

To Libertarians

Guy Debord

1 September 1980

Esteemed comrades,

We regret to have to draw to your attention a serious and urgent question about which you would ordinarily know more than we, who are far away and foreigners.¹ But we are obligated to note the diverse circumstances that until now have made it impossible for you to know certain facts or their meaning. We believe it necessary, therefore, to clearly expose those facts to you, as well as the circumstances that have prevented them from reaching you.

At this moment, more than fifty libertarians are being held in the prisons of Spain, and many among them have been held many years without being tried. The whole world, which every day hears about the struggles of the Basques,² completely ignores this aspect of the reality of today's Spain. Even in Spain, the existence and names of these comrades are sometimes revealed to a narrow sector of opinion, but generally there is silence about what they [the imprisoned libertarians] have done and what their motives were; and nothing concrete has been done to rescue them.

When we address ourselves to you, we are obviously not including the reconstituted CNT,³ as if it might play the central role for libertarians: [unfortunately] all those who are in it, don't belong, and all those who belong in it, are not.

The hour of revolutionary syndicalism is long gone, because, under modernized capitalism, all syndicalism has been given its recognized place, small or large, in the spectacle of the democratic discussion of the status arrangements of the salaried workers,⁴ that is to say, as intermediary and accomplice in the dictatorship of salaried work; because democracy and salaried work are incompatible, and this incompatibility, which has always existed essentially, visibly manifests itself in our times over the entire surface of global society. From the moment when syndicalism

¹ Born in France, Guy Debord lived in Spain on and off after 1978. He wrote this text upon his return to France in 1980.

² When Debord refers to "the Basques," he means those people from "the Basque Country" or "the Basque Provinces" — a uniquely autonomous region in the Pyrennes that, ever since the 16th century, has been occupied by Spain and France — who are struggling to establish self-rule ("separatists"). In 1980, the year Debord wrote this open letter, the Basque Provinces were granted regional autonomy. Among the groups unsatisfied by this "liberalization," were the Euskadi ta Askatasuna (or ETA, which means "Basque Fatherland and Liberty" in English).

³ The CNT is the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Workers), founded in Barcelona, Spain, in 1910.

⁴ The word used by Debord, *salariat*, designates the proletariat that receives yearly salaries.

and the organization of alienated labor reciprocally recognize each other, like two powers establishing diplomatic relations, any labor union develops a new kind of divided labor that makes its reformist activity more and more derisive. A union that declares itself ideologically hostile to all political parties isn't immune to falling into the hands of its own bureaucracy of specialized administrators, just like a political party. Each and every instant of its [syndicalism's] real practice demonstrates this. The affair evoked here is a perfect illustration, because if organized libertarians in Spain had said all of what they needed to, we wouldn't have had to say anything.

Of these fifty libertarian prisoners, who are mostly in the prison in Segovia, but also elsewhere (the "Model Prison" in Barcelona, "Carabanchel" and "Yserias" in Madrid, Burgos, Herrera de la Mancha, Soria), several are innocent and have been victimized by classic police provocations. Some people speak a bit of these people, and these prisoners are the ones that people are disposed to defend, but passively. Meanwhile, the majority of these prisoners have successfully dynamited paved roads, courthouses and public buildings. They have executed armed expropriations of diverse businesses and a good number of banks. We speak, notably, of a group of workers from the S.E.A.T. in Barcelona (who currently call themselves Ejercito Revolucionario Ayuda a los Trabajadores),⁵ who want to bring a kind of pecuniary aid to the strikers at their factory, as well as to unemployed people; and of the "autonomous groups" of Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia, which have long acted with the intention of propagating revolution all over the country. These comrades are the same people who have taken up the most advanced theoretical positions. While the public prosecutor has imposed penalties of 30 or 40 years of imprisonment on some of them, everywhere there is silence and many people who want to forget!

The Spanish State, along with its political parties (all of which, whether in power or among the opposition, recognize and sustain it); the authorities of all foreign countries, which on this point are the allies of the Spanish State; and the leadership of the reconstituted CNT: one and all have, for different reasons, found it in their respective best interests to keep the imprisoned comrades in oblivion. And we, who have a precisely contrary interest, are going to explain why.

