

Self-Management and the Spanish Revolution

1936 ~ 37

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I

“For the first time since the attempts to establish socialism in Russia, Hungary and Germany following the First World War, the revolutionary struggle of the Spanish workers demonstrates anew type of transformation from capitalist to collective modes of production, which despite its incomplete nature was carried out on an impressive scale.”

Karl Korsch — 1939.

Thirty six years after its first victories, the Spanish Revolution remains the most significant of the various practical experiments in self-management which have taken place in this century. The experience of the Spanish workers' councils forms an important point of departure for the modern proletariat, both in terms of its accomplishments and its failures. The widespread dissimulation of this aspect of history *made by the proletariat* only reinforces its fundamentally *radical* character. Suppressed by bourgeois historians and leninists alike, and distorted into an unrecognisable myth by those anarchists who treasure it as one of their “golden moments”, the revolutionary movement in Spain continues to be a source of embarrassment for ideology. The activities of the “uncontrollable elements” of the Spanish proletariat proved to be a scandal to all parties. The revolution was eliminated long before the victory of the fascists by a combined force of Stalinists, liberals and ‘libertarian’ bureaucrats of the very anarchist movement in whose name the most radical members of the working class had acted. The Spanish ‘Civil War’ only began *after* the defeat of the Revolution.

The revolution in Spain represents the last stand of the traditional proletarian movement and within its history are contained all the positive aspects of this movement as well as the counter-revolutionary forces and ideologies which were to oppose it. The struggle which had developed between Leninism and the councils in Russia was to be repeated in Spain on a larger and more profound scale. By rediscovering the councilist form in its own practice, the Spanish proletariat were the heirs of Kronstadt and the councils in Germany and Italy; with the Spanish councils the revolutionary movement which had been defeated by Social-Democracy and Bolshevism *reappeared*. The Spanish Revolution was an *international* struggle, not only in the sense that its combatants came from many countries, but because its existence stood in opposition to all the ruling powers of the world. As the Italian anarchist Berneri observed: “Today we are fighting against Burgos, but tomorrow we will have to fight against Moscow in order to defend our freedom.” This war against hierarchy; moreover, was to become a struggle against ideology in general.

Before the revolution, the CNT had attempted to integrate the councils within its ideological schema; the document produced by the CNT Congress at Saragossa (June 1936) was essentially a *councilist* program and recognized the councils as the basic organ of revolution. While advancing a revolutionary theory of workers' councils, however, the CNT itself was not a councilist organization — the principle of direct democracy under which the councils were to operate was not reflected in the structure of the anarchist organisation. While the lessons of the Bolshevik counter-revolution were not lost on the Spanish anarchists, their refusal of a ‘revolutionary’ representation — a party holding power in the *name* of the proletariat — was purely formal. The matter of democratic organization was to become anarchism's undoing. Although its explicit call for a *social* revolution — one in which the proletariat would assume management over the

means of production without the mediation of the state — remains one of anarchism's merits, the actual practical task of making such a revolution was beyond it.

In understanding the Spanish Revolution, it is not a question of merely rendering its “unconscious tendencies conscious” but in explaining the actions of a highly class conscious proletariat actions which were veiled in ideology, yet transcended it. The appearance of the councils in 1986 was the product of 50 years of revolutionary activity, most of it under the aegis of the Spanish anarchist movement. Yet the actual revolution marked the tactical failure of the anarchists; the expropriations of July were in response to a fascist putsch and not an anarchist insurrection. The anarchists' faith in the apocalyptic powers of a general strike had largely proved to be chimerical; the CNT-FAI had failed, in rising after rising, to be capable of extending the locus of revolution beyond the parochial confines of a few cities or regions. By 1936, the ideology of anarcho-syndicalism had been shown to be obsolete; the spontaneous development of workers' councils during the course of the 1983 Aragon insurrection and the Asturian miners' revolt represented a *practical advance* upon the anarcho-syndicalist program of building a revolutionary society based on unions. The revolutionary committees of Aragon and Asturias, which had established themselves as a social and economic power in addition to their military capacities, were to reappear all over Republican Spain in July 1986 and their existence threatened the leadership of the CNT-FAI as much as the Republican government.

