

The Revolutionary Anarchist Tradition

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A slightly different version of this article, written by Chris Day, originally appeared in Love & Rage, June / July 1996. Some of the points in the article were controversial within the organization, as reflected by the fact that another L&R member, Wayne Price, wrote a letter in response to the article, which was printed in the next issue of the paper. The controversies in this article mirrored controversies over internal documents circulating at the same time. Despite the controversy, this piece is the best we have for laying out the historical tradition with which Love & Rage most closely identifies. The version of the article printed here was edited to incorporate the criticisms and comments made about the original article.

— the editor

For most of this century the revolutionary struggle for human liberation has stood in the shadow of the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Revolution and the regime it established. The Collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, repression of the Chinese democracy movement, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1989 revealed the decay within Marxism as a supposed ideology of human freedom. The ensuing collapse of much of the Marxist left created an opening for a renewal of the revolutionary project.

Love and Rage was the creation of a layer of mainly young anarchists who were frustrated with the disorganization and lack of serious revolutionary politics within the anarchist movement. We were committed to building a serious revolutionary anarchist movement. While we came from a variety of political backgrounds and perspectives we did not collectively identify ourselves with any single tradition within anarchism. Surveying the various trends in anarchism (anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-feminism) as well as the libertarian trends that did not identify themselves explicitly as anarchist (council communism, the situationists) we did not see any single current as answering all of our questions. Furthermore many of us drew considerable inspiration from the anti-authoritarianism of the New Left of the 1960s, and from the new social movements that arose in the 70s and 80s. We also identified strongly with anticolonial struggles for national liberation that, in spite of their authoritarian organization, fundamentally challenged imperialism and raised the hopes of hundreds of millions of people for a world without oppression and exploitation.

Not only were none of the already existing currents within anarchism satisfactory to us, but we understood that our vitality as an organization depended on an atmosphere of open debate and discussion. This didn't mean that as an organization we would be agnostic on every political question, but rather that our politics would be developed through a process of collective practice and discussion. And this is pretty much what has happened — Love and Rage has developed a body of not always explicitly stated common politics by working together for so many years.

While our politics have remained consistently anti-authoritarian, Love and Rage has from its inception been defined by our disregard for anarchist orthodoxies. This is a good thing. If anarchism is to become a serious revolutionary movement it must develop a whole new body of theory and analysis for confronting the new realities of the 21st century, and that will require the transcendence of various cherished anarchist prejudices. The revolutionary anarchism of the future must be a living synthesis of all the useful thinking that has been created in the course of the struggle for human freedom.

At the same time we have been guilty of not looking closely enough at the debates within the anarchist movement of the past century. While the different currents defined by those debates are still an inadequate foundation on which to build a new body of revolutionary theory, we are not the first group of anarchists to be deeply frustrated by the deep structural problems of anarchism. In this sense we are part of a revolutionary anarchist tradition — a small but vital current within anarchism that has sought to learn new lessons from our defeats, that has struggled to raise anarchist politics above the level of naive moralism, that has confronted head on contradictions within anarchist thinking, that has fought for tighter forms of organization, that has sought to develop a coherent strategy for actually making an anarchist revolution. Revolutionary anarchism speaks to the fundamental failure of Marxism’s authoritarian reliance on the state as an instrument for revolutionizing society. But just as Marxism has been tested by history and found wanting, so too has anarchism failed to deliver real human liberation. Therefore we must be particularly attentive to the distinct current of revolutionary anarchist practice that has sought to confront these historic failures of anarchism. This article is an attempt to trace the course of that current through anarchist history.

This current has asserted itself most strongly when new historical conditions have demanded a rethinking of past anarchist assumptions. So at the beginning of this century the anarchist movement was still dominated by the theory of “propaganda of the deed.” Small anarchist groups or individuals would carry out bombings or assassinations in the vain hope that by revealing the vulnerability of the system they would inspire the masses to rise up and throw off their chains. Anarcho-syndicalism was simultaneously a recognition of the futility of this approach and a turn towards the mass revolutionary potential of the increasingly insurgent workers movement that was chafing under the largely middle-class leadership of the various socialist parties. The early anarcho-syndicalists were roundly denounced by the rest of the anarchist movement for abandoning the “anarchist principles” of individualist terror.

