for the critique of union bureaucracy by the supporters of workers' assemblies and council communism, see Carmona, *Transiciones*, pp. 46–73.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Luis Ballester, 18 May 1979.

¹⁰⁹ Josep Alemany, 'Esperando el congreso', *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ Carlos Semprún-Maura, 'La CNT como espejismo', *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979, p. 85.

¹¹¹ E-mail from Joan Zambrana to the author, 27 October 2014.

¹¹² Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, Stirling, 1995.

The influence in its ranks of a certain contingent of elements, clearly petit bourgeois, who respond more to ‘hippy’ ideals and the mere aim of ‘shocking the bourgeois’ [*épater le bourgeois*] than to a revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist consciousness.¹¹³

In the wave of post-Franco freedom, there was a trend among certain middle- and upper-class youths towards hippy rebellion; they were joined by champagne leftists (*izquierdistas de salón*), trendy liberals (*progres*), and other fashionable subcultures, all of which were stridently anti-syndicalist. Moreover, as one activist commented in 1977, ‘Unfortunately, anarchism is fashionable and people are getting involved from all social strata with a range of proposals.’¹¹⁴ The official media also constructed new categories like ‘slackers’ (*pasotas*) to demonise rebellious youth who rejected the work ethic. According to Edo, this pejorative label, directed at those who ‘break the conventional blueprints accepted by the System’, partially shaped the opinions of some veteran militants, who came to reject these ‘supposedly unconventional’ younger activists.¹¹⁵ For instance, following a visit to Madrid, Mariano Aguayo, a former guerrilla and comrade of Peirats in exile, playfully reported that there were ‘a lot of libertarians (or libertines)’ among the youth.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Peirats believed that events like the Park Güell fiesta attract ‘all the junk’, and ‘I’ll be astonished if it helps us reconstruct the organisation.’¹¹⁷ Around the same time, he expressed the fear that ‘besides some good people, we are picking up all the scraps and damaged elements, all the underlying scum [*basura*] in Spanish society.’¹¹⁸

Ultimately, Peirats, like other veterans, failed to appreciate the nature of the new generation of activists: ‘Today they call anyone a militant... I note among the youth a pronounced antipathy towards commitment.’¹¹⁹ As Pablo César Carmona points out, the CNT and the veterans were operating within ‘a new socio-cultural space in which the anthropological subject with which they were interacting was radically different and, moreover, in a completely new political and economic context’.¹²⁰ However, beneath the veneer of long hair, earrings, and beards of the 1970s counterculture, there were activists of value among the new anti-authoritarian movement. This was acknowledged by Gómez Casas, who wrote in 1984 that ‘a considerable number of these youths of both sexes remained with us and today they are conscious and promising CNT militants.’¹²¹ Indeed, the new CNT was, very much, a union of the youth: in 1977, 75 per cent of its total membership was under thirty – a reality that made the intergenerational disagreement all the more serious.¹²²

Following his first visit to Spain in 1976, Peirats had recognised in *Frente Libertario* that there was ‘a conflict of generations’ within the movement.¹²³ Sadly, he became eloquent proof of this tension. Throughout his life, one of his articles of faith had been his belief in the rejuvenating

¹¹³ Colectivo de Estudios por la autonomía obrera, *Por la organización autónoma*, p. 85.

¹¹⁴ ‘Conversación...’, *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, no. 58–60, July–December 1977, p. 109.

¹¹⁵ Luis Andrés Edo, ‘Fenómeno del cenetismo frente al Proyecto Político de “la Paralela”’, *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979, p. 133.

¹¹⁶ Letter from Mariano Aguayo to Peirats, 8 September 1977.

¹¹⁷ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 29 September 1977.

¹¹⁸ Letter to Mariano Aguayo, 15 September 1977.

¹¹⁹ Letter to Progreso Fernández, 2 October 1977 (original emphasis).

¹²⁰ Carmona, *Transiciones*, p. 133.

¹²¹ Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento*, p. 28.

¹²² José Luis Guinea, *Los movimientos obreros y sindicales en España de 1833 a 1978*, Madrid, 1978, p. 242. For the intergenerational conflict, see Carmona, *Transiciones*, pp. 73–8.

¹²³ José Peirats, ‘Problemas de relanzamiento’, *Frente Libertario*, March 1977.

mission of youth within the movement. Now, in his private letters, he was full of scorn for what he saw as infantile militants. In the absence of ‘the bridging generation’,¹²⁴ there was, on the one hand, ‘the old old’ (those of his generation), and, on the other, ‘the young young’ (the current wave), but ‘in between there is an enormous space which implies the rupture of many things.’¹²⁵ (In 1978, 15 per cent of CNT members were over sixty and only 10 per cent between thirty and sixty years of age.¹²⁶) In a likely reference to the slackers, Peirats argued that youths ‘have no idea what it is to struggle heroically’ and exhibit ‘a contempt for work and for life’.¹²⁷ Filled with pessimism for the ‘new anarchists’, he wrote to an old comrade that ‘the youth who were our big hope have turned out to be Nietzschean.’¹²⁸ On another occasion, in a letter to Domingo Canela, one of his first comrades in arms from the 1920s, he claimed that ‘we are the only survivors of a unique era in recent history... I despair when I make comparisons between us and the nonsense of new generations.’¹²⁹

This tension saw Peirats reassess his earlier conviction that a new generation of Spanish activists should take the baton from the older generation.¹³⁰ While Peirats was relieved to see the declining influence of the senile Toulouse leadership, he felt excluded by the ‘simmering hostility towards those of our generation which they disrespectfully describe as the “historic” ones’.¹³¹ (More disrespectful still were the youths who described them as ‘anarcho-mummies [*anarcomomias*].’¹³²) As if it were not enough, there was a feeling of incapacity, since ‘we are barely in this world. We can no longer do anything to change it.’¹³³