From its inception, the Anarchist movement in Spain had retained an implicitly hierarchical structure which embodied a dualistic separation of political and economic sectors. While the anarchist union, the CNT, was to organise the working class in preparation for social revolution, the recently formed FAI was to constitute a “conscious minority” of anarchist militants. The CNT-FAI was patterned upon an elitist conception of organization much like Bakunin's Alliance for Social Democracy which he had defined as being composed of “federations of workers, forming free pacts with one another, with a small secret revolutionary body that permeated and controlled them.” The clan-destine FAI saw itself as a “motor producing the quantity of fabulous energy needed to move the syndicates in the direction which most conforms to the longings of Humanity for renovation and emancipation.” In practice, this organization was to act as a quasi-Leninist vanguard party and the latent hierarchical divisions of the CNT-FAI as a whole were to become a social reality after July 1936. The immense revolutionary activity of the anarchist masses was to be reversed in a struggle in which the official CNT-FAI was to take the side of the bourgeois Republican state and its new found ally, the Communist party. What was accomplished by the factory councils, agrarian collectives and workers' militias in the year 1936–7 was *in spite* of the policies and actions of the official anarchist organization. Nonetheless, despite the obstacles erected in its path, the movement for self-management in the Spanish Revolution provides the clearest historical example of a genuine socialism.

II

“The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their actions” (Benjamin)

The historical explosion that was the Spanish Revolution cannot be explained under the convenient rubric of a ‘Civil War’; it represented the unfolding of an acute class-struggle in which

the Spanish proletariat participated as much for itself as against Franco. The fascist rising was answered, not by the impotent Republican government, but by a popular insurrection which involved men, women and youth and destroyed, in less than a month, the entire matrix of Spanish society. The armed proletariat of July accomplished a de facto abolition of Church and State and replaced capitalist modes of production with economic and social forms of its own. In the subsequent year, the councils established by the working-class were to become a third force fighting against both the fascists and the attempts of the Republican government to re-establish its authority. The success of the workers' and peasants' militias cannot be measured in purely military terms. While checking the fascist advance, these militias more importantly implemented a revolutionary program of expropriation and collectivisation. The slogan "war and revolution at the same time" formed the basis of the militias' actions. Wherever possible throughout Republican Spain, workers seized the factories, peasants collectivised their land and a revolutionary force was organised to generalise and defend the revolution: "we carry a new world in our hearts, a world that is growing at this very moment." Durruti)

The period of revolutionary occupation which began during July demonstrated the *viability* of the councilist form. The Spanish councils (unlike those previously in Russia, Germany and Italy) were able to pose the question of self-management *practically*, proceeding beyond the necessary arming of the workers to the organisation of production. In the industrialised areas of Catalonia, an anarchist stronghold, the proletariat proved capable of administering and improving a modern urban economy, increasing productivity while maintaining necessary services for the population – revolutionary Barcelona is witness to the success of self-management in Spain. Similar results were achieved in the rural areas of Aragon and Valencia, where modern agricultural techniques were introduced in the process of collectivisation. The most radical aspect of this movement, however, was not the simple rationalisation of the Spanish economy but the attempt made to practically realise a critique of political economy. From the beginning of the occupations, the Spanish proletariat proclaimed a comunismo *libertario* in which money and *commodity* labour were abolished. In spite of admittedly primitive economic conditions, the Spanish councils and collectives were able to devise a system of distribution and exchange which represented a qualitative suppression of the relations of capitalist production. The dilemma of 'economic' or 'moral' incentives, a problem for the bureaucratic classes of pseudo-socialist countries, was not encountered in revolutionary Spain. The radical translation of the dictum "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" into reality was incentive enough for the proletariat to meet and in fact excel the demands imposed by war.

The spontaneous capacity for organization demonstrated by the Spanish proletariat during the revolutionary period disproved, once and for all, the Leninist falsehoods about the need for "correct leadership". The assumption of direct power over the means of production was accompanied by the establishment of a direct democracy of the proletariat in which the basic organs of power were the councils – "revolutionary committees created by the people in order to make the revolution". (CNT, December 20, 1936).. Despite differences in their individual characteristics, the councils and collectives, operated on essentially the same basis: delegates were elected to perform specific tasks and co-ordinate production – these delegates had limited powers and were subject to recall by the general assemblies of workers and peasants, in which all important decisions were made. Besides establishing an internal democracy, the councils sought to *extend* their power by co-ordinating activities with each other; unity was created between the factory councils and agrarian collectives, not only in the militias where workers and peasants

fought side by side, but in the actual federation of movements and the exchange of delegates. While bourgeois sociologists and historians have attempted to portray the revolutionary activity of the anarchist peasants as a 'primitive religious movement', one must only examine the Program of the Federation of the Aragon Collectives to perceive the advanced consciousness of the rural proletariat: "We propose the abolition of the local boundaries of the property we cultivate...unoccupied work-teams will be used to reinforce the collectives that are lacking labour power." The Spanish movement for self-management was *not* a demand for simple regional autonomy — councilist federation was designed to supplant traditional authority in its *entirety*.