Inheritor of Francoism, the Spanish State — democratized and modernized just as much as was necessary for it to keep its banal place in the ordinary conditions of modern capitalism, and in a rush to be admitted into the pitiful "Common Market" of Europe (it deserves it) — officially presents itself as the reconciliation of the victors and vanquished of the civil war, that is to say, the Francoists and the Republicans; and that's truly what it is. The nuances have little importance: if, on the side of the Stalinist Democrats, Carrillo⁶ is perhaps a little more royalist than Berlinguer,⁷ then, on the side of the princes of divine right, the King of Spain is surely just as much a Republican as Giscard d'Estaing.⁸ But the most profound and decisive truth is that today's Spanish State is in fact the delayed reconciliation of the victors of the counter-revolution. They have finally amicably reunited, in the benevolence they now owe each other, those who wanted to win and those who wanted to lose, those who killed Lorca and those who killed Nin.⁹ Because all of the forces that, in those times, were at war against the Republic or controlled the powers

⁵ The Revolutionary Army of Workers' Aid.

⁶ Santiago Carrillo was the General Secretary of the Spanish Communist Party from 1960 to 1982.

⁷ Enrico Berlinguer was the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party from 1972 to 1984.

⁸ Giscard d'Estaing, a right-wing politician, was the President of France from 1974 to 1981.

⁹ A great Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca was murdered by Francoist nationalists on 19 August 1936. Andres Nin, one of the founders of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (see footnote [10] below), was murdered by Soviet secret police agents on 20 June 1937.

of that Republic, are today the same parties that serve in the legislature and continue to pursue, in diverse and bloody ways, the same goal: the destruction of the proletarian revolution of 1936, the greatest proletarian revolution that history has ever seen, and therefore the one that still best prefigures the future. The only organized force that had the will and the capacity to prepare this revolution — to make it and, perhaps with less lucidity and firmness, defend it — was the anarchist movement (supported only and in an incomparably feeble manner, by the P.O.U.M.).¹⁰

The State and all its partisans have never forgotten their terrible memories, but continually try to make the people forget about them. This is why the government prefers, for the moment, to leave the libertarian threat in the shadows. It evidently prefers to talk about the G.R.A.P.O.,¹¹ the ideal form of a well-controlled peril, since this group was from the start manipulated by the Special Services, just like the “Red Brigades” in Italy,¹² or like the terrorist pseudo-organization of imprecise name, the existence of which was announced by the French government, that entered the stage with a series of small attacks. The Spanish government, satisfied with G.R.A.P.O., would undoubtedly be quite content not to have to talk about the Basques any more. There are, however, constraints upon the effectiveness of their struggles. But, after all, the Basques are fighting to establish an independent state, and Spanish capitalism could easily survive such a loss. The decisive point is, however, that the Basques know very well how to defend their prisoners, about whom they haven’t forgotten for an instant. Solidarity has always been at home in Spain. And if one only sees solidarity for Spain among the Basques, then what will Spain resemble when the Basques separate from it?

The other states of Europe could painlessly accomodate themselves to an independent Euskadi¹³, but, confronted since 1968 with a social crisis with no remedy, they are as concerned as the government in Madrid with not seeing the reappearance of an internationalist revolutionary current in Spain. This means, according to the most recent techniques of domination: even when something appears, it can’t be seen. These States remember well what they had to do in 1936, the totalitarians of Moscow, Berlin and Rome, as well as the “democrats” of Paris and London, all in agreement on the essential need to crush the libertarian revolution; and several with a light heart reconciled to the loss or increase of risks in their decidedly secondary conflicts amongst themselves. Now, today, all information everywhere is State-ified, formally or slyly. The “democratic” press finds itself so impassioned and anguished about the maintenance of the social order that the government no longer needs to bribe it. The press graciously offers to support the government, any government, by proclaiming the exact opposite of the truth on each question, even the smallest; since today the reality of all questions, even the smallest, has become menacing to the established order.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there is no subject the bourgeois or bureaucratic press lies about with greater delight than when it is a question of hiding the reality of revolutionary action.

¹⁰ “P.O.U.M.” are the initials in Spanish for the Workers Party of Marxist Unification.

¹¹ Grupo de Resistencia Anti-Fascista Primero de Octubre (“First of October Antifascist Resistance Group”) was founded in 1975 as the armed wing of the then-illegal Communist Party of Spain.