The foundation of much of Peirats’s rancour at this time was his realisation that the CNT was not going to revive, Phoenix-like, as a mass organisation, in the same way as it had occurred in his youth after the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. The CC. OO., which were legalised a month before the CNT in April 1977, reported a membership of 1.3 million in September 1977, growing to 1.8 million the following year. The UGT, on its part, claimed 2 million members in 1978.¹³⁴ The CNT was nowhere close: at its 1978 peak, the National Committee put membership at 300,900.¹³⁵ This was deeply vexing for Peirats. As early as March 1977, when the CNT was still organising clandestinely, he complained that ‘the unions are not jelling fully.’¹³⁶ Without a firm connection with the factories, Peirats was gripped by the fear that Spanish anarcho-syndicalism would ‘end up a sterile movement, like in Italy and Portugal.’¹³⁷ ‘It is vital to put anarchism into practice’, he argued, for ‘we need to obtain a position of strength. This is syndicalism, a field of action that allows us to influence public opinion with the aim of becoming a decisive force.’¹³⁸ Nonetheless,

¹²⁴ Peirats, *Los anarquistas*, p. 402.

¹²⁵ Letter to Luis Ballester, 18 May 1979.

¹²⁶ Guinea, *Los movimientos obreros*, p. 242.

¹²⁷ Letter to María de Alfonso, 12 January 1976.

¹²⁸ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 24 November 1978.

¹²⁹ Letter to Domingo Canela, 12 December 1988.

¹³⁰ Letter to Julio Patán, 29 March 1978.

¹³¹ Letter to Julio Patán, 18 November 1978.

¹³² Carmona, *Transiciones*, p. 106.

¹³³ Letter to Acracio Ruiz, 1 July 1978.

¹³⁴ *El País*, 14 September 1977; Ilse Marie Führer, *Los sindicatos en España: De la lucha de clases a estrategias de cooperación*, Madrid, 1996, p. 135.

¹³⁵ Guinea, *Los movimientos obreros*, p. 241. Carmona puts the figure at 250,000 (*Transiciones*, p. 144).

¹³⁶ Letter to Ramón Álvarez, 7 March 1977.

¹³⁷ Letter to Heinrich Koechlin, 13 April 1976.

¹³⁸ Letter to Luis Ballester Brage, 30 June 1978.

as we will see, despite having significant mobilising power, the CNT never managed to reignite the beacon of social transformation that had burnt so brightly before 1939.

Before the start of the democratic transition, Peirats had advanced a firm critique of the CNT's decline in exile, although he proved less able to analyse the movement's changing fortunes in the frantic circumstances following its reorganisation.¹³⁹ By 1985, effectively removing agency from the equation, he reduced the CNT's problems to 'the dictatorship [which] worked very effectively to sterilise our traditions.'¹⁴⁰ While there is a certain element of validity in this judgement, he entirely ignores the tactical error of the exiled leadership, discussed above in Chapter 8, of refusing to work inside the CC. OO., where it could have disseminated anarcho-syndicalist culture and principles to a new audience inside Spain.

If the political structures of Francoism worked to 'sterilise' anarcho-syndicalist culture, the same can be said of those established during the transition to democracy after 1975. Following the June 1977 general elections, the political oligarchs were greatly perturbed by labour militancy. These fears culminated in the Moncloa Pacts (October 1977), an agreement between government, employers, and the moderate Left, including their affiliated unions (the UGT and the CC. OO.) to reduce labour protest. The participation of the UGT and the CC. OO., whose leaders were seduced by the promise of future welfare reforms, was vital to oversee labour demobilisation.¹⁴¹ The commitment of the authorities to trade union elections in the workplaces in 1978 also appealed to reformist union leaders, who saw this as a guarantee of new legal recognition. As for the employers and the government, they would benefit from the institutionalisation of industrial relations, which, they calculated, would curb the wildcat strikes so much in evidence since 1976.

Understandably, for Peirats and others who expected the collapse of Francoism to produce far-reaching social change, this political manoeuvre from above was anathema to direct action, revolutionary syndicalism and marked the start of the 'age of disillusionment'.¹⁴² Yet the tight alliance around the Moncloa Pacts, combined with the determination of the UGT and the CC. OO. to become the house unions of the new democracy, presented the CNT with a unique opportunity: to appear before the working class as the only fighting union in Spain. Such a stance raised the possibility of gaining new recruits among dissidents from within the bigger unions.

Therefore, the CNT spearheaded the opposition to the pacts, in accordance with its rejection of 'all inter-class pacts that are formulated at the expense of the workers'.¹⁴³ Inevitably, this struggle developed in the streets and brings us to one of the many shady episodes in Spain's democratic transition. On 15 January 1978, Barcelona saw one of the many anti-pact demonstrations organised by the CNT across Spain. At the end of the march, there was a petrol bomb attack on the Scala night club in the city centre and a huge fire ensued, leading to the deaths of four workers.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ See Gonzalo Wilhemi, *El movimiento libertario en la transición*, Madrid, 2012; Carmona, *Transiciones*; Antonio Rivera, 'Demasiado tarde: El anarcosindicalismo en la transición española', *Historia Contemporánea*, no. 19, 1999, pp. 329–53; Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento*; Various Authors, *CNT: Ser o no ser (La crisis de 1976–1979)*, Paris, 1979.

¹⁴⁰ Letter to Manuel Seva Verdú, 24 November 1985.

¹⁴¹ Juan Martínez, 'El Pacto de La Moncloa: La lucha sindical y el nuevo corporativismo', *Cuadernos de Ruedo ibérico*, no. 58–60, July–December 1977, pp. 32–51.

¹⁴² José Peirats, 'Aquí y ahora', *Cultura Libertaria*, September 1986.

¹⁴³ *El País*, 14 October 1977. See also Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, pp. 163–5.