The form in which the councils appeared was directly related to the organization of the workers' militias where the principles of direct democracy had first been developed. In July, the armed columns of the Spanish proletariat were, in fact, the Revolution. Their function was as much *social* as military; the liquidation of bourgeois elements by the militias was not carried out 'in defence of the Republic' but as an initial step in the radical transformation of Spanish society. The militias themselves never intended to be part of a regular army; in itself, the militia structure represented a radical break with conventional modes of warfare, simply because it was organised along revolutionary democratic lines. Like the insurgent armies of the Russian and German Revolutions, the Spanish militias represented the military arm of councilist power; the soldiers' councils, like the factory assemblies and collectives, elected revocable, mandated delegates. The non-hierarchical character of these militia columns is evidenced in the fact that differences in rank and pay were non-existent. The history of the Spanish militias remains an example of armed proletarian power: the revolutionary columns resisted any attempt at 'militarization', designed to turn them into regular army units, to the end. Defiantly, their slogan became: "militiamen, yes! soldiers, never!"

III

"We must carry out a total revolution. Expropriation must also be total. This is not the time for sleeping, but for *building*...If the Spanish worker does not carve out his liberty, the state will retain and will reconstruct the authority of the government, destroying little by little the conquest made at the cost of a thousand acts of heroism."

-Solidaridad Obrera, Aug.26, 1936

Despite the rapid advance of the workers' militias in Republican Spain, the social revolution which began in July failed to establish the absolute authority of councilist power. While the Republican government had been severely weakened, it did not, of course, abdicate in favour of the proletariat; after July, dual power existed in 'Anti-Fascist' Spain between the forces of a new revolutionary order and the remnants of the bourgeois Republic. The councils of July had made the government virtually irrelevant and had practically superseded the syndicalist structure of the CNT-FAI; they were defeated to the extent that they failed to see the necessity of consolidating their power — a consolidation that would inevitably mean the abandonment of all traditional organisations. Although the slogan of Asturias, UHP (unite, proletarian brothers!), reappeared during July and united various factors of the proletariat around a common program of revolutionary activity, ideological divisions soon manifested themselves again and prevented a lasting unity. The proletariat split along party lines, the anarchist rank-and-file and POUM

(a small Marxist party) being the only ones to support the Revolution. Despite this, the revolutionary proletariat were in a majority – unfortunately, however, they did not take advantage of their position. A misplaced trust in the leadership of the CNT-FAI led to a situation where the anarchist masses were to acquiesce to the gradual abolition of their power. Invoking the Stalinist slogans of “Unity” and “discipline”, the CNT-FAI sought to persuade the proletariat that the elimination of the councils and militias was a necessity imposed by the exigencies of Civil War.

While the anarchist proletariat undertook the reconstruction of society along the lines of self-management, the official CNT-PAI was preparing to accede to its *compromise*. The collaborationist policy of the anarcho-bureaucrats became clear when they put aside their ‘anti-statist ideology and actually joined the government. Playing into the hands of the Stalinists, who were rapidly organising the Republican petit-bourgeoisie into a counter-revolutionary movement, the CNT ministers consented to governmental action against the councils. Government inspired municipal councils, which included extra-proportional representation for the UGT and Communist party, were created in an effort to replace the councils of the proletariat. Additionally, the CNT leadership helped draft the Decree of Collectivisation of October 24, 1936, which would limit the councils’ power; in place of self-management they proposed to establish a form of ‘workers’ control’ in which the workers’ committees served a purely advisory role.

