

The Agricultural Collectives of Aragon

(Talk by) Felix Carrasquer

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At the end of his presentation, [Frank] Mintz spoke about the ideal, the conscious ideal that one ideates with the help of imagination, and about the fact that people have the ability to imagine first and then act. In the case of Aragon, the prehistory is very important in order to properly understand what happened next.

In Aragon, there already were communal fields in the villages which were cultivated in common, and also common pastures. There was thus a collectivist tradition. We syndicalists had already created collectives before the civil war. In my home village, Albaete de Cinca, we had – with the lands that belonged to my father – formed a collective with eight other comrades. It was a complete collective with community life and all property was held in common.

But what mattered more than this collectivist tradition was the honesty and good will of the syndicalists in the Aragonese countryside. On July 19, 1936 (the date of the fascist coup), there were ten to eleven thousand CNT members in the agricultural zone of Aragon. Thus we had created a number of pattern collectives. In addition, in the cafes, in the syndicalist or republican meeting rooms, we had read the syndicalist newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera* and other publications aloud to the villagers to acquaint them with a libertarian point of view. It meant that when the Republic came in 1931 and the old republicans – there were many of them in Aragon – noticed that nothing was really changing, they approached the CNT. I don't want to claim that they became card carrying syndicalists in the CNT, but they became sympathizers of the libertarian movement.

Then, when the republican authority in Aragon collapsed with the advance of the militia columns in Zaragoza, which had been conquered by the Fascists, the CNT called the people of almost all the villages of Aragon to a public meeting in the square or at the church, and so in a month we got a total of 300,000 collectivists, that is, we 11,000 syndicalists managed to get 300,000 people into the collectives. And this was the result of the CNT members' integrity and clear stance – clear at least at that moment and in accordance with the general opinion in our villages.

Let us now briefly present how the collectivization could come about. In Binefar, for example – Binefar was at that time a town with 4,000 inhabitants – the people gather in the square and the syndicalists explain what a collective is and the advantages it can have. For example, the abolishing of the classes in favor of equality and brotherhood between all. Other villagers would

speaking their mind, and then we said to those gathered: "Now go home all of you and think this through and once you have given it some thought, those who want to join can come to the committee and register and those who don't may continue as self-employed." A week later about 75% of the residents had enrolled in the collectives at the committee in Binefar, which means that 25% came to remain outside the collectives.

I want to point out in this context — because the communists and other malicious people have said that we forced people into the collectives — if in Binefar it was 25%, in other villages 10, 20 or 40% who did not join the collectives, that shows that we didn't force anyone, correct?

Because if we had done that, everyone would have been in the collectives. There was no coercion, everyone went into collectivization voluntarily.

So, with the land of the collectivists in this village and in all the villages of Aragon, as well as with land seized from fascists who fled or died in battle, the collective was formed. And the people organized themselves into "asamblea" (asamblea = assembly, ie of all the members. The word is used both of the assembled members and of the assembly itself, the "general meeting".) A "committee" was formed and it then divided the land into lots with a group of workers for each lot. The groups helped each other when needed. When the villages of "la comarca" (roughly equivalent to the Swedish "socken [parish]" or in a more modern word "storkommun [large municipality]") had organized themselves — there were 32 of them with a collectivists population of 30,000 people, a federation was formed for "la comarca", and a federation committee was elected which was located in Binefar. The 32 villages created a common, a completely in common economy. They not only helped each other financially with products. If one village needed to collect the harvest and another in the neighborhood had already finished, the workers from the latter village would go to the other to help them finish the harvest.

The Federation of "la comarca" did many things. It founded, for example, a hospital for the "comarca" district. Both collectivists and "individualists" (i.e. self-employed) could turn there, everyone received treatment. New roads were built and electricity and telephones were installed in twelve to fourteen villages that lacked these amenities.