Similarly Love and Rage and the broader revolutionary anarchist current of which it is part is a response to new conditions. The collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the prestige of marxism as a theory of human liberation created an opening for revolutionary antiauthoritarian ideas. But the anarchist movement was too accustomed to its role as the gadfly of the authoritarian left to break out of that role and put forward a positive vision of a new revolutionary movement. Contemporary revolutionary anarchism is the effort to do that.

In between the early anarcho-syndicalists and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been a series of other expressions of the revolutionary anarchist impatience with anarchist orthodoxy.

Malatesta

Errico Malatesta was an Italian anarchist who spent half of his life in exile. His most important period of activism was during the first thirty years of the 20th century up to his death in 1932. While he participated in a variety of groups and struggles his main significance was as an agitator and propagandist. Malatesta didn’t so much break with prevailing anarchist thinking as push it as far as it could go without a thorough critical re-examination. Malatesta’s writings on organization are still crucial reading for all revolutionary anarchists. He was unabashedly pro-organization and divided the discussion of organization into three parts:

organization in general as a principle of and condition of social life today and in a future society; the organization of the anarchist movement; and the organization of the popular forces and especially of the working masses for resistance to government and capitalism...

Malatesta: *Life and Ideas* p. 84 (Freedom Press, 1984, London)

Malatesta argued for a sharp distinction between popular organizations like labor unions and organizations of the anarchist movement. In contrast to the mainstream of anarcho-syndicalism Malatesta recognized the inherently reformist character of the unions, even unions with avowedly revolutionary programs, that grows out of their daily struggle for modest improvements in the lives of the workers. He argued that anarchists should not hesitate to work within such organizations, that it is precisely their openness to non-anarchists that makes them such fertile fields for anarchist agitation. Malatesta's arguments laid the theoretical groundwork for the organization of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), an organization of anarchist militants working within the larger popular movements.

Malatesta was also critical of the attempts to claim that anarchism rested on a scientific foundation. He used his obituary of Peter Kropotkin to polemicize against Kropotkin's efforts in this direction. The claims of political ideologies (like Marxism) to scientific truth have consistently had authoritarian implications.

Malatesta strove to ground anarchist activity in political reality. Unfortunately his writings remain trapped in a method of speculative politics that seems to dominate anarchist theory. There is a timelessness to his arguments. That means that they can be easily applied to the present. But it also means that they are not based on any sort of systematic investigation of the actual conditions then confronting the anarchist movement. His arguments would be as well reasoned in the 19th, 20th or 21st centuries, but they are a limited guide to practical action precisely because of this timelessness.

What is missing from Malatesta's thinking is a dialectical method. His conclusions are not based on investigation of the actual conditions within society (or within the anarchist movement) and they are not tested against the results of their application. Rather they flow from a set of abstract principles and if they don't coincide with current reality eventually, the reasoning seems to go, reality will just have to catch up.

The limits of Malatesta's methodology come out most sharply only when he is finally confronted with a new current in the anarchist movement that seeks to root its practice in a concrete analysis of the current conditions. The revolutionary upsurges in the wake of World War I exposed in practice the limitations of certain aspects of the prevailing thinking within the anarchist movement. Anarchists participated in many of these upsurges, but the most significant achievements were in Ukraine. When the Ukrainian anarchists summed up their experiences and called for some changes in the anarchist movement in light of theme Malatesta defended the prevailing orthodoxy.

The Makhnovchina

The Ukrainian Revolution is a seriously underappreciated chapter in anarchist history. Unlike Spain where over 60 years of anarchist educational work had shaped the thinking of much of the

Spanish peasantry and proletariat, the Ukraine did not have a strong well organized anarchist movement when the February 1917 revolution toppled the Russian Czar and opened up the whole Russian Empire, including Ukraine, to the pent-up revolutionary forces of peasant and worker discontent.

The Bolsheviks came to power in Russia on a program of Bread, Land and Peace. They obtained peace with the German and AustroHungarian Empires through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which handed over Ukraine to the imperialists. The relatively small Ukrainian anarchist movement seized the moment and built a revolutionary anarchist army around a nucleus of guerrilla partisans commanded by Nestor Makhno. The peasants were already seizing the land largely without the help of the anarchists. Makhno's army defended their gains and argued for the voluntary collectivization of the land while they fought the Austrians, the Germans, and the White armies of Deniken and Wrangel. After defeating the first three the Makhnovchina joined forces with the Bolshevik Red Army to defeat Wrangel. After the defeat of Wrangel the Bolsheviks turned around and crushed Makhno's army, retaking the Ukrainian lands they had given away in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

