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Interview with anarchist, Stuart Christie

Owen Adams

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Contents

Introduction	5
Interview with Stuart Christie	6

The supervisor handed the slip to the girl, indicating she should take it across to the two men in the alcove. The supervisor then handed me the letter and my passport. I turned to see the two men from the alcove quickly walking out. I made a mental note to shaft American Express at every conceivable opportunity, if I were ever again offered an opportunity.

My diaphragm tightened even more and my heart thumped like a tight Lambeg drum. Yet I felt curiously detached as I took a deep breath and walked out of the office, trying to keep my face expressionless. Mustering all the confidence I could, I paused at the doorway to look at the group of five men now standing to one side of the entrance. Until I appeared at the doorway they had been deep in conversation. They stopped briefly, exchanging knowing looks with one another, and carried on.

Attempting the jaunty air of a well-heeled tourist who had just cashed his letters of credit, I walked back the way I had come, and as slowly as I could. I had only gone a few yards when the knot of men began to follow me up the street, still talking among themselves. My eyes darted everywhere, desperately searching for any opportunity to escape. I continued up the carrera San Jeronimo, stopping to peer in shop windows I passed, as though I was window shopping, but in fact to see how far they were behind. They had allowed me a 20 yards' start before moving, and they kept to that distance.

An empty taxi pulled in to the pavement beside me. But when the driver appeared to invite me to get in, I knew it was an undercover police car. I was being hemmed in.

By this time I had reached the corner of the busy calle Cedaceros. As I steeled myself to make a dash through the crowds I was suddenly grabbed by both arms from behind, my face pushed to the wall and a gun barrel thrust into the small of my back. I tried to turn my head but I was handcuffed before I fully realised what had happened. It was all over in a matter of moments.

The possible dates for my rendezvous in Madrid were from Tuesday 11 to Friday 14 August. I left Barcelona on Monday, this time keeping the explosives in my bag. I could have flown or taken the train, but I enjoyed hitch-hiking and it also meant I would have a bit more money in the event of any emergency.

My destination in the capital was the American Express office. Instead of going to the railway station for a left-luggage locker and leaving my rucksack there, which is what a more experienced anarchist would have done, I swung it on to my back and strolled down the carrera San Jerónimo to collect the letter for my contact.

It was siesta time and the streets were quiet. Turning the corner to enter the American Express office, I was immediately aware of three smartly dressed and tight-lipped men in heavy-rimmed sunglasses standing by the entrance muttering among themselves. I breathed deeply and tried to control my anxiety. Walking past this group, I went into the American Express office where I asked for the poste restante desk. A clerk pointed me in the direction of a desk at the far end of the room.

Handing my passport to the receptionist I asked whether any letters were waiting for me. At this same moment I noticed out of the corner of my eye two men and a woman sitting in an alcove to my right. Again, I knew immediately they were police. The blood and lymph drained from my face and heart. My stomach churned. Something had gone badly wrong.

The girl with my passport found my letter among the tightly packed trays behind her and pulled it out. As she did, I noticed it had been marked with a pink piece of paper the size of a bookie's slip. The woman from the alcove, a supervisor, approached the girl, now bringing the letter to me, said a few words to her and removed the slip.

What was in the letter? How much did they know? Would I be arrested there or would they wait until I had met my contact? But if they knew about the Amex pick-up, they probably knew the details of my rendezvous as well.

Stuart Christie has been an active anarchist through writing, publishing and action. He first achieved notoriety in 1964, when he attempted to assassinate the dictator, Franco. He was imprisoned for 20 years but freed only 3 years later thanks to an international campaign that included Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell. In the 1970s, Stuart and Alfred Meltzer re-formed the Anarchist Black Cross (an organisation to aid anarchist prisoners), edited Black Flag magazine and – by and by – was acquitted of being part of the Angry Brigade. Below is an interview with Stuart, together with an extract from a book he wrote providing details of what happened on that fateful journey to Spain to assassinate Franco.

Introduction

On 31 July, 1964, Stuart Christie, age 18, left London for Paris. On the way he picked up plastic explosives from the anarchist organisation Defensa Interior . One of DI's principal objectives was to organise and carry out attempts on the life of General Franco. Its other role was to generate examples of resistance by means of propaganda by deed. From France, Stuart travelled to Madrid: his intention was to assassinate the fascist dictator , General Francisco Franco. Stuart hitch-hiked to Spain, but was arrested on arrival in Madrid on 11 August.