The same thing happened in 600 small villages in Aragon: twelve such "comarca" federations were formed. Each "comarca" organized itself and arranged its life in accordance with what the "asamblea" decided first in each village, because everything, absolutely everything, was discussed and decided at the "asamblea", i.e. the general meeting with all members of the collective. In this way, the "asamblea" was the only authority, and therefore we can say that in Aragon we lived for about nineteen to twenty months (depending on which villages it was) without authority, without property and without bureaucracy.

Question: How many people were included in all these twelve villages?

Answer: 300 000.

I would like to dwell a little bit on this question of bureaucracy, because our friend Mintz makes — perhaps through a purely linguistic misunderstanding — bureaucracy, the lack of bureaucracy, one of the negative things in the CNT, as for me, in fact, the very best thing about the CNT is that they despise bureaucracy. For bureaucracy is a mechanism that maintains the authorities and the existing order. What I mean is that Mintz just wanted to say that we lacked administrative capacity. That's what he wanted to say.

But my subject was the collectives in Aragon, and there was no authority from above. We only had to do what the "asamblea" had decided. And each village could only decide for itself. I must say that in Aragon this worked because there were no "highers ups" so to speak. It was

connected with the fact that our capital had been taken from us¹ and with it also the leading Aragonese CNT militants — those who, through the prestige they enjoyed, were perceived as "leaders".

The people in each village were thus completely masters of their own house. By and large, everything was spontaneous, revolutionary and free from inhibiting influences.

True, a "Council of Aragon" was formed, but that was because the Republic demanded it, so that there would be a sham of authority. But the Council of Aragon had no authority over the collectives, hardly even any influence. The collectives lived their lives and the Council of Aragon was a bit like a ghost or a scarecrow to the fascists.

It is necessary to emphasize that the collective — in accordance with the tradition of the libertarian movement — dealt with everything. On the economic level, they were interested in improving harvests and the like, but they also dealt with education, healthcare, coexistence. In education, not much could be done, because we had to work and make sure that freedom was as great as possible.

In healthcare, we did a lot.

I would like to add some details concerning upper Aragon, for example the Binefar district, which may serve as an example, as there are many others similar to it. There were quite a lot of machines already at this time, for example harvesters. They were collectivized and likewise mules, sheep, goats, pigs, etc. were brought together in collective stables. And some people were assigned to look after them.

I will now talk about the basic mechanism that allowed a kind of "libertarian communism" to work in Aragon. The very knot, the basic element, the rudder of the economic order were the cooperatives. In every village or in any case in most villages — for all were not the same — there was a cooperative, i.e. a cooperative store or distribution center.

This cooperative controlled the economy, both of the collectives and of the self-employed. This means that the self-employed person had an ongoing account. He went to the cooperative to get fertilizers, medicines, sugar or whatever he needed and he delivered grain, oil and more to the cooperative. And in this way they had control over the economy.

This experience shows a solution to the problem we talked about earlier — the money problem — and it can teach us a lot about how to undo the classical national economy, which is good for nothing.

We organized, produced for consumption, according to the needs that existed. But we were at war and we had to produce much more than we ourselves needed. But if the war had not been, we would have produced very rationally and worked fewer hours. But the fact is that we managed to avoid problems that arose in other regions, the inflation problem for example. For us a hen or a loaf of bread was worth just as much in 1936 as in 1938, while in Catalonia and in Valencia the price of a loaf of bread rose from 60 centimos to twenty pesetas and the price of a hen from eight pesetas to fifty.

I don't want to claim that Aragon's collectives were better than in other regions, not at all. There were agricultural collectives, especially in the province of Valencia, which were better organized than those in Aragon. But in Aragon we were 300,000 collectivists out of a population of about half a million, while in the Levant there were one million collectivists out of five million

¹ Aragon's capital Zaragoza fell to the fascists without a fight. A terrible massacre of militants of the labor movement took place there. (TN)

inhabitants and in Catalonia there were one and a half million collectivists (in industry and in the countryside) out of five million inhabitants. They were thus in the minority and were forced to submit to the market economy. While we were in the majority and could establish libertarian communism with an authentically socialized economy.