¹² Debord discusses the Red Brigades in a letter to Gianfranco Sanguinetti (1978) and his Preface to the fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1979).

¹³ Euskadi is the word in the Basque language that designates the “Basque Country.”

¹⁴ Note the similarity with the following passage from Chapter VI of Sanguinetti’s *Veritable Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*: “It’s no longer possible to let things go, always hoping that the workers will, for another instant, put off their smoldering revolt or to think that industry will catch its breath and regain its vigor, although self-avowed anarchy reigns in our factories and Italy throws out, one after another, its governments, which don’t last longer than a few months and are, moreover, constantly and uniquely engaged in the titanic enterprise of

Finally, the reconstituted CNT has felt a real embarrassment in this affair. It isn't out of indifference or prudence that it has kept quiet. The leaders of the CNT want it to be the pole around which libertarians regroup on a unionist base that is moderate and acceptable to the established order. The comrades who have had recourse to expropriation — because of this very fact, they represent an absolutely different pole of regroupment. They are reasonable; the others deceive themselves. Each is the offspring of their actions, and one must choose between them by examining the meaning and finality of those actions. If one had seen the CNT leading big revolutionary struggles during the years that the expropriating comrades have been in prison, then one might have concluded that the latter were too impatient and adventurist (and, moreover, that the CNT, the animator of these struggles, acted with dignity when it defended the expropriators, despite having differences with them). But if, instead, we've seen that the CNT is satisfied with gathering up a few poor crumbs during the modernization of Spain (which isn't exactly a dazzling novelty — another Bourbon? why not a Bonaparte?), then it must be admitted that those who took up arms weren't fundamentally wrong to do so. After all, it was the revolutionary proletariat of Spain that created the CNT, and not the other way around.

When the dictatorship judged that the time had come for it to better itself a little bit, many tried to gain some small advantage from the liberalization. But the autonomous comrades in question immediately decided that it would be dishonorable to be content with such things. They immediately demanded everything, because, after forty years of complete counter-revolution, nothing could wash away the blood except the reaffirmation and triumph of the total revolution. Who can call oneself “libertarian” and yet disapprove of the offspring of Durruti?¹⁵

Organizations pass, but subversion will never stop being loved: “Who has seen you and doesn't remember you?”¹⁶ Today, libertarians are still numerous in Spain, and they will be even more numerous tomorrow. And, fortunately, the majority and, notably, the majority of libertarian workers, are now among the uncontrollables. Moreover, many people, as everywhere in Europe, are engaged in particular struggles against some insupportable aspect, very old or very new, of this oppressive society. All these struggles are necessary: What good is a revolution if the women and homosexuals aren't free? What good will it do to one day be free of the commodity and authoritarian specialization, if an irreversible degradation of the natural environment has imposed new objective limitations on our freedom? At the same time, amongst those who are seriously engaged in particular struggles, none can think to get real satisfaction of their demands as long as the State hasn't been dissolved. Because all of these particular, practical irrationalities are the Reason of the State.

We will not ignore the fact that many libertarians find themselves in disagreement with many of the autonomous comrades' theses, and don't want to give the impression that they're so completely rallied to the cause that they've taken up the defense. Well then! One doesn't discuss strategy with comrades who are in prison. So that this interesting discussion can start, it is necessary to bring them back to the street. We think that these divergences of opinion — which, motivated by excessive scruples, run the risk of allowing some of those who firmly call them-

remaining in power a little longer than appeared possible, dismissing all questions, even the least one, because any answer would suffice to bring the government down.”

¹⁵ Buenaventura Durruti, the Leonese anarchist leader killed in Madrid on 20 November 1936, was a favorite of the Situationist International, which Debord helped found in 1957. See, for example, the para-situationist comic strip *The Return of the Durruti Column* (1966).

¹⁶ Spanish in the original.

selves revolutionaries to regard this affair as none of their business — are of four types: 1) some libertarians, those who see things from a less impatient or more easily appeasable perspective, judge the current situation in Spain in another way; 2) some might not agree with the efficacy of the forms of struggle that these autonomous groups have chosen; 3) some might believe that the imprisoned comrades cannot be defended as a matter of principle or as a matter of law; and 4) some might feel they don't have any means of intervening effectively. We reckon we can easily reduce these objections to nothing.