Makhno was openly contemptuous of the "dithering" and disorganization of most of the anarchist movement. While he didn't let the Bolsheviks off the hook for their crimes he correctly identified a number of the anarchist movement's weaknesses that he saw as responsible for the ease with which the Bolsheviks consolidated power. Makhno's two primary virtues as a revolutionary thinker are his lack of sentimentality and his willingness to radically reassess prevailing anarchist orthodoxies in light of actual experience. He describes the original military organization of the anarchists in Ukraine, the "free battalions":

It quickly transpired that that organization was powerless to survive internal provocations of every sort, given that, without adequate vetting, political or social, it took in all volunteers provided only that they wanted to take up weapons and fight. This was why the armed units established by that organization were treacherously delivered to the enemy, a fact that prevented it from seeing through its historical mission in the fight against the foreign counterrevolution. . . . Elsewhere the practical requirements of the struggle induced our movement to establish an operational and organizational Staff to share the oversight of all the fighting units. It is because of this practice that I find myself unable to subscribe to the view that revolutionary anarchists reject the need for such a Staff to oversee the armed revolutionary struggle strategically. I am convinced that any revolutionary anarchist finding himself in the same circumstances as those I encountered in the civil war in the Ukraine will, of necessity, be impelled to do as we did. If in the course of the coming authentic social revolution, there are anarchists who rebut these organizational principles, then in our movement we will have only empty chatters or deadweight, harmful elements who will be rejected in short order.

"On Defense of the Revolution" from *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays* by Nestor Makhno (AK Press, 1996, San Francisco)

Makhno understood that revolutionary anarchists had to operate in the real world of imperfect circumstances. If anarchist ideas were to mean anything they had to be applied in the struggles of the day. And if they were inadequate to the tasks of the struggle then they needed to be modified.

The Platformists

Unfortunately the Bolshevik victory in Russia gave their authoritarian politics enormous prestige amongst revolutionary minded people all around the world. Huge sections of the anarchist movement went over to Bolshevism in country after country. And it wasn't necessarily the worst elements that left either. In many cases the anarchists who remained true to their principles were the most dogmatic, the least interested in what actually worked in practice, the most unconcerned with making anarchism relevant to the majority of humanity. Outside of Spain and Latin America where the mass character of the anarchist movement delayed this development, anarchism was rapidly replaced by Bolshevism as the "revolutionary wing" of the workers movement. In the face of Bolshevik hegemony the anarchist movement became increasingly sectarian and oddly resistant to any challenges to its theoretical orthodoxies.

In the face of military disaster Nestor Mahkno drew the appropriate lessons and reorganized his forces to go on to beat the imperialist and White armies in Ukraine. After his defeat at the hands of the Red Army he and many of his Russian and Ukrainian comrades were forced into exile in Western Europe. There they found the same dogmatism and disorganization that had doomed the anarchists in the Russian Revolution.

Just as they had sought to apply the lessons of the defeat of the "free battalions" in building a revolutionary army, Mahkno and his comrades in exile sought to apply the political lessons they had drawn from their experience and to create a new kind of revolutionary anarchist organization — one capable of the profound organizational tasks involved in carrying a revolution through to victory. Their call for the formation of such an organization was a pamphlet entitled "The Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists." The Platform, as it came to be known was published in 1926 and quickly became an object of controversy within the anarchist movement. Reading its opening paragraphs it is not hard to see why:

It is very significant that, in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas, and in spite of the forthrightness and integrity of anarchist positions in facing up to the social revolution, and finally the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for libertarian communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared, very often, in the history of working class struggles as a small event, an episode, and not an important factor.

This contradiction between the positive and incontestable substance of libertarian ideas, and the miserable state in which the anarchist movement vegetates, has its explanation in a number of causes, of which the most important, the principal, is the absence of organizational principles and practices in the anarchist movement.

The introduction goes on to say that :

(I)t is nevertheless beyond doubt that this disorganization derives from some defects of theory: notably the false interpretation of the principle of individuality in anarchism; this theory being too often confused with the absence of all responsibility. The lovers of assertion of 'self,' solely with a view to personal pleasure, obstinately cling to the chaotic state of the anarchist movement, and refer in its defense to the innumerable principles of anarchism and its teachers.