Question: The fact that even the self-employed — or the individualists, as they said in Spain — delivered their goods to the cooperatives, that must mean that not all individualists were bourgeois. So there were different types of individualists?

Answer: It was mandatory to go to the cooperative. We didn't let in buyers either from Catalonia or Valencia. If a truck came to buy, it was sent back. The economic transactions that were made in Aragon, they were made with the collectives of the Valencia region or with the industrial collectives of Catalonia or with the Generalitat, the Catalan government, but always through the cooperatives.

Throughout the region the family wage was introduced — with some variations, for there were villages that gave oil or wine or bread for free to the collectivists, not to the others. But everywhere you had a family wage. This meant that the collective took care of the old, the mothers of young children, the children, the sick, everyone. A family wage was introduced that was equal for those who worked in the fields, those who worked in other tasks, as well as for doctors and teachers. This had never been done before. And the collective provided the doctors and teachers with the books, journals and instruments they needed. But the family wage was the same for everyone.

The cultural environment and the coexistence of people was the most important aspects of all in the collectivist experiment in Aragon. This is something you can hardly find in the books. In almost every village, an atheneum was created — or a cultural group if the village was small — and people, especially the young, went there after work to learn things, play theater, have fun, be together in a brotherly and sisterly community. It is difficult to describe for those who have not experienced it.

Since the fathers no longer had authority and ownership, they did not care if the daughters went to the dance or the theater, something that had always been forbidden in the past. We have to consider that the people of Aragon had little education and a lot of tradition and the freedom that fell to the lot of women in the past was not great. But during the civil war she got full freedom and women and men were equal. There was no class difference, people could like each other more or less, but there were no social barriers that separated us. This created immense joy. People went singing to work the fields and came back singing, and in the evenings there was constant joyous feasts in the villages, in the streets and everywhere.

In the organizational pattern itself, an important piece was missing, that was the regional federation. The Aragonese peasants had a panicky fear of bureaucracy, because they had always been ill-treated by the Civil Guard, tax collectors, etc. They felt a resistance to establishing a regional federation, they were afraid that if a bureaucracy were now created, it could at a later point harass them and inhibit the revolution. But in the end, a congress at the beginning of 1937 succeeded in going for the establishment of the regional federation. At this congress I participated a lot in the debate, I gave a speech of almost two hours to show that what was done within each "comarca" was the same thing that we now wanted to do for the whole region. And if there had been no bureaucracy at the "comarca" level, why would there need to be at the regional level? In addition, there was an economic problem, because each "comarca" did business transactions with Catalonia and with Valencia without taking into account, without knowing, the needs that

existed in the region. If they united, however, everything could be done in a more efficient and rational way. The result was that a decision was made about the federation. A regional committee was elected. In this way, not only was the federation created, but a decision that already existed could be implemented, namely that the rich "comarca" federations should help the poor, so that a true communism, an economic equality, could be achieved.

I want to emphasize, even if it can only happen in passing, that self-management reaches such a strength when it is practiced, that it is able to blur ideological dividing lines and dogmatic positions, because in Aragon there were – admittedly only a few – collectives with both social democrats and syndicalists as members, and after two months there was no longer talk of social democrats and syndicalists, but all were collectivists. Everyone worked with enthusiasm and joy.

So in creating the regional federation, we had organized the whole thing as far as circumstances allowed, because we must remember that it was war, and never in any country in the world has war avoided complicating conditions. In Aragon, despite this, we managed to realize libertarian communism for the first and only time in human history. Well then, through the regional federation we had created a pattern of mutual assistance between different "comarca" districts, between the villages, where the transactions and the mutual exchange took place in an efficient way.

And all this some humans wanted to smash. I will now talk about the communists' attack on the collectives, but first I want to say something about what Mintz said earlier: that there were communists who sympathized with the collectivization. I myself have never met anyone like that, never, neither before nor during the war nor afterwards. As I remember it, they made active propaganda against collectivization, and in Aragon they then came in hordes to smash the collectives. That's what I'm going to address now.

