

Anarchism and Utopia in the Spanish Civil War

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We are asked from the outset to come up with a flawless system, to guarantee that things will work this way and not that, without mishap or error. If learning to live had to be done this way, then our apprenticeship would never end. Nor would the child ever learn to walk, nor the youngster to ride a bicycle. On the contrary, in real life things happen the other way around.

Isaac Puente, *Libertarian Communism*

Where and when is utopia, that image of the world imagined otherwise? The answer to this question is as numerous as the idea of utopia itself. The naming of it begins with Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in Latin in 1516. Simultaneously the good place (eutopia) and no place (outopia), the island of More's novel was influenced by the expanding geographical knowledge of sixteenth-century Europe. However, during the eighteenth century the spatial utopia gradually took on a temporal character and utopian narratives became aligned with the idea of a better/alternative future. Since then, utopia has continued to be associated with transformative future scenarios, and with a process of learning to think and live otherwise.

Reading literary utopias in relation to the wider social-political conditions of their production is not an uncommon practice. Less common, is the approach of reading historical events through the lens of utopian thinking, particularly in those cases where, as Fredric Jameson writes, 'whole social movements have tried to realize a Utopian vision, communities have been founded and revolutions waged in its name'. This is because history has predominantly been written as a record of past events, rather than narrating the hopes of past societies.

Here, we take the second approach and explore history from the perspective of utopia, specifically looking at the revolution that took place during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In this context, the idea of utopia is very much linked to 'libertarian communism' – sometimes called anarchist communism – and the workers' movement, which found its strongest form in the organisation of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) union in 1911. Membership of the CNT was not confined to anarchists but its overwhelming ideological influence was anarchism. Support for the union grew rapidly in 1931, after the declaration of the Second Republic in Spain, and brought new energy to anarchist debates about utopia.¹

Anarchism had had a following in Spain since the 1890s, when cheap translations of the works of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin were published in print-runs of tens of thousands. Before 1931, however, discussions about the nature of the coming society had taken the form of polemics in newspapers and reviews, with little opportunity for speculative theories to be tested in practice. The advent of democracy and the founding of the Second Republic changed that and gave rise to a period of heightened class struggle.

A notable event in 1932 was the short-lived rebellion of mineworkers in the Catalan region of Alt Llobregat, during which several villages announced the arrival of libertarian communism. Libertarian communism had been the declared goal of the CNT for over a decade, but the rising of 1932 brought it to the forefront of the anarchist agenda. Debates about the precise content of libertarian communism would continue until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, but there was agreement that it would introduce a society of equality, in which private property, money and the state would all be abolished.

Two prominent voices in the debate were Isaac Puente (1896-1936) and Diego Abad de Santillán (1897-1983). Each were thinkers of utopia in the sense that they attempted to outline the

¹ The Second Republic was the democratic regime that existed in Spain from 1931 to 1939.

shape of alternative future societies in their writings. In this essay, we compare the former's ethical communist vision with the latter's industry-centred programme, as different responses to the question of living in post-revolutionary Spain. It was a question that was to find a partial answer in the revolution that accompanied the outbreak of the Civil War, when workers in both urban centres and rural enclaves engaged in initiatives that were, to a greater or lesser extent, informed by pre-war anarchist ideas.

Utopian thinking played an important role in these activities, giving form to the space of possibility opened up by the revolution. In focusing on the writings of Puente and Santillán, we hope, then, to highlight the close dialogue between political movements and the alternative realities of their utopias.

Isaac Puente and *Libertarian Communism* (1932)

Isaac Puente was a doctor from the Basque country, an advocate of naturism and neo-Malthusianism,² who was executed at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. His pamphlet *Libertarian Communism (El Comunismo Libertario)* was first published in 1932 and sold in enormous quantities. Following the rising of that year in Alt Llobregat, Puente, like many other anarchists, was convinced that the working class of Spain was ready to rid itself of capitalism, and that its natural striving towards liberty was only obstructed by the oppressive apparatus of the state. In his pamphlet he declared that: 'The greatest of evils is not capital, which exploits the worker, enriching itself at his expense, but rather the state which keeps the worker naked and undefended, maintaining him in subjection by armed force and by imprisonment [...] the state, that old, old institution, now confronts the libertarian aspirations of the people. They will overwhelm it'.