The Platform had three sections. The first or “General” section was a basic exposition of revolutionary anarchist thinking concerning the process of revolution. The second “Constructive” section elaborated an anarchist program for the reorganization of industry, agriculture, and consumption. This section also addressed the question of how the gains of the revolution would be defended by a revolutionary army. The final “Organizational” section called for the creation of a “General Union of Anarchists” on the basis of four organizational principles:

1. Theoretical Unity
2. Tactical Unity or the Collective Method of Action
3. Collective Responsibility, and
4. Federalism

The Platform was widely attacked within the anarchist movement in terms that would be familiar to those who have followed the controversies around Love and Rage. The Platformists were accused of being crypto-Leninists and of attempting to dominate the whole anarchist movement in their effort to build an effective organization. The Platformists were pushed to the margins of the anarchist movement and their efforts to build an organization failed. But the ideas of the Platformists lived on and a variety of Platformist groups have come and gone over the years. Two Platformist organizations that are currently operating are the Anarchist Communist federation in England and the Workers Solidarity Movement in Ireland.

The political program of the Platformists was not as much of a break with anarchist orthodoxies as their organizational principles which Malatesta described as “the absolute negation of any individual independence and freedom of initiative and action.” In response to Malatesta’s charges Mahkno noted how the absence of the spirit of collective responsibility had resulted in the chronic disorganization of the anarchist movement and its effective abdication of its revolutionary responsibilities. The sharp exchange between Malatesta and Mahkno should be required reading for all anarchists today. (Fortunately it has recently become available again in English with the publication of *The Anarchist Revolution*, a collection of Malatesta’s later writing by Freedom Press.) Malatesta’s criticisms of the Platformists are ponderous and abstract, making no reference to the actual state of the anarchist movement. In contrast Mahkno’s response raises the difficult questions that anarchism had up to that point effectively evaded.

One obvious error that the Platformists made was their overestimation of the potential for winning over the majority of anarchists to their position. Given the depth of their criticisms they should have understood that at least initially they would only be able to attract a minority of the anarchist movement. A General Union of Anarchists united around the sort of program advocated in the Platform would not be possible before an intense political struggle within the anarchist movement, a struggle that the Platformists were not in a position to win. Consequently, by tying their project to winning over the majority of anarchists they doomed it.

The Platformists also failed to develop a coherent analysis of imperialism and the profound influence that its global inequalities would have on the process of world revolution. Consequently their political program and their understanding of the class struggle reads today as very simplistic. But their critique of the organizational failings of the anarchist movement and the measures necessary to correct those failings has lost none of their resonance. Their organizational principles

are simple and common sensical. But they are a stake through the heart of anti-organizational thinking in anarchism. The intensely hostile response they generated is a profound testimony to the political irrelevance of much of the anarchist movement.

Tragically the Platformists were to have almost no influence on the Spanish anarchist movement. When the Spanish anarchists found themselves in a revolutionary situation they were considerably better positioned than their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts to give the revolution a libertarian character. But in the end they failed for many of the same reasons. J. Manuel Molinas, Secretary of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) in the early 1930s later wrote: "The platform of Arshinov and other Russian anarchists had very little influence on the movement in exile or within the country ... 'The Platform' was an attempt to renew, to give greater character and capacity to the international anarchist movement in light of the Russian Revolution ... Today, after our own experience, it seems to me that their effort was not fully appreciated." The Spanish Revolution offered the best opportunity to carry the anarchist revolution to completion. The failure of the Spanish anarchists to learn the lessons of the Russian and Ukrainian experiences before it was too late is perhaps the single greatest tragedy in the history of the anarchist movement.

The FAI

The Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) was founded in the summer of 1927. Whereas the Platformists were the product of the experience of defeat of the Russian and Ukrainian anarchists, the FAI arose in response to the burgeoning revolutionary potential of Spain and some of the contradictions within the Spanish anarchist movement. Up until the formation of the FAI the main organizational form of the Spanish anarchist movement was the National Confederation of Labor (CNT). The dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera had broken up the CNT as a functioning national organization. Under these conditions of repression powerful tendencies towards reformism asserted themselves within the scattered anarchist movement. The FAI brought together the most militant and determined revolutionaries in Spain under conditions of intense repression. The FAI was composed of small affinity groups federated locally, regionally, and nationally (including also Portuguese groups and exile groups in France). When the CNT was reorganized in 1928 the FAI came to exert a dominating influence on its orientation.