Stuart faced a military trial and a possible execution sentence by garrote,. However, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. An accomplice, Fernando Carballo Blanco , was sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment. Stuart served only three years in Carabanchel Prison, where he was able to get to know other anarchist prisoners, such as Miguel Garcia , Luis Andres Edo and Juan Busquets . Stuart was freed on 21 September 1967, thanks to international pressure, with support from notables such as Bertrand Russell and

Jean-Paul Sartre. The official reason given by the Franco regime for his early release was that it was due to a plea from Christie's mother.

Back in Britain Stuart re-formed the Anarchist Black Cross and the paper, Black Flag, with Albert Meltzer. The police tried to fit Stuart up for Angry Brigade actions, but he was acquitted of all involvement. Soon he started up a publishing house – Cienfuegos Press (later Refract Publications), which he operated from Sanday in the Orkneys. Today, Stuart remains active in the south of England, where he runs a book publishers and hopes to get funding to get an anarchist/libertarian film archive up and running again (see appeal on his site).

Interview with Stuart Christie

Q. Do you feel that earlier anarchist methods, such as 'propaganda by the deed' can be effective today?

A. *The tactic of propaganda by the deed is an essential and unchanging element in the struggle for justice and fairness. What may differ from time to time, generation to generation, is the methodology of that direct action. When called on, each new generation and/or individual finds its own way to resist tyranny or advance the struggle. Methods that, for one reason or another, were morally or technically feasible 20 or even 10 years ago are often no longer possible today. To paraphrase Karl Popper: because our knowledge and understanding of the world is constantly changing and evolving, especially so in our digital age, we cannot, therefore, know today what we can only know tomorrow.*

Q. I have seen little evidence that the protagonists of recent movements such as the Indignados of southern Europe, the Arab Spring, and Occupy describe themselves as socialists or anarchists, yet it seems to me that their calls for direct democracy, their holding of general assemblies and call for the end of capitalism are

like hours, a car pulled over. It was driven by a middle-aged English commercial traveller from Dagenham. He was going to Barcelona.

It soon became apparent that his charity was driven to a large extent by enlightened self-interest. Every few kilometres the old banger would chug to a standstill and I would have to get out in the full blast of the August Mediterranean sun and push the bloody car up the foothills until we got it bump-started. Between pushing a car uphill and granny's jumper, the sweat began rolling off me. Waterproof tape was yet to have been invented, and the cellophane-wrapped packets of plastique began slipping from my body. I had to keep nudging them up with my forearms.

Traffic was heavy when we reached Le Pérthus, the busiest of Spain's frontier mountain passes. This was where we would have to clear a customs check. On the other side was fascist Spain.

After queuing for a bowel-churning eternity, I had to push the car on to the ramp while my companion steered. I pulled my jumper taut and waited with my heart in my mouth while two dour-faced Civil Guards with shiny patent-leather three-cornered hats and sub-machine guns at the ready looked me up and down. I handed my passport over to the border guard while the customs officers examined the boot and searched behind the seats of the car.

"Why have you come to Spain?"

"Turista!" I replied, hoping my accent didn't make it sound like "terrorista".

A pair of dark eyes looked at me suspiciously for a moment before the stamp finally descended on the passport.

The car made it as far as Gerona's main square, where it broke down again, this time in the middle of the rush hour. Eventually we got going again and before I knew it we were driving through the dilapidated red-roofed outskirts of industrial Barcelona.

"I never thought we'd make it," said my companion.

"Neither did I," was my reply.

We said goodbye and went our separate ways.

Alberola went through the details of the operation while Salva translated. My job was to deliver the explosives to the contact, together with a letter, addressed to me, which I was to collect from the American Express offices in Madrid. Then, at a rendezvous in the plaza de Moncloa, the contact would identify me by a handkerchief wrapped around one of my hands. He would approach me and say, “Qué tal?” (“How are you?”), to which I was to reply, “Me duele la mano” (“I’ve a sore hand”).