¹⁴⁴ See Joan Zambrana, 'Terrorismo de estado: El caso Scala y la CNT', *El Viejo Topo*, September 2008, pp. 35–9, Xavier Cañadas Gascón, *El Caso Scala: Terrorismo de Estado y algo más*, Barcelona, 2008; *Solidaridad Obrera*, January 1978 (special edition); 'Rocinante', 'The Scala File: A Case History of State Provocation', *Anarchy*, no. 38, 1985, pp. 4–9;

Cui bono? It is hard to see any motive on the part of the CNT. Two of the four dead workers were cenetistas, which is unsurprising, given that some 70 per cent of the Scala workforce was, at the time, CNT-affiliated.¹⁴⁵ CNT suspicions that the attack was a police set-up were more than rhetorical.¹⁴⁶ It was later established that the instigator of the attack was Joaquín Gambín, a long-term recidivist who had spent over half his life in jail and who later confessed to working for the police. Upon leaving prison in 1977, he joined the FAI and, it appears, organised the Scala attack with some Barcelona radicals, whose names he later provided to the police.¹⁴⁷ Despite intense police activity (around 150 anarchist militants were arrested), Gambín mysteriously remained at liberty. According to *El País*, eleven months after the attack, 'several sources' revealed that Gambín was leading a normal life in his native Murcia and that the police had 'perfect knowledge of his whereabouts'.¹⁴⁸ And yet he remained free for almost two years after the Scala attack, until he was arrested on unrelated charges of arms smuggling and armed robbery. Once detained, he immediately acknowledged his role as a police agent, including his involvement in the 'dirty war' of assassinations and terror perpetrated by Spanish intelligence against ETA and its supporters.¹⁴⁹ In 1983, the CNT launched a lawsuit against the police and Rodolfo Martín Villa, former interior minister at the time of the Scala tragedy and known popularly as 'the cudgel of the Transition', accusing them of planting Gambín in the organisation with a view to discrediting it.¹⁵⁰

The Scala affair was a massive boon to the authorities in their campaign to silence dissent to the Moncloa Pacts. Showing great selectivity, Martín Villa, an industrialist and former general secretary of the Francoist state-run trade union apparatus, who shed no tears for the five workers murdered by police in Vitoria-Gasteiz months earlier, was appalled at the deaths of the Scala workers. He described the anarchists as a bigger threat to public order than ETA, while a supine press identified the CNT, the main anti-Moncloa force, with terrorism.¹⁵¹ Just a day after the attack, when events were anything but clear, the Barcelona daily *El Noticiero Universal* denounced the anarchist movement as 'common murderers'.¹⁵² This was not a new media agenda. In late 1977, there were attempts to establish a connection between the anarchist movement and terrorism, when *El País* uncritically carried a story filtered to the *New York Times* about an apparent anarchist plot to kidnap Justice Minister Landelino Lavilla.¹⁵³ Alarmed by the comparisons made in the article between Spanish anarchists and the West German Baader–Meinhof Group, the CNT National Committee traced the source of the story to Dan Kurzman, a US journalist and military

Francisco Gago, 'El caso Scala: Intento de desprestigiar y criminalizar a la CNT', *Tiempo y Sociedad*, no. 15, 2014, pp. 41–58.

¹⁴⁵ Cañadas, *El Caso Scala*, p. 77.

¹⁴⁶ Quintà, 'Del antinacionalismo', *El País*, 28 April 1979. Manel Aisa, secretary of the Barcelona CNT local federation during the Transition, related to me that there was also, around this time, a South American CIA informant in their ranks. His affiliations were only discovered after he left Spain (e-mail from Manel Aisa to the author, 4 December 2014).

¹⁴⁷ Cañadas Gascón, *El Caso Scala*, p. 23. According to Cañadas Gascón, Gambín's passport into the FAI was 'two suitcases, one with arms, the other with explosives (both provided to Gambín by the police)'.
¹⁴⁸ *El País*, 2 December 1980.

¹⁴⁹ *El País*, 12 December 1981, 22 March and 17 November 1983, and 8 June 1985; *Cambio 16*, 21 December 1981.

¹⁵⁰ *El País*, 24 December 1983; *Solidaridad Obrera*, January 1984.

¹⁵¹ *ABC*, 18 January and 1 February 1978; *El País*, 18 January 1978.

¹⁵² *El Noticiero Universal*, 16 January 1978.

¹⁵³ *El País*, 17 November and 7 December 1977.

historian who had spent some time in Spain and who was suspected of being linked to the United States intelligence services.¹⁵⁴

The fallout of the Scala case, which coincided with the build-up to the first trade union elections in early February 1978, left the CNT's reputation badly tarnished. By the time more light was thrown on the incident, its public image had been severely damaged. According to Marín, the affair 'marked a before and after' for the CNT.¹⁵⁵ As many workers distanced themselves from the union, in the view of one analyst of the period, 'The CNT would quickly decline from a weak third place [behind the UGT and the CC. OO.] to even greater insignificance.'¹⁵⁶

The internal dynamics of the CNT did not help much to ease its increasingly marginal position. With its revival during 1976–7, there was a recrudescence of the strategic and tactical divisions over how best to address the new democratic opening – a situation that mirrored events forty years earlier when the Republic was born. A witness to the CNT's earlier splits, Peirats was aghast at the prospect of a damaging factional struggle.¹⁵⁷ He was especially concerned that the FAI, with its 'dogmatic narrowness',¹⁵⁸ would exacerbate internal divisions.¹⁵⁹ As tensions grew, he used his public addresses to warn of a split ('our *bête noire*'¹⁶⁰) in which 'there will be no victors but a victim: the CNT.'¹⁶¹ Yet, as he recognised just months before his death, 'I had no luck as a prophet in my homeland.'¹⁶² Indeed, a debilitating schism finally came at the CNT's first congress during the Transition, held in Madrid during 8–16 December 1979.¹⁶³

The background to the split was the slowing down of labour militancy in 1978 due to the Moncloa Pacts and the declining CNT membership after the Scala affair. At the time of the congress, the CNT claimed 150,000 members, half the figure of the previous year.¹⁶⁴ Two main factions confronted each other: one favoured renovating anarcho-syndicalist practice by participating in the state-organised trade union elections, while the other regarded this as 'government intervention in labour-capital relations'.¹⁶⁵ This difference of opinion did not, in itself, make a split inevitable. Among the radicals, some were prepared to coexist with more moderate sectors and, indeed, accept their input into the CNT's orientation.¹⁶⁶ However, as had been the case in previous splits, the more maximalist factions drowned out the voices that called for a reasoned discussion of in-

¹⁵⁴ *El País*, 19 November 1977. Former Jerusalem correspondent for NBC and the *New York Times*, Kurzman was biographer of David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel, and the author of a typical Cold War potboiler on 'communist penetration' in Asia. See his obituary in the *New York Times*, 24 December 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Marín, *Anarquistas*, p. 329.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Fishman, *Working-Class Organization and the Return to Democracy in Spain*, Ithaca, NY, 1990, p. 194.