Opponents of the collectives in Aragon as well as in other regions were the entire Spanish bourgeoisie in the Republic. They needed a pretext to attack Aragon. Therefore, they fought the collectives from every point of view. They used hundreds of arguments. In larger towns in Aragon such as Barbastro, Castre, Albaniz, Fraga, there were old notaries and other bureaucrats as well as landowners who dreamed of re-establishing the old authoritarian order. These disaffected groups were picked up by the Communist Party who urged them to write letters saying that in Aragon there was tyranny and that you could not live there.

The government took advantage of this and, on Indalecio Prieto's initiative, issued a decree outlawing the collectives. The communist Lister who commanded the eleventh division of the People's Army came to Aragon and arrested the Council that had been created as the face of the republic, arrested the regional committee of the CNT and the regional committee of the collectives and occupied militarily the whole region to arrest all the committees of the collectives in Aragon.

Lister's division was not enough, Mintz mentioned the division Carlos Marx which was in Binefar, and in southern Aragon towards Teruel was part of Macia y Companys division. All were engaged in arresting collectivists. They arrested about six hundred people, some they killed as they tried to escape over the mountains, because many comrades tried to get to the syndicalist division at the front.

The soldiers behaved badly in many different ways. They took sugar, oil, wine and distributed in the streets, they returned mules and other things to Fascists who fled, that is, to the widows or women who had stayed behind. The whole thing was a disaster.

When our forces at the front heard of this, they wanted to intervene. They wanted to leave the front to liquidate the communists, but we opposed it. I personally, who was then secretary in Binefar, must take part of the responsibility: I opposed an intervention because it would have meant the end of the war.

Question: Why did you not want the syndicalist forces to come to your aid, was it for moral or military reasons?

Answer: Both. First: to abandon the front would have been to leave the field free to the fascists. Second: a judgment of history would at that point have fallen over the CNT.

The comrades here will surely ask themselves how it is possible that a party that calls itself communist and considers itself revolutionary and left-wing could fight the collectives with blood and fire. The matter is simple. Marxism relies on authority, i.e. on a proletarianized authority and on the belief that one must create intellectual elites to rule over others. Well, if we in Aragon could show that elites were not needed, then they had no business in this world.

Sometimes it has been written — and many people believe it — that when the communists had pulled through the collectives with the disasters we just talked about as a result, the collectives disappeared. It wasn't like that. Some fearful people left the collectives, and also some former small farmers who could make a living from their own farming, but the majority stayed in the collective, and for me it was uplifting to see what power there is in the people.

The peasants of Aragon had identified themselves so completely with the collective, that when they heard that the committees had fallen or fled, they immediately elected new committees with slightly older people, who had not been formed within the syndicalist movement, but came from the republican regime. These people started working for the collective with tremendous enthusiasm, which I think shows that in the depths of people there is always an attraction to the good, the solidarity, the fraternity.

Yes, I have now tried to give a summary picture of collectivization in Aragon. There could be much more to say, but I don't want to burden you with more, because after all, all this ended when the fascists invaded the region and destroyed everything, killing the collectivists who did not flee to France. But since the subject seems to interest you — and I repeat once again that it is the only example of libertarian communism that people have experienced in recent centuries — I would like you to ask questions, so that the whole thing can become more concrete for you.

Excerpt from the question and answer session after Carrasquer's talk:

Question: I would like to talk about the so-called individualists. What function did they have, what did they do, did they work against the collectives?

Carrasquer: You must always keep in mind that we were at war, and although in Aragon we were relatively spared, there was much violence in the first days of the fighting. Afterwards, there was no violence, but there was prestige that made some individualists actually cast longing glances at the collective. If only the whole thing had been allowed to continue, they would have become collectivists.