The failure of the Spanish Revolution lies in its inability to extend itself to a point where the councils and militias would assume total control over the revolutionary movement and, as a consequence, over Republican Spain as a whole. While immensely successful in organising military and economic affairs, the Spanish councils failed, to give *positive* practical and theoretical expression to their own existence. Unable to define themselves in relation to the CNT-FAI, they were everywhere outmanoeuvred. Every attempt at action against the enemies of the Revolution in the Republican camp was thwarted; the Stalinists and liberals were able to reconstruct the machinery of government virtually unhindered. Successive Republican ministries sabotaged the attempts at self-management, denying credit to factories, etc., without serious retaliation – the anarchist militias who were denied arms did not disarm those who were preparing their demise. The destruction of the Spanish Revolution did not, of course, proceed without opposition, but the recognition by the proletariat of its betrayal did not come until well after the initial moves against the councils and militias. Herrería was one of the first to openly pose the crucial question facing the revolution in an open letter to the anarchist politician Montseny he wrote: “The dilemma, war or revolution, no longer has any meaning. The only dilemma is this: either victory over Franco through revolutionary war or defeat. The problem for you and the other comrades is to choose between the Versailles of Thiers and the Paris of the Commune, before Thiers and Bismarck make their holy union.” Unfortunately, the forces of the Spanish Thiers had already acted; the left-wing anarchist masses, who co-operated with militants of POUM, did not offer significant opposition until early 1937. The left-anarchist group, the Friends of Durruti, conducted a widespread agitation among the workers’ militias for a defence of the Revolution, but by this time the initiative had passed from the proletariat to the *forces* of its enemies.

The campaign of the bourgeois Republican forces (the government, the Communist and Socialist parties) against the workers’ councils became overtly violent in May, 1937 when the Stalinists and Catalan Nationalists moved on the self-managed Barcelona Telephone Exchange. Following this action, the working class of the city rose spontaneously to defend their Revolution; barricades were erected, the police disarmed and armed workers were in control of the city. At this

point, the counter-revolution could have been reversed, at least in Catalonia. The anarchist militias at the Aragon front were prepared to march to Barcelona — victory was far from assured for the government and the Stalinists. The Barcelona workers, however, remained in purely defensive positions and hesitated to move beyond their own districts. This stalemate worked to the advantage of those who sought to pacify the situation and, as before, the central leadership of the CNT-FAI was to offer its services of ‘conciliation’ — from the beginning of the insurrection, these recuperators urged the workers to dismantle their barricades and return to work. The *casa CNT* was resisted in its pacification program by the Friends of Durruti and others who called for the defence of the councils and a victorious conclusion to the fighting. Despite this resistance, the CNT continued in its efforts to ‘mediate’ the dispute and prevented anarchist militiamen from entering the city. Thus isolated from external support, the insurgents of Barcelona were easily surrounded; while the CNT called for a ‘return to normality,’ Stalinist agents began to implement their by-now standard method⁵ of repression, assassinating select groups of the most radical elements and disarming the workers, thereby establishing ‘unity’. In the months after May, these tactics were employed throughout Republican Spain: Lister’s troops eliminated the agrarian collectives, the militias were dissolved, POUM was suppressed and the CNT, now expendable, was evicted from the government. The councils were defeated within a year after their appearance; the “thousand acts of heroism” of the Spanish proletariat were not enough to prevent the victory of the counter-revolution.

IV

What was so difficult to accomplish in Spain-1936, today becomes the absolute *minimum* for any proletarian revolution. The experience of the Spanish workers’ councils provides an example of only the *beginnings* of councilist power; the technical resources of contemporary capitalist society will enable the modern proletariat to accomplish in a few days what the Spanish revolutionaries were never able to complete — the self-management of the means of production. The possibilities for the radical transformation of society are that much greater now because the economic question’ can and must become a *banality*. Whereas in Spain “full employment” was a revolutionary goal, the success of any future councils will be measured by their concrete efforts to *eliminate* work as much as possible. Because of the extreme conditions of emergency in which it took place, the Spanish Revolution was never a festival, even to the extent the Commune was. The pleasure denied the Spanish proletariat awaits the revolutionaries of today.

Beyond the economic and technical developments which separate the modern proletariat from the tradition of the Spanish councils, there remains an essential link — many of the problems encountered in 1936 will continue to confront any revolutionary movement. In its defeat, the Spanish Revolution demonstrates the role played by enemies *within* the ranks of the proletariat recuperators who are not as easily recognized as the clowns of the various Leninist parties. As Spain shows, councilist power does not always succumb to an external ‘villain’ conveniently played by the Noskes and Trotskys of the world; the councils can *defeat themselves* if they fail to take the offensive and establish their authority everywhere. The modern proletariat will avoid the fate which befell revolutionary Kronstadt or Barcelona only through an awareness of the immensity of the task which awaits it. The exemplary actions of the Spanish councils and militias

could not compensate for the failure of the Spanish proletariat to perceive the obstacles which still remained in its path. The radical history of the *future* will be conscious or it will be *nothing*.

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