¹⁵⁷ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 13 February 1976.

¹⁵⁸ Letter to Luis Ballester, 30 June 1978.

¹⁵⁹ Letter to Juan Manuel Molina, 24 June 1976.

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 14 January 1989.

¹⁶¹ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 31 March 1980.

¹⁶² Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 14 January 1989.

¹⁶³ Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria*, pp. 198–202; Carmona, *Transiciones*, pp. 107–28; Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento*, pp. 212–38. For a variety of views on the CNT before the congress, see the dossier 'Para qué la CNT?', *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979. For the congress resolutions, see CNT-AIT, *El anarco-sindicalismo*, pp. 1–115.

¹⁶⁴ Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980.

¹⁶⁵ Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento*, p. 219.

¹⁶⁶ Thus Edo wrote how 'reformist factions have had, and still have, a place in the CNT; their presence, their actions and their militant protest have provided the Confederation with a series of analyses, activists, values of immense interest to the necessary inner workings of the Organisation' ('Fenómeno del cenetismo', *Nada: Cuadernos internacionales*, no. 3, 1979, p. 135).

ternal differences. Amid a climate of violence allegedly generated by FAI groups, some fifty-three delegations withdrew from the congress.

Perhaps aware of what might develop, Peirats resisted pressure from young Valencian cenetistas to attend the congress.¹⁶⁷ From afar, he was extremely well informed of proceedings through his many correspondents. He believed the split was structural and went beyond the issue of union elections: 'In a disoriented organisation... agreement is impossible.'¹⁶⁸ He was appalled at the way events unfolded.¹⁶⁹ Before the congress, to help orientate delegates 'starved of knowledge of organisational norms',¹⁷⁰ the National Committee entrusted Peirats with the task of producing a pamphlet outlining the historic internal mechanics of the CNT.¹⁷¹ This did little to ensure open discussion. Peirats compared Madrid to the 1965 Montpellier Congress, where opponents to the Montseny–Esgleas line were expelled. This view was based on what he saw as the 'dogmatism and authoritarian and mafia-like practices' of the leadership around Secretary-elect José Bondía, the somewhat shady candidate of the FAI, who was later expelled from the CNT.¹⁷² Like in 1965, the rhetorical defence of principles masked the use of bureaucratic methods to finger and isolate dissidents.¹⁷³ Meanwhile, Bondía and his cronies ('the hatchet men'¹⁷⁴) labelled their opponents 'reformists' to 'highlight traitors'.¹⁷⁵

Peirats was enraged by the 'shameful image' the congress presented to the world.¹⁷⁶ He reserved additional venom for the FAI, which, he believed, had created the conditions for an avoidable split¹⁷⁷ and whose end was 'not mother anarchy but an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.¹⁷⁸ His fears of a haemorrhage of militants were justified.¹⁷⁹ If, as Peirats claimed, 'the split is like a voodoo spell that scares the average militant', the 'psychological impact' on affiliates was even worse. Workers fled a fractured CNT.¹⁸⁰ From its high-water mark of 300,000 affiliates in 1978, membership now decreased to around 60,000,¹⁸¹ leaving the CNT 'dying of

¹⁶⁷ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Letter to Acracio Ruiz, 18 February 1981.

¹⁶⁹ Letter to Miguel Íñiguez, 14 June 1985.

¹⁷⁰ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 20 November 1979.

¹⁷¹ José Peirats, *Mecanismo orgánico de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, Barcelona, 1979.

¹⁷² Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980. For Bondía, see Gómez Casas, *Relanzamiento*, pp. 232 & 253–5. Bondía's expulsion related to 'the deliberate loss of photographic material from the CNT-FAI historic archives in Amsterdam, maintaining discussions with the socialist government behind the back of the organisation and pursuing a factionalist policy'. Arguably, the most serious allegation against him was his clandestine contacts with Alfonso Guerra, vice-president of the socialist administration formed after the 1982 elections (*El País*, 18 October 1983).

¹⁷³ Letters to Mariano Casasús, 3 January 1980, and Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980.

¹⁷⁴ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 16 December 1980.

¹⁷⁵ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 6 January 1980. Writing to a former CNT secretary, he raged that 'the genuine principles are the norms of the organisation and saving them presupposes respecting and applying them. Anything else is superficial.' He also denounced 'the insignificant individuals from the orthodox faction, who, in the name of anarchism, do nothing beyond shout, intimidate and threaten people' (letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 20 January 1980).

¹⁷⁶ Letter to Juan Gómez Casas, 20 January 1980.

¹⁷⁷ Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980. Summing up the FAI's history, Peirats argued that 'it has never been an anarchist organisation but an army of mercenaries at the service of the bosses who boss the CNT, on whose funds it has always fed itself' (letter to Carlos Navarro, 4 October 1984).

¹⁷⁸ Letter to Manuel Seva, 6 November 1982.

¹⁷⁹ Letter to Antonio Albiñana, 10 June 1980.

¹⁸⁰ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 20 May 1980.