Those who wait for some new amelioration of the socio-political situation in Spain are obviously the most deceived. All the pleasures permitted by democracy have already seen their best days, and each person has been able to see that they are nothing more than that. Henceforth, everything is going to get worse in Spain, as everywhere else. Historians generally agree that the principal factor that has made Spain revolutionary over the 100 years has been the incapacity of its ruling classes to raise the country's level of capitalist economic development to the level that provided the most advanced countries of Europe and the United States with long periods of social peace. Oh well! Spain is going to be revolutionary again and for the new reason that, even if the modernized ruling class of post-Franco Spain shows itself more skillful in improving the general conditions of contemporary capitalism, it will do so too late, at the precise moment when everything is decomposed. Everywhere one finds that the life of the people and the thinking of their rulers deteriorate a little more every day, and notably in the unhappy "Common Market," in which all of these Frenchified men of power promise to lead you as if it were all a festival. The authoritarian production of lies grows to the point of public schizophrenia, the consent of proletarians is dissolved, all social order is undone. Spain will never be peaceful, since, in the rest of the world, peace is dead. Another decisive element in Spain's propensity for disorder has surely been the autonomous liberatarian spirit that is so strong in the proletariat. This tendency is precisely the one to which the history of this century gave purpose, and the one that reappears everywhere, because everywhere one sees the process by which the modern state becomes totalitarian, and the sad results of the cannibalization of the workers' movement, dominated by authoritarian and Statist bureaucracies. Thus, at the moment that revolutionaries of all nations have, on this central question, become Spanish, you cannot think of becoming something else.

We can much better understand the objection that can be made on the purely strategical level. One can in effect ask if, for example, looting banks so as to have the money to buy printing presses, which, in turn, are used to print subversive writings, constitutes the most logical and effective way of doing things. But, in every case, these comrades have incontestably attained another kind of efficacy: simply by ending up imprisoned for having, for a long time and without hesitation, carried out the programme of action that they themselves sketched out. They have rendered a great service to the cause of revolution, in Spain and all other countries, precisely because they have created an evident, practical field of action that permits all libertarians scattered throughout Spain to show and recognize themselves in the struggle for their liberation. By their initiative, these comrades have saved you the pain of searching out, in long and difficult discussions, the best way to start to act. There couldn't have been a better initiative, since it was very sharp as theory and very good in practice.

Certain libertarians perhaps have the impression that, on the judicial level, the gravity of the deeds renders the defense of these comrades more difficult. On the contrary, we think that it is the gravity of these deeds that facilitates all well-calculated actions in their favor. Libertarians cannot, on principle, accord value to any law of the State, and particularly when it is a question

of the Spanish State: considering the legality of its origin, and all of its subsequent behavior, its justice cannot function decently except under the form of a permanent amnesty for one and all. Furthermore, attacking banks is naturally a serious crime in the eyes of the capitalists, not in the eyes of their enemies. This is what is blameworthy: theft by the poor, and it is fitting that all of the laws of the economy — despicable laws, which will be abolished by the complete destruction of the real terrain upon which they apply themselves — guarantee that a poor man will never become a banker. It so happens that, in an encounter in which gunshots were exchanged, a guard was killed. The humanitarian indignation of justice that rose up seemed suspect in a country where violent death is so frequent. In certain times, one could die like people used to die in Casas Viejas or on the sands of Badajoz.¹⁷ In other times, according to the technological necessities of profit-increases, one could die quickly, as did the 200 squatters who burned to death in Los Alfaques or the 70 bourgeois who died in the plastic luxury of a big hotel in Saragossa. Will we say that our “terrorist” comrades are responsible for such massacres? No, and they also aren’t guilty of polluting the Gulf of Mexico, since that peccadillo was committed while they were in prison.

This affair is not a judicial case. It is a simple question of power relations. Since the government has an obvious interest in having no one speak about these comrades, we are obliged to speak of them in such a manner that the government will be forced to conclude that it’s in its immediate interest to free them, not keep them in prison. The fact that the government wants to come to this same resolution — but by way of a trial, at the conclusion of which the comrades’ sentences would be set equal to “time served,” there would be an amnesty or the comrades would be allowed to escape — is unimportant. However, we must insist on the fact that, if there doesn’t exist a movement on behalf of these comrades that can express itself forcefully and with sufficient menace, a tolerated escape from jail is dangerous: you know well the “law of fugitives”¹⁸ and you will see the application of it many times again.

