

Anarchism and Power in the Spanish Revolution

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Today, when anarchism has become *le mot du jour* in radical circles, the differences between a society based on anarchy and one based on the principles of social ecology should be clearly distinguished. Authentic anarchism above all seeks the emancipation of individual personality from all ethical, political, and social constraints. In so doing, however, it fails to address the all-important and very concrete issue of *power*, which confronts all revolutionaries in a period of social upheaval.

Rather than address how the people, organized into confederated popular assemblies, may capture power and create a fully developed libertarian society, anarchists conceive of power as an essentially malignant *evil* that must be destroyed. Proudhon, for example, once stated that he would divide and subdivide power until it, in effect, ceased to exist. Proudhon may well have intended that government should be reduced to the minimum entity that could exercise authority over the individual, but his statement perpetuates the illusion that power can actually cease to exist, a notion that is as absurd as the idea that gravity can be abolished.

The tragic consequences of this illusion, which has burdened anarchism from its inception, can best be understood by examining a crucial event in the Spanish Revolution of 1936. On July 21 the workers of Catalonia and especially its capital, Barcelona, defeated the forces of General Francisco Franco and thereby gained complete control over one of Spain's largest and most industrialized provinces, including many important cities along the Mediterranean coast and a considerable agrarian area. Partly as the result of an indigenous libertarian tradition, and partly as a result of the influence exercised by the CNT-FAI, Spain's mass revolutionary-syndicalist trade union, the Catalan proletariat proceeded to organize a huge network of defense, neighborhood, supply, and transportation committees and assemblies, while in the countryside the more radical peasantry (a sizable part of the agrarian population) took over and collectivized the land. Catalonia and its population were protected against a possible counterattack by a revolutionary militia, which, notwithstanding its often-archaic weapons, was sufficiently well armed to have defeated the well-trained and well-supplied rebel army and police force. The workers and peasants of Catalonia had, in effect, *shattered* the bourgeois state machine and created a radically new government or polity in which they themselves exercised direct control over public and economic affairs through institutions of their own making. Put in very blunt terms: They had *taken*

power – not by simply changing the names of existing oppressive institutions but by literally destroying those old institutions and creating radically new ones whose form and substance gave the masses the right to definitively determine the operations of the economy and polity of their region.¹

Almost as a matter of course, militant members of the CNT gave their union the authority to organize a revolutionary government and provide it with political direction. Notwithstanding their reputation for indiscipline, the majority of CNT members, or *cenetistas*, were libertarian syndicalists rather than anarchists; they were strongly committed to a well-structured, democratic, disciplined, and coordinated organization. In July 1936 they acted not only with a due regard for ideology but often on their own initiative, to create their own libertarian forms, such as neighborhood councils and assemblies, factory assemblies, and a great variety of extremely loose committees, breaking through any predetermined molds that had been imposed upon the revolutionary movement by dogmatic ideologues.

On July 23, two days after the workers had defeated the local Francoist uprising, a Catalan regional plenum of the CNT convened in Barcelona to decide what to do with the polity that the workers had placed in the union's hands. A few delegates from the militant Bajo de Llobregat region (on the outskirts of the city) fervently demanded that the plenum declare libertarian communism and the end of the old political and social order: that is, the workers that the CNT professed to lead were offering to *give* the plenum the power that *they* had captured and the society their militants had begun to transform.

By accepting the power that was being offered to it, the plenum would have been obliged to change the entire social order in a very considerable and strategic area of Spain that was now under the CNT's de facto control. Even if it were no more permanent than the "Paris Commune," such a step would have produced a "Barcelona Commune" of even more memorable dimensions. But to the astonishment of many militants in the union, the plenum's members were reluctant to take this decisive measure. The Bajo de Llobregat delegates and the CNT militant Juan García Olivier, to their lasting credit, tried to get the plenum to claim the power it *already possessed*, but the oratory of Federica Montseny and the arguments of Diego Abad de Santillán (two CNT leaders) persuaded the plenum not to undertake this move, denouncing it as a "Bolshevik seizure of power."