While the FAI constituted the most revolutionary forces within the anarchist movement they were not united around any sort of coherent program. Rather they were united in their opposition to any sort of collaboration with the reformist forces. Politically the FAI was heterogeneous in the extreme including a wide range of anarchist tendencies as well as groups organized to promote vegetarianism, Esperanto (an artificial language created for purposes of international communication), etc..

In opposition to Malatesta who argued that the unions should be ideologically non-sectarian in order to attract the broadest participation of the working class, the FAI declared itself in favor of explicitly anarchist unions because "working-class unity is not possible." The existence of widespread sympathy for anarchism among the Spanish proletariat and peasantry made it possible to build an explicitly anarchist mass union like the CNT, but the very existence of the FAI pointed to the contradictions involved in such a union. Malatesta argued that the need to meet the daily needs of the members under the existing system has a conservatizing influence

on unions regardless of their origins or assertions of radical aims. The experience of the CNT prior to the founding of the FAI confirmed this position. In effect the FAI constituted itself as an organization of the most advanced elements that fought for (and won) revolutionary politics within the CNT. Opponents of the FAI's revolutionary orientation attacked the FAI for dominating the union. The FAI resisted this characterization of their role within the CNT and certainly non-FAI members were often influential, but an honest assessment of the FAI must acknowledge its leadership function within the Spanish anarchist movement.

While the FAI was undeniably composed of many of the most committed revolutionary anarchist fighters in Spain they fundamentally failed to cohere themselves around a program or strategy until it was too late. Reading Juan Gomez Casas' *Anarchist Organization, The History of the FAI* (Black Rose, 1986, Montreal), one can not help but be struck by this fact. Year in and year out the conferences and plenums of the FAI are dominated by discussions the most elementary organizational matters. The political resolutions are agonizingly vague and subject to the broadest possible range of interpretations. When a revolutionary situation fell into their hands they were utterly unprepared for the difficult choices involved.

On July 19, 1936 the CNT carried out a revolutionary general strike in response to an fascist military coup. They were joined in varying degrees by the socialist union (the UGT) and the political parties of the left. In Catalonia where the anarchists were dominant within the working class and among the peasants the CNT decisively smashed the military revolt, armed the workers and peasants, formed revolutionary committees and organized militias to fight the fascists. A similar pattern repeated itself, again in varying degrees, across those parts of Spain where the fascists were unable to establish control.

In Catalonia the revolutionary upheaval was so complete and the anarchist predominance within it so beyond dispute that on July 20 Luis Companys, the President of the semi-autonomous government of Catalonia (the Generalidad) summoned the leaders of the CNT and the FAI and offered to resign. The leaders of the CNT and FAI declined claiming that they did not want to establish an "anarchist and Confederal dictatorship."

In this single moment we find distilled the historical anarchist abdication of political responsibility. The anarchist movement has no reason to expect to be presented with a better opportunity to reorganize society on libertarian lines than existed on July 20, 1936. While support for the CNT was not universal, they clearly had the allegiance of the majority of the oppressed classes in Catalonia. They had created a situation of dual power with the capitalist state. The choice before them was not one between collaboration with the capitalist state and an anarchist dictatorship. It was between the revolutionary creation of a federation of the popular committees and councils and collaboration. To take the first road would have required smashing the state not just militarily (as they already had) but politically by overthrowing Luis Companys and the Generalidad. Since the popular committees in Catalonia were largely initiated by the CNT's defense committees established to prepare for the insurrection there is no reason such a program could not have been carried out. Dual power is not an end in itself, it is a condition under which an opportunity exists to smash the old power and replace it with a new organization of society. Situations of dual power are inherently unstable. Sooner or later the old power or the new power will smash the other one. The consequence of the CNT and FAI's false fear of being party to an "anarchist dictatorship" was that they soon found themselves first under a dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie and the Communist Party and then under Franco.

The FAI's failure to unite around a comprehensive analysis of Spanish society and strategy for its revolutionary transformation meant that they were unable to seize the revolutionary moment when it presented itself. The workers and peasants were ahead of their leaders and accomplished profound things in terms of collectivizing industry and agriculture and reorganizing social life in the villages and cities under their control. But they lacked the organization or collective political experience to navigate the complicated political situation that confronted them. The organization that was best positioned to provide these things, the FAI, was unable to do so.

