

Critical assessment of "Wildcat Spain" book

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The book *Wildcat Spain Encounters Democracy* was pretty much blanked at the time it was published in the late 1970s. The Communist/Trotskyist left and the left of the Labour party – hardly surprisingly – made no mention, though one or two fellow traveller trendy journals, mainly in London, did. The anarchists though were particularly furious especially as the overthrow of Francoism in Spain seemed to promise a renewed great future for the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. Criticism of the CNT and anarchism generally at the time was more than heresy, it was almost regarded on the level of psychopathic churlishness. It's what we had anticipated though were very surprised at the sheer extent of the venom. Consequently we still have quite a few boxes of books still unopened even though the book sold reasonably well though no doubt in time the remainder will be subjected to the gnawing criticism of the mice.

Should we - Stuart Wise, Phil Meyler & Portuguese friends and an Australian guy called Gerry Vignola – have gone ahead and published particularly as, in other respects, we were somewhat wanting? The Spanish was extraordinarily difficult to translate and none of us were, by any stretch of the imagination, official translators. Indeed we didn't even know one! We tried here and we tried there but no one was prepared to help especially those Spanish libertarians living in London around the revived CNT who were livid at the pamphlets content. We struggled on exasperatedly trying to bring out the nuances of various arguments whilst keeping English on board hoping to overcome the appearance of too much translatese. We didn't succeed but we tried our very best and seeing we've been condemned for these inadequacies more than once it's worthwhile pointing out the difficulties which beset us. Perhaps without exception most of those engaged in the majority of the translating had never received any official language teaching to any recognised level in very basic schooling. For us it was a mere smattering of French never mind an often high falutin', classical Spanish style. In some ways our efforts (if this isn't stretching a point?) can perhaps be compared with those unemployed Welsh miners in the 1930s who translated Zola just for the sheer difficult hell of doing it. One difference though: Official social democratic education had intervened in the meantime. It does though point to a dilemma: Should we go ahead with another publication knowing such a problem will again rear its head? There is a text lying on a dusty shelf translated quickly from Italian 25 years ago dealing with the Metropolitan Indian revolt and written by one of its protagonists. Unfortunately the original Italian has been lost so there's no way it could be corrected with precision, though even as it quirkily stands, it is a fascinating story.

All we can say in justification isn't it better that these texts finally see the light of the day rather than indulging in too much nit picking? And maybe it's not too farfetched to say that *Wildcat Spain Encounters Democracy* is perhaps the best critical, blow by blow, account ever of the actual rise, fall and motion of a very determined assembly movement which nonetheless failed and what we have here are profound historical documents.

The book largely consisted of four longish texts published separately in Spain in the mid to late 1970s by roughly, a few individuals who loosely came together. The tone of comment changes dramatically from first to last mirroring the decline over merely two years or more of what could have become a great insurrectionary moment. The Manuscript Found in Vitoria by *Los Incontralados* has a euphoric cutting edge catching the life force of the emerging autonomous assembly movement in all its nascent audacity as if every alienation was destined to collapse before its breathtaking reality - what some pundit at the time called "a diffuse, insurrectional chaos". Noting and condemning the impotence of the big socialist and communist unions together with the new "parallel unionism" this text didn't stop short of lucidly expounding on the emptiness of revived anarchism.

Obviously the people who wrote these texts were very intimately related to this raw, primordial social revolt and no doubt were able to move in and about some of the hundreds and hundreds of open assemblies constituted by the workers. When the book appeared some individuals criticised the contents for being "substitutionist" though this is the last thing it was. Even if those involved in writing the originals were not at the centre of particular important struggles and weren't say shipbuilders, shoe makers or building workers etc, didn't they also capture the mood and sway of these assemblies enough to rightly point where they were making mistakes? In any case to possibly counteract the tendency towards a certain revolutionary intellectualism we nonetheless had made certain we put in the book some texts written organically by workers themselves involved in major struggles. So there's a certain compare and contrast at work here. To be sure in the long texts much emphasis is placed on the failure of theoretical consciousness: "The unconsciousness of the workers, above all else...delivered them into the hands of their enemy" noting that workers did not recognise "the extent of their challenge" thus limiting the assemblies relying on them as "the better means of defence". The movement "did what was essential but did nothing more and allowed external powers to dispossess it of its gains and to speak in its place".