¹⁸¹ Führer, *Los sindicatos*, p. 135.

consumption'.¹⁸² 'We are reduced to almost nothing, a small fish in a big pond... We have lost contact with the real workers', Peirats despaired.¹⁸³ Without strong unions, the CNT faced 'self-marginalisation'.¹⁸⁴ 'We have allowed our time to pass... we are like Balzac's magic skin which, over time, shrinks and shrinks'.¹⁸⁵ Untrammelled pessimism was the order of the day: 'There's no need for anyone to destroy us', he wrote to an old comrade; 'we alone are more than capable of destroying ourselves. All our movements have perished due to the same reasons: personalism, high-handedness, intransigence; in short, authoritarianism. We pretend to be anarchists, libertarians, anti-authoritarians, and we are the exact opposite of this'.¹⁸⁶ He was left with nostalgia for the past, when 'we fought for a sacred cause... What do people kill and die for today?'¹⁸⁷

While describing himself euphemistically as a 'midfielder',¹⁸⁸ equidistant between the two CNTs, he positioned himself closer to the so-called renovators after the split. Nevertheless, saddened by the path of the movement and with the march of history, he withdrew from the polemic.¹⁸⁹ If it was not enough that there were now two CNTs, he was horrified when the orthodox leaders of 'the immobile CNT' launched a legal case for exclusive use of the acronym. In contrast, in the 1930s, the moderate treintistas had laid claim to these same initials unmolested by the radicals.¹⁹⁰ In 1986, with the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Revolution, he rebuffed invitations from both CNTs to participate in public acts, keeping with his 'firm decision' of 'never participating in a meeting or demonstration that is not called in the name of a united CNT'.¹⁹¹

This did not inhibit him from contributing articles to the Barcelona-based anarchist magazine *Polémica* (something he did until his death), which, despite its name, was an 'open platform' that lent itself to the 'civilised and essential confrontation between anarchists, libertarians and respectful independents'.¹⁹² Yet, more than anything, he now focused on preserving the historical memory of the movement and its activists. As Marín notes, he was 'tireless, gathering together information, photographs and the memoirs of his comrades'.¹⁹³ For all his pessimism, as in the 1930s and beyond, he retained hope in a united CNT, 'if not powerful like it was in my youth, at least united'.¹⁹⁴ Until the end of his life, he clung to 'the utopia of patching up what could be repaired'¹⁹⁵ and craved 'an honourable peace' to save 'the life of a movement whose death can still be avoided'.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸² Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 4 November 1980. With fewer union contributions, *Solidaridad Obrera*, the CNT's flagship paper on which Peirats once worked, was reduced in size to the extent that 'it looks like an advertising rag' (letter to Marcelino Boticario, 14 January 1989).

¹⁸³ Letter to Manuel Seva, 23 June 1983.

¹⁸⁴ Letter to Luis Ballester, 30 June 1978.

¹⁸⁵ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 20 May 1980.

¹⁸⁶ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 13 September 1983.

¹⁸⁷ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 25 September 1985.

¹⁸⁸ Letter to Miguel Íñiguez, 22 October 1986.

¹⁸⁹ Letter to Manuel Seva, 23 June 1983.

¹⁹⁰ Letter to Conrado Lizcano, 25 January 1983. In 1989, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the orthodox CNT and the dissidents created the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT – General Confederation of Labour) (*El País*, 8 April 1989).

¹⁹¹ Letter to Carlos Ramos, 20 March 1986.

¹⁹² Peirats, 'Secularización...', p. 12.

¹⁹³ Marín, *Anarquistas*, p. 332.

¹⁹⁴ Letter to Miguel Íñiguez, 8 November 1985.

¹⁹⁵ Letter to Julio Patán, 23 August 1986.

¹⁹⁶ Letter to Miguel Íñiguez, 17 October 1987.

9.3 The return to his roots: La Vall d'Uixó (II)

By this time, Peirats had returned to his birthplace in La Vall d'Uixó. In the late 1970s, Gracia, her sister Asunción, and himself pooled their 'scarce resources' to buy an old house, which was fully renovated in 1981.¹⁹⁷ They visited La Vall most summers for a few months each year, before installing themselves there in 1983, when Gracia retired as a seamstress.¹⁹⁸ Despite fears that he would be 'a stranger',¹⁹⁹ he readapted to life there and was delighted to be back in 'a town with which I was always deeply in love'.²⁰⁰ Regardless of all the changes that took place since his years as a youth in the streets of La Vall ('before it smelt of thyme, rosemary and a thousand aromatic herbs, now just carbonic gas'), with 'a little imagination', Peirats acknowledged, 'it reminds me of my infancy'.²⁰¹ He was content with a 'Franciscan regime'²⁰² in what became his 'Robinson Crusoe's island',²⁰³ which contrasted favourably with his experience of Barcelona, where 'to the environmental pollution one must add that produced by the CNT... Insults and acts of aggression are continuous'.²⁰⁴

Besides writing, he took daily walks with Gracia around the town and the nearby countryside. Since he was having problems with his memory due to Parkinson's, he wrote mainly to exercise his mind and to retain the habit.²⁰⁵ He continued corresponding with friends at home and abroad, and his letters reveal a solid grasp of international affairs, ranging from the global economy to the Gorbachev reforms in the former Soviet Union.²⁰⁶ As had been the case throughout his life, he lived in austerity. On the wall outside their home, one could read the last two lines from Machado's 'Retrato':

You will find me aboard, with little baggage,
almost naked, like the children of the sea.

His main personal concern was now his health. He was increasingly dependent on Gracia, his 'guardian angel'.²⁰⁷ 'My good fortune was forming a union with Gracia. I would already be dead otherwise', he wrote to a friend in 1983.²⁰⁸ But, apparently, he did not fall into self-pity: 'One must always think of the suffering of others as a philosophy against pain. At the end of the day, I have come here to die'.²⁰⁹

His humility remained intact. He rejected an invitation to participate in a planned homage to him in L'Hospitalet, where he was recognised 'as a favourite son'.²¹⁰ Similarly, in La Vall, where he drew attention 'as a notable citizen', he resisted an attempt by members of the local council to hold a public reception in his honour.²¹¹ He was more concerned with collective memory, and this

¹⁹⁷ Letter to José del Amo, 16 February 1981.