Those who were the real enemies for religious or ideological reasons, they kept silent because they were afraid. On the surface there was complete harmony, but under the surface it was perhaps not quite so harmonious. There was not a single priest left in Aragon, and there was no

religious practice, but many people prayed at home. We knew that, but we didn't meddle with it. So it was with everything. The spiritual climate was characterized by prestige and struggle, and this meant that some of the individualists were sympathizers and some were not, but they were silent out of fear. Therefore, there was no conflict.

Question: What kind of problems arose within the collectives and between those who were in the collectives and those who were outside?

Carrasquer: I expected that question. It is necessary, because there must always be conflicts in the world.

In the collective of Aragon there was much harmony but there was always someone who did wrong. I can tell you about a case from a village that I know. A woman who worked in the cooperative gave her sister-in-law some of the fabric they had brought in, so that she could sew herself a fine dress. It was forbidden because what was in the cooperative belonged to everyone. But she gave away the cloth as if under the table. This was found out and brought up in the "asamblea" (the "general meeting"). The "asamblea" criticized the deed and says that it was not right. The "convict" says: "I did wrong and from tomorrow I will leave the cooperative and go work the fields".

In another village they had no bookkeeper. The village asked the "comarca" federation to get a bookkeeper to help them. They sent a comrade from another village. But as he became a bookkeeper, he thought he was above the others and began to exercise authority every now and then. The village complained to the "comarca" federation who sent someone to the village. A general meeting was organized and the individual was fired. So were issues dealt with. All conflicts.

Regarding conflicts between the collective and the individualists, we must remember that the first decision taken at the congress of the collectives of Aragon and the CNT concerned the abolition of property and the wage system. Since there were no wage laborers, all those who did not have land had to be collectivists. Those who wanted to be individualists, self-employed, they are the ones who have land, right? Well, if an individualist had more land than he could manage to farm, he was called to the committee or to the "asamblea" and was told that part of his land would be requisitioned, some acres that he could not farm himself. This was solved by the "asamblea" of the collective.

Question: I would like to hear a little more about how the coordination between industry-based collectives and agricultural-based collectives went about.

Carrasquer: You must understand that in the liberated Aragon there was not much industry. In Binefar, for example, there was a fairly large flour mill, and in Monson a sugar factory which was also quite large. These two industries organized themselves as collectives. But they were in close contact with the respective village collective and lived in relation to it, with the same order of life.

In the larger towns with more than four thousand inhabitants — the majority of villages in Aragon were and are small — the craftsmen who had to be in the town, for example blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, masons etc., formed a collective as a kind of annex to the agricultural collective. And in the small villages where there were maybe only three or four artisans, they were part of the farmers collective itself and they worked for agriculture and lived off agriculture: there was no difference.

Thus, when there was a significant industry, a collective was formed that took care of itself, and when it is a question of a small village, the craftsmen are included in the [already exist-

ing] collective, and the doctor and the school teacher are also included in the [already existing] collective. It was a close, well-knit community.

Frank Mintz: Was there equal pay for men and women in the collectives in Aragon that you have known? And then, you've talked about how the most important thing about collectivization, besides the economic aspect, was the cultural aspect. Can you say something more about the role of women in this new environment, if, for example, women were elected to committees ... ?

Carrasquer: I have already said that men and women were basically equal. Nevertheless, it was often the case that when calculating the family wage,² they calculated a little less for the wife, because she was not considered a worker when she stayed at home to take care of the family, the children and the elderly. But when the woman had the same work as the man, she received the same wage. In the family wage — or the "family allocation" — there were different rates in different collectives. But the same rates in all families.

In any event, the financial aspect is not the most important thing, but the aspect of coexistence. The women spoke at the general meetings just like the men and they participated to the same degree. But one must of course count on the fact that the woman had traditionally been looked down on and that she had a poorer education. Therefore she spoke less often. But she eventually got used to participating in the debates.

² esp. "feudo familiar", actually "family allocation". The word "wage" was not used because the wage system was abolished. The family wage was calculated according to the number of people (children and elderly) who had to be supported. (TN)

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