The monumental nature of this error should be fully appreciated because it reveals all that is internally contradictory about anarchist ideology. By failing to distinguish between a polity and a state, the CNT leaders (guided, for the most part, by the anarchistic Abad de Santillán and Montseny) mistook a workers' government for a capitalist state, thereby rejecting political power in Catalonia at a time when it was *actually in their hands*. By refusing to exercise the power they had already acquired, the plenum did not eliminate power as such; it merely transferred it from its own hands to those of its most treacherous "allies." Needless to emphasize, the old ruling classes celebrated this fatal decision and slowly, by the autumn of 1936 went on to refashion a

¹ These revolutionary syndicalists conceived the means by which they had carried out this transformation as a form of direct action. In contrast to the riots, stone throwing, and violence that many anarchists today extol as "direct action," they meant by the term well-organized and constructive activities directly involved managing public affairs. Direct action, in their view, meant the creation of a polity, the formation of popular institutions, and the formulation and enactment of laws, regulations, and the like—which authentic anarchists regarded as an abridgment of individual "will" or "autonomy."

workers' government into a "bourgeois democratic" state and, given the circumstances, open the door to an increasingly authoritarian Stalinist regime.

The historic CNT plenum, it should be emphasized, did not simply reject the power that the union's own members had won at a considerable cost in life. Turning its back in the most adolescent way on a crucial feature of social and political life, it tried to supplant reality with a daydream, not only by rejecting the political power that the workers had *already* placed in the CNT's hands, but by disavowing the very legitimacy of power and condemning power *as such* – even in a libertarian, democratic form – as an unabated evil that must be effaced. In no instance did the plenum – or the CNT's leadership – give the slightest evidence that it knew what to do "after the revolution," to use the title of Abad de Santillán's utopian disquisition against its author's own behavior at the plenum. The CNT, in effect, had propagated revolutions and theatrical uprisings for years; in the early 1930s it had taken up arms again and again without the least prospect of actually being able to change Spanish society – but when at last it could finally have a significant impact on society, it stood around with a puzzled look, almost orphaned by the very success of its working-class members in achieving the goals embedded in its rhetoric. This was not a failure of nerve; it was a failure of the CNT-FAI's theoretical insight into the measures it would *have had* to undertake to *keep* the power it actually had acquired – indeed, that it feared to keep (and, *within the logical framework of anarchism*, should *never* have taken) because it sought the *abolition* of power, not simply its acquisition by the proletariat and peasantry.

If we are to learn anything from this crucial error by the CNT leadership, it is that power cannot be abolished – it is always a feature of social and political life. Power that is not in the hands of the masses must inevitably fall into the hands of their oppressors. There is no closet in which it can be tucked away, no bewitching ritual that can make it evaporate, no superhuman realm to which it can be dispatched – and no simplistic ideology that can make it disappear with moral and mystical incantations. Self-styled radicals may try to ignore it, as the CNT leaders did in July 1936, but it will remain hidden at every meeting, lie concealed in public activities, and appear and reappear at every rally.

At the risk of repetition, allow me to emphasize that the truly pertinent issue that confronts anarchism is not whether power will exist but whether it will rest in the hands of an elite or in the hands of the people – and whether it will be given a form that corresponds to the most advanced libertarian ideals or be placed in the service of reaction. Rather than refuse the power offered to it by its own members, the CNT plenum should have accepted it and legitimated and approved the new institutions they had already created so that the Spanish proletariat and peasantry could retain their power economically and politically.

Instead, the tension between metaphorical claims and painful realities finally became intolerable, and in May 1937 resolute CNT workers in Barcelona were drawn into open battle with the bourgeois state in a brief but bloody war within the civil war.² Finally the bourgeois state suppressed the last major uprising of the syndicalist movement, butchering hundreds if not thousands of CNT militants. How many were killed will never be known, but we do know that that the internally contradictory ideology called *anarchosyndicalism* lost the greater part of the following it had possessed in the summer of 1936.

² In the intervening year, the CNT leaders had discovered that their rejection of power for the Catalan proletariat and peasantry did not include a rejection of power for themselves as individuals. Several CNT-FAI leaders actually agreed to participate in the bourgeois state as ministers and were holding office at the time of the suppression of their members in the battle of Barcelona in May 1937.

Social revolutionaries, far from removing the problem of power from their field of vision, must address the problem of how to give power a concrete *institutional emancipatory form*. To be silent with respect to this question, and to hide behind superannuated ideologies that are irrelevant to the present overheated capitalist development, is merely to play at revolution, even to mock the memory of the countless militants who have given their all to achieve it.

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