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Anarchism – A Philosophy Of Action

Jack White

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February 5th, 1937

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The following is the speech made by Captain White at the
Meeting held at Conway Hall, January 18th under the auspices of
the London Committee of the CNT-FAI.

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Contents

Non-Intervention A Verbal Screen	6
Out To Organise A New Spain	7

While no doubt the voluntary discipline and the enthusiasm that begets it is not confined to the CNT-FAI, it is unquestionable that the policy of the Industrial Revolution simultaneous with the anti-fascist fight is the anarchist policy carried into practice in spite of the opposition of the P.S.U.C.

As to the dignity emanating from the workers, I saw enough with my own eyes while in Spain to verify the proof of the reports I have quoted. I found Barcelona, a clean, well run, orderly city, with trams and trains running to the minute, restaurants and cinemas open, and all run as collectivised institutions by their courteous and efficient staffs. Never before had I met waiters and even shoe-blacks consistently refusing tips, so great is the self respect engendered in the workers by their new status of the collectivised owners of the industries they control.

We are then bound in justice to give to Anarcho-Syndicalism and the CNT-FAI the credit which is their due for the magnificent creative work which results from their philosophy, individual and social.

Of all the Spanish workers, well may we say, with Langdon Davies, *"We turn in humility to the humble fold of Spain, Republican, Socialists, Communists, Syndicalists, Anarchists, who are groping in horror with their bare hands to save the Light from flickering out. We turn in anger to those in England who want the Light to die and we cry in words to which Spain is giving a new meaning: 'No Pasaran.' 'They Shall No Pass.'"*

Our comrade, Emma Goldman, is an anarchist and I should like to give a word of explanation why I stand beside her on this platform. I want to sketch in what, as I understand it — and my knowledge of theoretic anarchism is as yet very small — is a fundamental of anarchist philosophy. I believe, then, I am right in saying anarchism is a philosophy of action, because it is pre-eminently the philosophy of individual spontaneity. Every free and spontaneous individual knows that it would be highly desirable and convenient if knowledge could always precede action, and we could advance rationally step by step to a foreseen goal; life, and especially the deeper aspects of life, will not permit this; in the deepest crises and conflict of life, whether individual or social, action has to precede knowledge, and if we wait too long to calculate results and fail to obey our emotional impulses to stand for what is right, or resist intolerable wrong, regardless of consequences, we miss the psychological moment; somehow we are devitalised by our own prudence, and we are left to face wrong, more deeply entrenched by our inaction, with less "elan vital" in our ourselves to give us assurance of future victory. Reason, or rather the passive attempt to calculate consequences without creatively contributing to them by the magic of the deed, has betrayed us. The highest reason is incarnate in action and often cannot explain itself till after the actions. Reason is latent in the pent-up emotion that drives to action. It is emotional reason, creative reason; the other kind of reason is dead.

At moments of revolution, the higher emotional reason is especially necessary, because it breaks through the old forms which are the premises of the dead reason; it creates new forms, which have their seed primarily not in the mind but in the heart of man. He may not be able to foresee or define the new forms; but he knows the old forms are dead and will destroy his heart and spirit unless he bursts through them.

Non-Intervention A Verbal Screen

Nothing has been sadder to watch for the past five or six years than the way in which fascism has gained victory after victory by acting from its evil heart, while socialists and democrats reasoned and talked; in Germany and Austria. Fascism waited its moment and struck, quite regardless of the pathetic faith of its opponents in the compelling rightness of democratic theories. In the international parleys about Spain, talk of non-intervention has been nothing but a verbal screen for armed fascist intervention on an even larger scale.

We have to look to the internal struggle in Spain for the first real meeting of fascist action by revolutionary action, first in the magnificent struggle of the Asturian miners, so ruthlessly suppressed, and later on the July 19th of last year in the historic defeat of the fascist coup by the workers of Barcelona. At last the philosophy of action of the fascists had met a revolutionary philosophy of action strong and direct enough to master it. In one day fascism was conquered in Barcelona. Machine guns and batteries of artillery were taken by the invincible rush of the people dependent for the most part on nothing but their bare hands with about one rifle per 40 men. The guns were turned against the barracks, their walls were breached and their stores of arms captured while the rank and file of the troops joined the people. In three days fascism was liquidated in Catalonia.

In addressing an audience like this to make known the work of the CNT-FAI, it is a little difficult to put one's finger on points whether of theory or practice, which differentiate the Anarcho-Syndicalism or Libertarian Communism of Spain from, say, the more highly centralised system of Russian Communism. I have not the knowledge to descant on the points of theoretic difference, and, if I had it might be inadvisable to do so.

It might, however, be interesting to trace the historical foundations of anarchism in Spain and to indicate the roots of anarchist

divergence from the brand of communism with which we are more familiar in this country. Mr John Stachey writing in the Left Book Club News of the working class movement of 1860 says, "*it is a pity that into the new born movement of that date had strayed the brilliant, erratic, disastrous Russian aristocrat, Michael Bakunin. He became far more influential in Spain than the Marxists. He split the International and set a great section of the Spanish working class movement in the rigid anarchist mould.*" Whether Mr. Stachey is right is speaking of the anarchist movement as "Rigid," we will investigate later. I can only say that if I agreed with him I should be on this platform now.

Out To Organise A New Spain

I want, if I can, to give you some notion of the respective characteristics of the authoritarian and libertarian groups in Spain, not in any spirit of invidious comparison, but to illustrate as far as possible the difference of outlook and temperament. Sir Peter Chalmers-Mitchell, writing in the Times of his experience in Malaga in the early days of Franco's rebellion, mentions two points in comparing the UGT and the CNT-FAI which are, I think, characteristic. Both, he says, organised Militias, but the former tried to attract recruits by promising them permanent service in the Standing Army afterwards, while the latter were bitterly opposed to all Standing Armies, and even their leaders refused to accept Commissions.

In their attitude to economics, he adds the former tended to concentrate on raising wages at the expense of capital, while the latter were out to organise a new Spain based on creative work.

Many impartial observers have spoken of the self-imposed discipline in the factories taken over and controlled by the workers, and realised that underlying this voluntarily discipline was great enthusiasm and revolutionary faith; hence the impression of dignity emanating from the workers.