I spoke no Spanish, so to avoid the embarrassment of forgetting my lines and unloading a kilo of high explosives on the first friendly Spaniard I met, Octavio wrote the words down for me, along with all the instructions. (This was, with hindsight, extremely foolish.) Once the contact had identified himself, I was to hand over the parcel, together with the letter, and leave immediately.

My train pulled into Toulouse station shortly before dawn on Friday August 7 after a clammy and uncomfortable night. After a hurried coffee and croissant I caught a train to Perpignan. Here, I prepared myself for crossing the border; I would hitchhike the rest of the way to Madrid.

The best way to take the explosives in, I thought, was on my body, not in my rucksack in case it was searched by a punctilious customs officer. In Perpignan, I found the public baths and paid for a cubicle. After a hot soak, and still naked, I unpacked the slabs of plastique, and taped them to my chest and stomach with Elastoplasts and adhesive tape. The detonators I wrapped in cotton wool and hid inside the lining of my jacket.

With the plastic explosive strapped to me, my body was improbably misshapen. The only way to disguise myself was with the baggy woollen jumper my granny had knitted to protect me from the biting Clydeside winds. At the risk of understatement, I looked out of place on the Mediterranean coast in August.

I walked through the outskirts of Perpignan until I came to a junction with a road sign pointing to Spain. After what seemed

similar, or the same, as anarcho-syndicalism. Do you agree, and if so, why do you think the words ‘anarchism’ or ‘socialism’ are rarely, if ever, mentioned, and do you think they should be?

A. My understanding of these movements is that anarchists and libertarians were — and are — very active in these movements, indeed central to them, especially in the case of the indignados in Spain. What they didn’t do, however, quite sensibly and correctly as anarchists, is lay ideological claim to these popular movements or attempt to use them as fertile organisational ‘recruiting grounds’, as inevitably occurs with the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist and the Islamist/jihadist groupings. Anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian socialists are certainly active today in Egypt, Libya and other Maghreb countries, and I’ve no doubt there are also anarchists active in the Arabian Peninsula as well. If the terms ‘anarchism’ and ‘socialism’ are rarely heard that’s possibly down to the editorial policies of the mainstream broadcast and print media, who have a different agenda and prefer to focus on the Jihadist/Muslim Brotherhood threat.

Q. It seems to me that anarchism is regarded by many as a dirty word, partly due to successful anti-anarchist propaganda, partly due to the interpretation given to it by some anarchists themselves (such as ‘the black bloc’). Would you agree with me, and how might we ‘sell’ anarchism to the masses?

A. The words ‘Anarchism’ and ‘anarchists’ have always been demonised by the mainstream media; the time to worry is when the capitalist press and state spin doctors stop using them as ‘bogey men’ terms. As for ‘selling anarchism to the masses’ the only way to do that is through education (spreading the Idea), inspiration— and example.

Q. Would you consider yourself a socialist as well as an anarchist?

A. Yes

Q. How hopeful, or hopeless, do you feel the anarchist struggle could be in the face of this current government?

A. *It has never been a question of being hopeful or hopeless in the face of this or any future government/society; the struggle —with the human condition, not just the state — is forever. All you can — or should — hope for along the way are a few little victories and, maybe, the occasional big one. Seamus Heaney says ‘Don’t hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime, the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme. So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge. Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles and cures and healing wells.’*

Q. If there were a general election tomorrow, would you vote, and if so, who would you vote for (if they were standing)?

A. *No, I wouldn’t vote for a party or for an individual, no matter how honourable, but I would certainly consider a protest vote against a party — or for something achievable. For example, in the Spanish elections of 1936 the anarcho-syndicalist CNT tacitly withdrew its overt opposition to participation in the parliamentary process (ie, voting) in order to force the release of 30,000 political prisoners imprisoned by the Republic over the previous three years.*

Q. Do you think we could achieve a wholesale anarchist society? Could it happen transitionally or would a rapid revolution be necessary?