¹⁹⁸ Letter to José del Amo, 30 September 1982.

¹⁹⁹ Letter to Mariano Aguayo, 6 July 1976.

²⁰⁰ Letter to José del Amo, 19 November 1972.

²⁰¹ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 25 September 1985.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Letter to Fontaura (Vicente Galindo), 19 May 1982.

²⁰⁴ Letter to Juan Panisello, 2 June 1980.

²⁰⁵ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²⁰⁶ Letter to Conrado Lizcano and Salomé Moltó, 7 November 1987.

²⁰⁷ Letter to José del Amo, 28 March 1984.

²⁰⁸ Letter to Juan Panisello, 25 January 1983.

²⁰⁹ Letter to Sara and Jesús Guillén, 7 February 1986.

²¹⁰ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 25 September 1985.

²¹¹ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 23 September 1985.

sustained his passion for history, to 'guide us in our militancy today and tomorrow'. He criticised the pact of oblivion that shaped post-Franco democracy, arguing that 'one of the aberrations of modern humanity is its lack of historical memory, something that extends to supposed historians.' Thus, he called for historical memory in order 'to master our own history'.²¹² (When we consider the subsequent unravelling of the pact of oblivion, as younger generations have sought to raise new questions about Francoist repression, questions that were unasked in the 1970s Transition and beyond, these words were more than prescient.)

Perhaps because of this commitment to the past, Peirats accepted an *ad honorem* invitation to the II International Colloquium on the Spanish Civil War at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in November 1986.²¹³ He had a heart attack after the first session and spent the following twenty-three days in hospital. The doctors gave him little chance of survival.²¹⁴ He did not remember much of the colloquium, although Gracia reminded him he had been extremely critical of the academic historians present there.²¹⁵ Peirats had little respect for 'professional' historians, as, he believed, 'they lack imagination'²¹⁶ and often worked with 'bad faith', which meant 'they did a disservice to the Goddess of History'.²¹⁷ He rejected the label of 'historian', preferring to describe himself as a 'reporter and, above all, a chronicler',²¹⁸ or as an 'amateur historian'.²¹⁹ Yet 'professional' historians continued to acknowledge their debt to him. In 1987, Peirats was invited to join the Sociedad de Estudios sobre la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo (SEGUEF – Society for the Study of the Civil War and Francoism) by virtue of his 'social importance, personal standing and human qualities'.²²⁰ He accepted 'happily', despite 'having blurted out that my only career was that of brickmaker'.²²¹

After the major heart attack in 1986, Peirats had the feeling he had little time left. The following year, facing his final days, he wrote to a friend that, while 'I have always detested suicide', should something happen to 'my goddess Gracia', then 'nothing would keep me alive in this absurd world'.²²² Aware that he was living on borrowed time and with 'the End more or less imminent', he felt 'a big itch to work'.²²³ Knowledge of a new edition of *La CNT*, which appeared in 1988 after having been out of print for several years, most likely enhanced his urge to work.²²⁴

He thus initiated two final projects in late 1987 and early 1988: the first was the edition of a selection from his memoirs and some of his press articles for the Anthropos publishing house in Barcelona; the second was a series of short stories, which reflected his enduring desire to di-

²¹² Letter to Luis Ballester, 18 May 1979.

²¹³ Letter to Salomé Moltó, 8 October 1986.

²¹⁴ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009; letter to María de Alfonso, 15 December 1986.

²¹⁵ Letters to Juan Gómez Casas, 13 June 1987, and Eduardo de Guzmán, 23 February 1987.

²¹⁶ Letter to Joan Llarch, 9 May 1984.

²¹⁷ Letter to Andrés Martínez, 30 January 1988.

²¹⁸ Letter to Pedro Panés, 2 March 1977.

²¹⁹ Letter to Salomé Moltó, 8 October 1986.

²²⁰ Letter from Julio Aróstegui, president of the SEGUEF to José Peirats, 25 October 1987. Among those who received the same honour were the poet Rafael Alberti Merello, the US journalist and historian Herbert Southworth, and playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo.

²²¹ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 14 January 1989.

²²² Letter to Salomé Moltó, 3 April 1987.

²²³ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 2 November 1985.

²²⁴ This edition was published jointly by Ediciones Madre Tierra (Móstoles, Madrid) and Asociación Artística La Cuchilla (Cali, Columbia).

rect his imagination towards literary endeavours.²²⁵ Both appeared posthumously: in 1990, An-thropos published *Una experiencia histórica del pensamiento libertario: Memorias y selección de artículos breves*, while the following year the short stories, which consisted of a series of narra-tives relating to episodes from the history of the anarchist workers' movement, appeared as *La Semana Trágica y otros relatos*, named after the 1909 Tragic Week urban revolt in Barcelona.

His work was interrupted before Christmas 1988, when he was hospitalised in Castelló. His medication no longer had the same effect as before, and he found himself increasingly tired and with breathing problems.²²⁶ However, upon release from hospital, he resumed writing, 'without rest'²²⁷ – a 'final sacrifice', because 'it's nearly time for me to stop.'²²⁸ By the summer of 1989, he had completed both projects. Earlier that year, after a friend enquired how long he believed he would last, he replied: 'To be truthful, were it not for a small number of people who are still around (among these, my outstanding partner), I would end it all early tomorrow morning.'²²⁹ He was ever conscious of the burden he was placing on Gracia. In June, in one of his final letters, he expressed regret at being 'a heavy cross' for her and revealed a weariness at the prospect of more hospital visits and medication.²³⁰ As Gracia explained, 'He always wanted to be of value, to be useful and independent.'²³¹ Having suffered from Parkinson's disease since the late 1970s, Peirats understandably feared the further loss of his faculties.