Puente's vision of libertarian communism was based on a moral critique of contemporary society: 'Man is at the mercy of these two social afflictions which escape his control [capital and the state]: they make him petty, stingy and lacking solidarity when he is rich and cruelly insensitive to human suffering when he wields power. Poverty degrades, but wealth perverts'. However, Puente resisted describing in precise terms the moral improvement to society that would presumably flow from a social revolution. Instead, the majority of the pamphlet is dedicated to contesting the 'prejudices' that he thought could prevent the full acceptance of libertarian communism among the people. Such prejudices range from those likely to be found among political rivals of the anarchists – social democrats and Bolshevik-inspired communists were implied in his references to 'social architects' and the 'intercession of politicians' – to what might be considered the 'common sense' of class society, which justifies social division according to supposed naturally occurring human hierarchies. In countering these prejudices, Puente adopted a polemical tone. His was a 'libertarian common sense' which affirmed that

The workers know more about sociology than the intellectuals; they are much more farsighted when it comes to solutions [...] the working class has a much more precise vision of the future and a greater breadth of spirit than all the intellectual classes put

² Here, naturism refers to a politically radical way of life, characteristics of which include social nudity, and vegetarianism. Neo-Malthusianism was a set of ideas for population control, derived from the political thought of Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus.

together [...] For all its ferocious ignorance, an uncultivated mentality is preferable to minds that have been poisoned by privilege and eroded by the routine grind of learning [...] What holds human societies together is not compulsion by the powers that be, nor the intelligent foresight of those in government [...] [but rather] the instinct for sociability and the need for mutual aid [...] With biological humility we anarchists ask that these organising tendencies and instincts be given free rein.

Here, Puente argues in simple yet poetic language what decades of anarchist influence had already instilled in much of the Spanish working-class population: that society was organised so as to deny liberty to the worker and to justify this denial through ideological prejudice. Therefore, Puente believed that living in libertarian communism would be ‘like learning to live’, ‘emerging from dullness little by little’. It is likely that Santillán’s subsequent careful statistical argument regarding Spanish capitalism’s inefficiency was intended as a complement, or even a self-conscious contrast to Puente’s moral manifesto.

Puente insisted that the bases for organising libertarian communism already existed. These were, on the one hand, the trade union, which would provide the democratic means of running the economy, and the municipality, an assembly of the people in villages and small towns. Puente described the latter as ‘an institution with ancient origins [which] can, despite dilution by political institutions, recover its ancient sovereignty and take charge of the organisation of local life’. The society of the future would thus be organised from the bottom-up, and consist of multiple local units. He wrote, ‘this is the utopia that the anarchist wishes to bring about’.

Puente’s localism would prove to be the most controversial aspect of his utopian vision. Santillán described it as ‘economic parochialism’ unsuited to the complexity of modern industry. This dilemma would persist into the Civil War, when contrasting priorities at the local, regional and national level created fractures within the CNT.

Diego Abad de Santillán and *The Economic Organisation of the Revolution* (1936)

Diego Abad de Santillán, born Sinesio Baudilio García Fernández, was a prolific writer and anarchist activist whose life was divided between Spain and Argentina. By the time of his involvement in the Spanish movement in the 1930s he was already a veteran of bitter ideological disputes that had affected both countries. He had become convinced that libertarian communism would only be possible in an industrial society, in which a degree of centralisation would be necessary in order to co-ordinate the different parts of the economy.

Santillán’s writings from this period, compiled in pamphlet form in March 1936 under the heading *The Economic Organisation of the Revolution* (*El Organismo Económico de la Revolución*),³ emphasised this point in an attempt to address the perceived lack of realism and pragmatism amongst his comrades. ‘What we are attempting to outline’, he claimed, ‘is not our dream of the future, but rather what is practical in this moment, with the human material at our disposal, in the current world conditions’. He declared himself concerned with answering the question of ‘how to begin if the longed-for revolution breaks out tomorrow and the workers have to directly take

³ Santillán’s pamphlet was re-published in 1937 and 1938 with additional notes from the author, who considered himself to have been broadly vindicated by the events of the Civil War.

on the responsibility of labour in the new order'. Although it was not presented as a definitive blueprint, he insisted that a 'bad plan of action is better than none'.

Santillán conceived of libertarian communism as a society of abundance rather than scarcity or simplicity, claiming, for example, that everyone who had need of a car would possess one:

We do not want to deprive ourselves of any of the commodities that modern technique has made accessible; on the contrary, if it is possible to multiply these commodities, and we do not doubt that this must be the case, given that if capitalism has achieved such marvels, more will be achieved in a regime of socialisation and freedom.

By way of comparison, Santillán alluded to the 'beautiful' craftsmanship – and the belief in a society built on craft production – of the English socialist William Morris. Such production fell outside his definition of socially necessary labour. If craft products were desired they would have to be made 'outside the hours of obligatory general labour, for the satisfaction of minority tastes'. The boundary between work and play that utopian socialists⁴ had wished to erase would clearly be reinforced under the programme outlined here: 'Modern industry is a mechanism that has its own rhythm. The human rhythm does not govern that of the machine, rather it is the rhythm of the machine that governs that of the human. The fact of private property becoming social does not change the essence of production or the productive method'.