A. *I’ve really no idea; what appeared to work rapidly and violently in particular places and times (e.g., Russia, 1917, and Spain, 1936) clearly, for a whole variety of reasons, didn’t endure. Similar events may happen again, who knows, all we can do is work, hope and carry on. Even so, as, when, and if an ‘anarchist’ society comes into being, we’ll still have to face the perennial problems of co-existence human beings have faced since time immemorial. One saving grace we should have — as anarchists —is that we’d hope to be more realistic and conscious of our human failings, shortcomings and limitations, particularly with regard to the corrupting influence of the exercise of power. However, I am an optimist and I share the view of American psychologist William James’: ‘The ceaseless whisper of the more per-*

(The following is taken from Stuart’s book, *Granny Made Me An Anarchist.*)

By August 6 1964, everything was ready for my mission. My ticket had been booked on the night train from Paris to Toulouse. I met Bernardo and Salvador, my Spanish anarchist contacts from London, at the place d’Italie, and from there we walked down the rue Bobillot and into a narrow and neglected side street with grubby grey tenements.

Checking to ensure we had not been followed, Salva gave a prearranged knock on the curtained street-floor window and, when the door opened, we filed quickly through the dark and narrow hallway and into the front room. This was the quartermaster’s stores, where the weapons, explosives and forged documents could be kept with some degree of safety.

Three people were already in the room. Two were seated, one of whom I recognised as Octavio Alberola, the charismatic coordinator of the underground anarchist group *Defensa Interior*, and the man on whose shoulders lay the responsibility for killing Franco. The third man, referred to as “the chemist”, was standing by the sink wearing rubber gloves, measuring and pouring chemicals.

Being thirsty, I went to the sink for water, and was about to put a glass to my lips when the chemist turned round and saw what I was doing. He shouted at me to stop and rushed across, removing the glass carefully from my hands, explaining that it had just been used for measuring pure sulphuric acid.

Shaken, I stood back to lean on the sideboard and went to light a cigarette. This triggered another equally volcanic reaction from the chemist as he explained that the sideboard drawer was full of detonators. I retreated to the table, and was very cautious after that.

The chemist placed on the table five slabs of what looked like king-size bars of my granny’s home-made tablet (a crumbly Scottish toffee similar to butter fudge), each containing 200 grams of plastic explosive, along with detonators.

Elsewhere, the less formal practices and struggles of the more indomitable among the propertyless and disadvantaged victims of the authority system have found articulation in the writings of those who on brief acquaintance would appear to be mere millenarian dreamers. Far from being abstract speculations conjured out of thin air, such works have, like all social theories, been derived from sensitive observation. They reflect the fundamental and uncontainable conviction nourished by a conscious minority throughout history that social power held over people is a usurpation of natural rights: power originates in the people, and they alone have, together, the right to wield it.

Q. Do you think we in Britain are still threatened by fascism?

A. Fascism of one sort or another — as with any other reactionary populist ideology and fundamentalist belief system — is always a potential threat to society, especially when people's fears and emotions can be manipulated and used in the furtherance of some elitist political or religious agenda. Who'd have thought twenty years ago that militant jihadist Islam or fundamentalist Protestantism/Catholicism would still be a serious and ongoing problem in the 21st century!

Q. Should we try and build a movement and organise? If so, how might we do it and what form could it take?

A. Movements that are thrown up as a response to a particular threat or situation, yes, but you can't just 'set up' a body with revolutionary aspirations in the hope of it developing it into a 'revolutionary movement' without it — inevitably—degenerating into a self-perpetuating, self-serving vanguardist monster, e.g., the Communist Party, SWP, WRP, etc. A very useful text to read in that respect is Robert Michels' 'Political Parties', especially the chapters outlining what he called 'the Iron Law of Oligarchy'. The only way to build, organise, educate and proselytise anarchist libertarian ideas and solutions is through bodies with shared economic/class interests such as the trade unions, trades councils or other community-based groups...

Stuart on the Franco assassination attempt

manent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, MUST warp the world in their direction.'

Q. Do you think that a) the NHS, b) Social security, c) police, d) military, could continue to function, or would be necessary, in an anarchist society?