He was aware that 'one must know how to live and how to face death with dignity.'²³² Ac-cording to Gracia, 'When he couldn't do anything, he didn't want to live anymore... "This isn't living, it's vegetating", he would say.'²³³ As a lifelong activist, existence had little meaning with-out action – this had been the principle that guided him in his struggle for a better Spain. On 20 August 1989, aged eighty-one, at Burriana beach, he threw himself head first into a wave. His heart finally gave up. In accordance with his wishes, only his closest friends and family attended his funeral. 'I don't want Pharisees following me', he would tell Gracia.²³⁴ Among the dozen or so people present was Domingo Canela, his first comrade in rebellion from La Torrassa. His ashes were later scattered in the Mediterranean Sea.

²²⁵ Letter to Luis Pasamar, 27 January 1970.

²²⁶ Letter from Gracia Ventura to Pura Arcos, 22 December 1988.

²²⁷ Letter to Marcelino Boticario, 14 January 1989.

²²⁸ Letter to Domingo Canela, 12 December 1988.

²²⁹ Letter to Antonia Fontanillas, 18 February 1989.

²³⁰ Letter to José del Amo, 12 June 1989.

²³¹ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²³² Peirats, *Figuras*, p. 309.

²³³ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 20 February 2009.

²³⁴ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

Conclusion: An indispensable life

Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.

—Albert Camus

Without the hope that we might control our own actions and that we might, against all odds and limitations, be able to make our dreams come true, without this, life would not be worth living.

—José Peirats

How do we judge a human life? If we return to the quote from Brecht in the Introduction to this book, Peirats was undoubtedly indispensable. His was a noble life of struggle, whether as a union militant and man of action or as a cultural activist, propagandist, and historian, always in pursuit of what he regarded as a higher ideal. He emerged from the rank and file of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which was his university. His early struggles, ‘in tough tasks shoulder to shoulder with the humble and living on foot’, had ‘taught me a lot’, he recognised.¹ Through these lessons, he flourished intellectually and developed into an accomplished writer and publicist. It is possible that in a different context and in other circumstances, his talents and intellect may have brought him a life of comfort and stability, possibly even wealth. Instead, he chose to dedicate his energies to the collective dream of freeing the disinherited, of which he was one – a path that ensured his life was lived in an almost permanent condition of semi-poverty.

From a young age, he resisted the physical, material, cultural, and socio-economic limitations placed on him by the context into which he was born. This awoke his fighting spirit and set him on a path of permanent struggle: ‘My great tutor has been life. I added willpower and rebelliousness.’² His dissident vocation meant he was destined to ‘experience upsets’ and yet, as he put it:

If we start by saying that anyone who fights for a better society will inevitably be faced against numerous obstacles and considerable hostility, the greatest satisfaction is to be found emerging unvanquished before so many adversaries. To be a CNT and anarchist militant brings no benefit in the common sense of the word. The satisfaction comes from the struggle in its own right.³

At the end of his intense life, he could thus acknowledge that ‘I have a clear conscience... I did what I could despite many obstacles.’⁴

His fierce opposition to hierarchy, only extinguished in death, impelled him to resist recurring economic hardships, injustices, and the psychological dislocation of exile during the long Francoist winter, in which he pitted himself against the powerful socio-political forces that governed Spanish society. As we saw in Chapters 5, 7, and 8, he also confronted the censure of those at the helm of the anarchist movement. He remained unbowed. In his sixties, in a letter to a friend,

¹ Letter to José Gutiérrez, 12 July 1985.

² Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

³ Letter to Vicente Sánchez, 20 February 1978.

⁴ Letter to Andrés Martínez, 30 January 1988.

he revealed his indefatigable defiance towards his enemies: ‘A solitary man, slight and rickety, almost elderly, tells them SHIT.’⁵

Throughout his life, he remained true to the principles he discovered as a youth, unflinching in his belief in the possibility of a better world. This was tempered by an inner stubbornness: according to one activist who was close to Peirats in exile, he was ‘little inclined to tone down his convictions and opinions. We’re all a bit like that, but he was very rigid.’⁶ At the end of his long years as an exile, he reflected how ‘now more than ever, I want to be a free man. My main weakness, among many smaller ones, is that I am an impassioned and vehement defender of justice.’⁷

History did not go his way, and he may be seen as one of the ‘losers’ of twentieth-century Spain. However, through his struggle for culture, we see the triumph of the human spirit, as he ensured ideals of liberty were preserved, along with the anarchist tradition and its historical memory. His historical writings, in particular, were part of an open-ended intellectual project and a guide to future action. His public defence of culture as a right, as something inherently democratic, and not as a mark of distinction and superiority, proved inspirational for many, particularly the young.⁸ According to Carlos Díaz, Philosophy professor at Madrid’s Complutense University, who was close to several anarchists of his generation

There were few like Peirats, who transmitted the theory-practice connection, making study a prerequisite for action and action the prerequisite for study. For me, this circular causality endowed him with a magical aura, which has never lost intensity. This vocation-obsession was impervious to all passing fashions and trends because it was his essence, pure faith understood as an anthropological virtue.⁹

Since his death, the values Peirats defended have been very much alive. Besides the enduring anarchist tradition inside Spain (which saw the renewed popularity of horizontal organising and participatory democracy, most publicly seen with the *indignados* or 15-M movement and the enduring legacy of the anti-globalisation movement post-Seattle of 1999), we bear witness to the emergence of what Tomás Ibáñez calls ‘extra-mural anarchism’, ‘practices and values unmistakably anarchist outside of specifically anarchist movements and without any explicit reference to anarchism’.¹⁰

Some of Peirats’s opinions are less evident and acceptable today. His view of gays and feminists – quite typical of working-class males (and indeed those of other classes) in the 1920s and 1930s – is the most obvious example. While in no way wishing to excuse these opinions, they were, nevertheless, not uncommon within what was a very masculine, even if anarcho-syndicalist, trade union movement. At the same time, the anarchist movement internationally has been criticised for its anachronistic/sexist leanings and for reproducing in its ranks the very power dynamics it seeks to oppose.¹¹ In the Spanish context, this helps explain the subsequent birth and popularity

⁵ Letter to José Agustín, 26 October 1969.