It was only after the revolutionary moment had passed and the Spanish state was reorganized with the generous assistance of Moscow that the FAI recognized the need to reorganize itself in accordance with its actual role. In July 1937 the FAI reorganized itself with clear standards of membership based on agreement with a common political orientation. The affinity groups were stripped of any "official role in the new FAI organization" and vote by simple majority was introduced to prevent small groups from obstructing the work of the organization as a whole. But the new political statement of the FAI was again hopelessly vague and the organization had been fundamentally compromised by their participation in the Republican government and their treacherous call for a cease-fire during the "May Days" in Barcelona two months earlier.

The Friends of Durruti

The failure of the FAI to provide revolutionary leadership in spite of the powerful revolutionary aspirations of the Spanish peasants and workers created a political vacuum. One organization that attempted to fill that space was the Friends of Durruti.

One of the central issues in the Spanish Revolution was the attempt to incorporate the militias into a new regular Republican army. Much of the impetus for this militarization came from the Communist Party, which by virtue of its connections with the Soviet Union, was prepared to dominate the command of such an army. The anarchist and POUM militias resisted this process in varying degrees. Ultimately most of the anarchist militias were either incorporated into the new army or broken up by it. One group that resisted militarization were the militias at the Gelsa front. Instead of joining the army many of their members returned to Barcelona and joined with some other dissidents in the CNT to constitute themselves as the Friends of Durruti.

The Friends of Durruti played a pivotal role in the May 1937 events in Barcelona, calling on the anarchist forces to maintain their barricades when the CNT leadership was preaching conciliation with the Communists. After these events the Friends of Durruti issued a pamphlet "Towards a Fresh Revolution" that analyzed the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and put forward proposals for its regeneration. Unlike anarchists today who see the Spanish militias as the model of anarchist military organization the Friends of Durruti had seen them in action and proposed in opposition to either the Republican army or an exclusive reliance on the militias the revolutionary army:

With regard to the problem of the war, we back the idea of the army being under the absolute control of the working class. Officers with their origins in the capitalist regime do not deserve the slightest trust from us. Desertions have been numerous and most of the disasters we have encountered can be laid down to obvious betrayals by officers. As to the army, we want a revolutionary one led exclusively by workers; and should any officer be retained, it must be under the strictest supervision.

The Friends of Durruti also proposed the creation of a Revolutionary Junta to be democratically elected by all of the revolutionary working class organizations that opposed further participation in the Republican government. The precise mechanism for forming the Junta (a word which does not have the same authoritarian implications in Spanish as it does in English; all the CNT unions were governed by juntas) varied in different statements of the Friends of Durruti, but the point should be emphasized that what they were proposing was a popular democratic structure, not a party-state like the one established by the Bolsheviks in Russia. This is similar to the program for workers' and peasants councils, although not quite as good since it required working through the existing union structures. The Friends of Durruti also took some tentative steps to align themselves with anti-colonial forces in Morocco. As troops stationed in Morocco constituted the base for the fascist uprising, the question of support for Moroccan independence was a crucial one. This tentative anti-imperialism is indicative of the Friends of Durruti's determination to confront the weaknesses of anarchist theory.

Conclusion

The Friends of Durruti continued to operate even after the ultimate defeat of the Republic by the fascists, but in the final analysis their initiative clearly came too late. Like the Mahknovchina before them, they only came to understand the need for a different kind of revolutionary anarchist organization as a result of bitter defeats. Their abortive efforts to create such an organization did not get far enough to offer us much guidance today. What they do provide, however, is a desperately needed example of revolutionary anarchism confronting its errors head on and creating new forms in response to new conditions.

The experiences in Ukraine and Spain demonstrate that in the course of a revolution, a certain amount of centralization and repression of open counter-revolutionaries will be necessary. Of course antiauthoritarians must consciously strive to keep such centralization and repression down to the minimum level necessary and should deliberately work to keep the communal organization as decentralized and radically-democratic as possible. Exactly how to maintain this balance is a matter of political judgment, but there should be no ambiguity in our opposition to party-states.

One simple lesson from the experiences discussed here is that the attempt to build a serious revolutionary anarchist organization will inevitably encounter hostility from many quarters, including many sincere anarchists. Only a minority of the most serious and committed activists can be expected to join such an effort. And only in the context of profound social upheaval will the importance of their extended period of organizational and political preparation become clear. Only in the course of struggling to build such an organization on the basis of coherent politics can we hope to collectively confront and overcome the mistakes of the past.

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