In contrast to the moral force of Puente's denunciation of capitalism, Santillán took great pains to demonstrate its inefficiency. He painted a picture, not only of human, but of natural and organic potential wasted by this inefficiency: '[Capitalism] does not get the most out of the land or natural power, water and wind; it does not get the most out of man as a worker, as a technician or as a scientist'. The alternative to such waste was a 'socialised economy, in which land, factories, housing and means of transport cease to be monopolised by private interests and become the collective property of the whole community'. 'The new socialised economy will be in the hands of the workers and the technicians and will have no other purpose or objective than the satisfaction of the needs of the population. The population will not be conceived as a market place: people will not be made to buy products, rather products will be made to satisfy the needs of people'. According to Santillán, from one day to the next, the unions, whose structure was already in place, could do a better job of running the economy than private interests.

From Theory to Practice

In its National Congress of May 1936, the CNT included a discussion of libertarian communism on the agenda, and this was debated in great detail by affinity groups and union branches up and down the country. 150 position papers were submitted for the consideration of the Congress, at which a working group was established to come up with a coherent definition. Certain assumptions common to both Puente and Santillán formed the basis of the submissions, namely: capitalism had entered its final crisis, the tools for the reorganisation of society already existed, the rational organisation of the economy could lead to the self-sufficiency of Spain, complete blueprints of the future should be resisted and experimentation encouraged.

⁴ For example, the overarching theme of William Morris's utopian fiction, *News from Nowhere* (1890), is that of pleasure in work, and of craft production as fully integrated into social life.

It was clear, however, that the vision of libertarian communism outlined in the position paper produced at the Congress was a compromise between competing points of view. Santillán was dismayed that the unions were not to be given total authority but, rather, would have to share decision making power with the Commune, a body very like Puente's conception of the municipality. The paper's attention to questions of naturism and gender relations made it distinct from both of their texts but it was noticeably in agreement with Puente's other writings on these subjects.⁵ The paper has subsequently been criticised by historians for its 'naïve' attention to such matters rather than the urgent issues of armed conflict and war-time production that the movement would, in a matter of months, be confronted with.

Yet many of the principles that were seen as crucial to the revolutionary project would be significant for the social revolution that erupted alongside the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936. The Spanish revolution took the following broad forms: the collectivisation of industry and land under union or worker control, the creation of armed militia to patrol the streets and fight the rebellious army at the front, the expropriation of the church, the reorganisation of education, and the participation of thousands of women in all of these phenomena. The different tendencies within Spanish anarchism expressed by Puente and Santillán's pamphlets persisted, and there was a degree of conflict between union power in the cities and the autonomy of smaller localities engaged in revolutionary experiments of their own. They were overshadowed, however, by a greater conflict, due to events that neither writer had foreseen: the persistence, in spite of the revolution, of the Republican state, and the participation of anarchists in state bodies.

Puente would certainly have agreed with Santillán when he declared in March 1936 that 'we are prepared to sacrifice a great deal of ourselves because what is at stake demands sacrifices, but we cannot deny our very nature, and to neglect the reactionary, antisocial and anti-proletarian nature of the state is tantamount to suicide'. By the end of the year Puente would be dead and Santillán Councillor for the Economy in the Catalan government. The notes added to later editions of Santillán's pamphlet are haunted by this fatal compromise, and he admitted a desire to 'bear witness to our total failure in wanting to make of the state apparatus an instrument of public utility and not a simply oppressive burden. The events we have lived through make us see once again that we were right in our critique of the state'.

Such reflections resonate with the struggle to imagine alternative futures today and the structural transformations that would be required to achieve them. The writings of Puente and Santillán, and their uptake at the CNT Congress of 1936, are a testament to moments in which utopian thinking finds form as part of a wider collective movement. Here, utopia refers not to the relative realism or fantasy of such thinking but instead to the capacity to imagine the world otherwise, and the potential for social change that follows from it.

The difficult task of living otherwise that Spanish workers attempted during the revolution reveals something of this potential. For a time, social relations were fundamentally altered. From the organisation of work to the role of women, from the power of the church to conventions of speech and dress, Spanish society in much of its Republican zone underwent changes that would have seemed impossible only months before. These inspirational experiments did not last, and most were extinguished with varying degrees of violence before the collapse of the Republic in

⁵ Puente's writings on such topics include 'Neomalthusianismo' and others compiled in the volume included in the 'Further Reading' section below.

1939. However, the Spanish revolution endures as a powerful example of how utopian ideas and anarchist practice can open up new ways of living and being.

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