⁶ E-mail from Octavio Alberola to the author, 22 August 2008.

⁷ Letter to Julio Patán, 26 December 1972.

⁸ E-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

⁹ E-mail from Carlos Díaz to the author, 26 November 2014.

¹⁰ Ibáñez, *Anarquismo en movimiento*, p. 20; see also pp. 24–31.

¹¹ Emily Gaarder, ‘Addressing violence against women: Alternatives to state-based law and punishment’, in Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis A. Fernández, Anthony J. Nocella II, and Deric Shannon (eds.), *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, New York, 2009, pp. 46–51.

of the anarcho-feminist organisation Mujeres Libres.¹² Still less excusable is Peirats's inability to modify and revise his views in the different circumstances immediately before and after May 1968.

For all Peirats's internationalism and hostility to nationalism, he remained a very Spanish man. *Don Quixote* was essential reading, his 'bedside book', according to Gracia.¹³ Peirats was then, as Altet puts it, like the other 'libertarians of exile [who] never ceased to reclaim a cultural heritage that was both anarchist and Hispanic.'¹⁴ Similarly, as we have seen, he never adjusted to life in exile; Peirats always had an eye fixed across the Pyrenees, longing for the political change that would allow him to return to his birthplace, even if, over time, Spain became more of a memory and, increasingly, an abstraction.

Peirats was thoroughly engaged with the sensual, joyous aspects of life, as witnessed in his commitment to theatre and his later love of painting.¹⁵ Throughout the years of exile, like in his earlier life in Spain, he regaled friends with renditions of zarzuelas, which were much in demand at parties.¹⁶ This love of song contrasted with his more puritanical and rather strict morality, which gave him an air of severity. Nonetheless, one comrade who knew Peirats well acknowledged that 'he wasn't serious. He was always joking.'¹⁷ Gracia too attested to his deep sense of ironic humour.¹⁸

Yet there are two human traits that really stood out in Peirats. The first is humility. Many who knew him concur on this point.¹⁹ For all his achievements as an organiser, writer, and propagandist, he was 'gifted with extraordinary intellectual abilities'²⁰ and, as one youth who knew the mature Peirats in the 1970s recognised, 'You did not see any haughtiness in him.'²¹ Decades earlier, one of his 'students' in revolutionary Lleida appreciated how he addressed those with less knowledge than himself 'with tact, circumspection and great patience... He knew how to put himself at our level while teaching us the ABC of anarchist morality' – an approach that placed him 'at the head of our *teachers*'.²² That today a street bears his name in La Vall d'Uixó is a memorialisation of which he would not approve.

Perhaps due to the many setbacks and moments of adversity he encountered throughout life, Peirats never appeared prideful or boastful. Rather, he was proud of his humble origins, describing himself, typically, as 'a modest writer who emerged from the fired clay of an oven'. His awareness that there was always more to learn in life militated against arrogance: 'In terms of my culture, I'm not bad, but I'm conscious of the huge effort this involved and how deficient it is right now', he wrote in 1969.²³ Besides, it is likely that, to a significant degree, his sense of self (and self-worth) were submerged within the collective identity of the group or movement

¹² Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, Bloomington, IN, 1991.

¹³ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁴ Altet and Domergue, *La cultura del exilio*, p. 116.

¹⁵ 'He always had to be doing something' (interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009).

¹⁶ One friend wrote that what she would most remember of Peirats was his 'voice, those moments of song and joy that I can recreate whenever I wish' (Antonia Fontanillas, '¡Ciao, Peirats!', *Rojo y Negro*, January 1990).

¹⁷ Interview by the author with Diego Camacho, 5 November 2005.

¹⁸ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

¹⁹ Interview by the author with Frank Mintz, 30 October 2008.

²⁰ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 226.

²¹ E-mail from Freddy Gómez to the author, 5 May 2009.

²² Téllez Solá, 'Recuerdos', *Anthropos*, no. 102, p. 61.

²³ Letter to Federico Martínez, n.d. (1969?)

to which he belonged at any given time. Certainly, there is ample evidence that he prioritised collective goals over individual self-advancement. In any case, he never saw himself as a gifted individual, and he viewed his life as ‘a race between Achilles and the tortoise’, in which Achilles is constantly pursuing the turtle.²⁴ He believed that with will power and struggle, anything was possible. According to Gracia, his philosophy was based in the theory that ‘If you want to achieve something, then attempt it; if it does not turn out well, then examine why and try again.’²⁵

The other striking quality Peirats exuded was a deep honesty. One activist who knew him well commented that ‘in the moral domain, his honesty and his integrity were incomparable.’²⁶ Even his ideological adversaries attest to his profound uprightness and were impressed by this and his ‘austere independence’.²⁷ Peirats was also ‘unflinching’: he expected and, indeed, demanded these same values from those around him – ‘he didn’t like tricks.’²⁸ Indeed, his militancy was characterised by ‘the same demand of neatness’.²⁹ As Peirats reflected just before his death, his stance ‘created more than a few enemies, but many more friends. In the area of principles, I tried to be rigid, starting with myself.’³⁰

Two days after his death, in an unsigned obituary in *El País*, he was described incorrectly as ‘theoretician of the CNT’.³¹ He was, certainly, *of* the CNT. But as another obituary noted, he was a ‘pure product of the CNT’, ‘one of the great intellectual figures of Spanish anarchism’.³²

²⁴ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

²⁵ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²⁶ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 225.

²⁷ Abad de Santillán, *Memorias*, p. 195.

²⁸ Interview by the author with Gracia Ventura, 21 February 2009.

²⁹ Borrás, *Del radical-socialismo*, p. 225.

³⁰ Letter to Ramón Fortich, 28 December 1985.

³¹ *El País*, 22 August 1989.

³² Freddy Gómez, ‘Hommage à José Peirats’, *Le Monde Libertaire*, no. 761, 21 September 1989, p. 10.

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