Comrades, we won’t allow ourselves to suggest to you — who are there [in Spain] and who can perfectly well weigh all of the possibilities and risks blow by blow — that you take such-and-such form of practical action. Provided that the explicit demand for the liberation of these libertarians is placed front-and-center, all forms of action are good, and those who create the most scandal are the best. By grouping yourselves according to affinities, you will, according to your tastes and opportunities, be able to discover or further develop any of the means of action that have been employed in other epochs or that still remain to be experimented with, except for falling into the baseness of respectful petitions, which are circulated everywhere, and vainly, by Leftist electoral parties. It is at first completely useless to coordinate such autonomous actions. It is enough that they converge upon the same specific goal, proclaim it at all times and multiply with time. And when this precise goal has been attained, it will be seen that an active libertarian current has reappeared, and will recognize and know itself. Thus will start a general movement, which will be able to better coordinate itself and attain an increasing range of goals.

The first goal must be getting the country obsessed with this affair, which will be tantamount to making known the existence of a revolutionary libertarian movement in Spain, by obliging people to know about these prisoners and the power of those who defend them. It is necessary

¹⁷ Casas Viejas is the name of a Spanish town that revolted and was massacred on 8 January 1933. On 14 August 1936, Francoist nationalists massacred Republicans in the Spanish town called Badajoz.

¹⁸ I.e., kill on sight. Spanish in original.

that the names of these prisoners become known throughout every country in which proletarians rise up against the State, from the workers who lead huge revolutionary strikes in Poland, to those who sabotage production in Italy's factories and those dissidents who live in the shadows of Brezhnev's psychiatric wards or in the prisons of Pinochet.

Since there are, unfortunately, too many names for us to cite them all — shame! how many like Puig Antich¹⁹ today feel around their necks the pressure of the garrot or the weight of forty or fifty years imprisonment in accordance with the government's plan? — we must for the moment limit ourselves to citing the names of the guilty, against whom justice has demanded or already imposed penalties of more than 20 years of prison: Gabriel Botifoll Gomez, Antonio Cativiela Alfes, Vicente Dominguez Medina, Guillermo Gonzalez Garcia, Luis Guillardini Gonzalo, Jose Hernandez Tapia, [and] Manuel Nogales Toro. But it must be made clear that we also demand the liberation of the rest, even the innocent ones.

The first point is to make the problem widely known; then, to keep it from being forgotten, by demonstrating, always more powerfully, a growing impatience. The means will multiply as the movement takes its course. In support of the prisoners, a single small factory in Spain might go out on strike for a day, and this would be a model for the rest of the country. You will only have to make immediately known their exemplary attitude, and half the battle is already won. Right away, one shouldn't be able to start a University course, a theatrical performance or a scientific conference without someone directly intervening or letting loose a rain of tracts that pose the questions, What has become of our comrades? and, On what day will they finally be released? No one should be able to walk down any street in Spain without seeing the prisoners' names written on the walls. And the songs that are sung about them must be heard by all.

Comrades, if our arguments appear just to you, diffuse and reproduce this text as fast as possible, and by all the means that you have or can seize. And, if not, throw it away right now, and start publishing others, better ones! Because it is without doubt that you have the right to judge our modest arguments rigorously. But what is even more without doubt is the fact that the scandalous reality that we have tried our best to reveal is not an object for your judgment: on the contrary, it will ultimately judge you.

Salut!

Long live social liquidation!

The International Friends

1 September 1980

Note: originally written in French in August 1980 and signed by 25,000 people. Published in November 1980 by Editions Champ Libre, as part of the volume *Appels de la prison de Segovie* [Appeals from the prison in Segovia], which was attributed to the "Coordinated autonomous groups of Spain." An English translation, *To Libertarians*, was published in London, August 1981, by "the British Internationalists" (Michel Prigent and Lucy Forsyth). It wasn't consulted when we translated *Aux Libentaires* from scratch in August 2004. A dozen or so corrections suggested by Jules Bonnot de la Bande were made on 31 May 2010.

¹⁹ Salvador Puig Antich was garroted in Barcelona's "Model Prison" on 2 March 1974.

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