A. An anarchist society is and always will be an aspiration, an ideal — a 'star' to follow — one that provides us with an ethical code, a moral barometer and a libertarian political template for our everyday lives. If and when a social revolutionary situation recurs again (in this country or anywhere) the role of the anarchist will be to do what they can to ensure that the social institutions required to ensure that any human society (including health and welfare, and security/defence services), function justly, fairly and as conflict-free as is humanly possible, are — and remain — fundamentally democratic, libertarian and answerable to the community. It's not about achieving Nirvana or a Utopia, only religious zealots and ideological fundamentalists believe in the 'rapture' that creates the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, or the 'last fight' mentioned in 'The Internationale'. Anarchists appreciate only too well how 'imperfect' human beings are and, doubtless, always will be, which is why they reject institutionalised power structures as the bedrock for the creation of oligarchies (well-meaning or otherwise) and the corrupting of the body politic.

Q. What examples can you think of as anarchy in action today?

A. Can't think of any offhand, specifically, but I'm sure your readers can come up with lots of examples of voluntary self-help and direct organisations and bodies that would fit into the category of 'anarchy in action'.

Q. Can laissez-faire capitalists/ the US Libertarian Party, be considered as anarchists?

A. Not in the slightest. These people are minimal statist, the minimal part being the defence and advancement of self-interest and property rights — and not even 'enlightened' self-interest.

Q. Have your ideas changed much over the decades, and if so, how?

A. Yes, my thoughts and views on lots of things have changed over the years, which is inevitable as you acquire more knowledge through different experiences, and meet a wide variety of people with different views on life to your own — and of course reading, TV, cinema, the internet, etc.. But my anarchist view of the world remains fundamentally unchanged.

Q. What is anarchism?

A. Anarchism is the movement for social justice through freedom. It is concrete, democratic and egalitarian. It has existed and developed since the seventeenth century, with a philosophy and a defined outlook that have evolved and grown with time and circumstance. Anarchism began as what it remains today: a direct challenge by the underprivileged to their oppression and exploitation. It opposes both the insidious growth of state power and the pernicious ethos of possessive individualism, which, together or separately, ultimately serve only the interests of the few at the expense of the rest.

Anarchism promotes mutual aid, harmony and human solidarity, to achieve a free, classless society – a cooperative commonwealth. Anarchism is both a theory and practice of life. Philosophically, it aims for perfect accord between the individual, society and nature. In an anarchist society, mutually respectful sovereign individuals would be organised in non-coercive relationships within naturally defined communities in which the means of production and distribution are held in common.

Anarchists, are not simply dreamers obsessed with abstract principles. We know that events are ruled by chance, and that people's actions depend much on long-held habits and on psychological and emotional factors that are often anti-social and usually unpredictable. We are well aware that a perfect society cannot be won tomorrow. Indeed, the struggle could last forever! However, it is the vision that provides the spur to struggle against things as they are, and for things that might be.

Whatever the immediate prospects of achieving a free society, and however remote the ideal, if we value our common humanity

then we must never cease to strive to realise our vision. If we settle for anything less, then we are little more than beasts of burden at the service of the privileged few, without much to gain from life other than a lighter load, better feed and a cosier berth.

Ultimately, only struggle determines outcome, and progress towards a more meaningful community must begin with the will to resist every form of injustice. In general terms, this means challenging all exploitation and defying the legitimacy of all coercive authority. If anarchists have one article of unshakeable faith then it is that, once the habit of deferring to politicians or ideologues is lost, and that of resistance to domination and exploitation acquired, then ordinary people have a capacity to organise every aspect of their lives in their own interests, anywhere and at any time, both freely and fairly.

Anarchism encompasses such a broad view of the world that it cannot easily be distilled into a formal definition. Michael Bakunin, the man whose writings and example over a century ago did most to transform anarchism from an abstract critique of political power into a theory of practical social action, defined its fundamental tenet thus: In a word, we reject all privileged, licensed, official, and legal legislation and authority, even though it arise from universal suffrage, convinced that it could only turn to the benefit of a dominant and exploiting minority, and against the interests of the vast enslaved majority.

Anarchists do not stand aside from popular struggle, nor do they attempt to dominate it. They seek to contribute to it practically whatever they can, and also to assist within it the highest possible levels both of individual self-development and of group solidarity. It is possible to recognise anarchist ideas concerning voluntary relationships, egalitarian participation in decision-making processes, mutual aid and a related critique of all forms of domination in philosophical, social and revolutionary movements in all times and places.