In a way that's also the sticking point to and we still need to be reminded of this. It doesn't imply from now on we need a party albeit an ultra leftist one as that indeed would be substitutionist. Moreover, when have we ever seen an insurrectional autonomous workers' assembly clearly going from the defensive to the offensive meaning it begins to take on board the entire social totality ushering in the new world? Whether this will ever happen in this bleak time seems farther away than ever but it's still worth the try when circumstances become more favourable again! One can only marvel at the hope that was in Spain at the time. After the battle in Vitoria in 1976 a sentence like the following had such meaning: "What we have experienced has only been the mild beginning of something that will happen in the future and will continue for some time". "Mild" after the guns and riots in Vitoria - you must be joking! There simply was this sense of an imminent new Spanish revolution following on lucidly from the clarity of the Barcelona May Days of 1937: "The assembly movement is the first workers' council of the second Spanish revolution". But it never was to happen!

The texts to follow were to be marked by the beginning of a new uncertainty always hoping against hope that the real movement would snap back into focus. It was a common enough hope at the time everywhere although Spain was to the forefront. The fact that no breakthrough happened – rapid advance is always essential in such historical situations – meant a climate of subdued weariness ensued and the declining assembly movement reflected this as they became props of the unions. The gap was closing as these later texts mirroring the fall from euphoria became at the same time searching and enquiring emphasizing more of the modern alienations beginning to make their mark; social delinquency, the pretext of terrorism, ecological catastrophe, nuclear proliferation and the transition to an information age aided by technology – “the perspectives for domination which nuclear energy and technology open up” – though without pinpointing hi-tech which was still in its infancy.

These indeed are the problems which beset us today though the ‘theorists’ – for want of a better word – behind these texts were also becoming more bewildered, puzzled and perplexed themselves in the midst of another growing lacunae hard on the heels of a disintegrating Francoism. They saw this as the tendency towards; “State capitalism, of monopoly technocracy” when that monopoly was to be driven by a neoliberal ‘free’ market and not by the state. They were right though about monopoly even if catastrophically unawares it was to be spearheaded by the most powerful entrepreneurial robber barons (e.g. Bill Gates etc) in the history of capitalism. On the other hand they lucidly intimated there was a vast leveling at hand as we became prisoners of a flattened universe like never before amidst, “the evident fact of the internationalism of daily life” – an aspect central to the “Freewheeling Latin America” web page elsewhere here. In their maybe too often repeated condemnations of parties and unions, important though such condemnations are, these incontrolados had neglected other essential aspects of growing alienation represented by the role of intellectuals, media and the arts only noting; “the large number of jobs created in this sector”. It would have been really something if they’d gone on from these initial insights maybe connecting the growing interdependence between an increasingly hemmed-in and commoditised daily life and a colossal farcical parody of the death and transcendence of art bought and sold everywhere as a substitute for the mass creative revolution of everyday existence, a revolution which must negate money, commodity and celebrity – everything this farcical parody isn’t. In the end though, it’s always easier to make such criticisms with the benefit of hindsight...

That wasn’t quite that vis-à-vis Spain. A few years later and we became rather more personally involved with the Spanish dockers’ coordinadora, a kind of autonomous workers’ organisation (or was it in reality?) or rather did it degenerate into a rank ‘n’ file trades unionism? At first one of the Spanish guys – Miguel – who had played a significant in the previous Wildcat Spain writings was of the opinion that the organisation was autonomous in character during the Spanish dock strikes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In its statutes, the coordinadora berated the CNT alongside the other big Spanish unions. Moreover, a respected guy from the ultra leftist mag Etcetera in Barcelona in a voluntary capacity was beginning to work continually with the coordinadora. (Later he was to leave). All this clinched things for us and we published a detailed account of its activities, along with other dockers’ struggle across the planet in *Workers of the World Tonight*. Internationalism was of the essence here and the result is on some web out there! In the meantime we warned the Spanish dockers that a big strike was imminent in British ports and together with our Spanish friend Ana wrote a report in Spanish which was printed in the coordinadora’s newspaper. (Ana had been an anarchist in and around Madrid during the 1970s but had got fed up with some of the money shenanigans her little group got into and left). So

much for international attempts! The dockers' strike in the UK was quickly defeated and the Dock Labour Scheme which provided basic job protection was scrapped. After what seemed like the massacre of the miners in 1984-5 there was simply no heart left for titanic resistance never mind positive struggle. Though internationally there was to be a brief flurry of exemplary international boycotting – especially on the Atlantic and Pacific Seaboard - after the Liverpool dockers were sacked in the early 1990s, the nightmare future was really setting in

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