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Bookchin on Spanish Anarchism

New History Published

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did not embrace a libertarian outlook to straitjacket myself in the past and wrap myself in a black flag that is meant to symbolize a new corps of holy saints and sacred organizations. I do not want to *revere* anarchism; I want to *believe* in it as a rational human being. A flight back to the classical labor movement and the time-worn tracts of earlier generations is a tragic regression, whether it takes place in the name of Marxism, socialism, syndicalism, or anarchism. If people want the security of tradition, they are welcome to it—but they will pay a bitter price in the form of a mindless dogmatism. In this respect, anarchists who follow this path backward will be no different than those pathetically fragile individuals who are trying to create a secure home and catechism for themselves in Trotskyist, Maoist, and Stalinist organizations. For my part, I choose a different path—not apologia for the past, but honest criticism; not the mindless deadening security of tradition, but the rationally provocative uncertainties of the future.

Needless to say, a high degree of technological development can never be *in itself* the *sufficient* reason for a liberated society; but, at the very least, it is the *necessary* reason. Without a communism based on a sufficiency in the means of life, we will have a communism based on scarcity. If Sam believes that a luminescent ethical principle can prevent a communism based on scarcity from degenerating into another scramble for privilege and gain, he would do well to review history and see how countless such ethical movements degenerated into new hierarchies and systems of domination.

It would be dense, of course, to say that mere abundance as such provides a guarantee of freedom and social harmony. *Obviously*, it requires *more* than a sufficiently developed technological base to achieve a libertarian communist society. Ultimately, the sufficient reason for such a society involves a new morality, indeed a new culture. But the moral and cultural without the material remain mere abstractions, just as material advances in themselves reinforce domination if they are based on social relations rooted in privilege. Having made this reasonably clear, I hope it will be the last time I shall have to repeat it. If Sam wishes to inveigh against my post-scarcity concept, let him at least argue against it for what it *really* is—an attempt to provide the material basis for anarchist ethical concepts—not knock over straw men of his own making.

I would like to end on a conciliatory note, particularly when old comrades “cross swords” in a public discussion. If, at times, I have seemed harsh to my good friend Sam Dolgoff, I hope he (and readers of *The Open Road*) will understand that my harshness derives more from weariness than irritation. And it is a weariness that stems not only from the misunderstandings that riddle Sam’s review but also the spirit it reflects among a number of anarchists—namely, the fear that any criticism of anarchist movements and leaders (yes, leaders!) must be muted lest our opponents avail themselves of our weaknesses; furthermore, that tradition must be perpetuated in an uncertain present and a dim future. For my part, I

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his anarchist principles in 1936 that earned him the admiration of anarchists and even of ordinary workers in Spain. Misguided as Durruti's *pistolerismo* may have been, I would regard myself as a hypocrite if I failed to show at least some admiration for this courageous, selfless, idealist while trying to refurbish his "dark" reputation for gun-toting with the phony equipage of an anarchist "states man," "politician," and "commander."

Considering the material that is available on the bureaucratic, not to speak of parliamentary, tendencies in the CNT, I should have thought that the less Sam said about the subject, the better. My comments on the subject were, if anything, much too gentle. Vernon Richards' admirable *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*, Carlos Semprun-Maura's *Revolution et Contre-Revolution en Catalogne*, even Jose Pierats in many of his writings provide clearly documented material that is little short of devastating. If the anarchist movement in all its forms cannot admit to its mistakes, if the reputation of its spokespersons and its organizations count for more than its principles, let us kindly close our mouths and stop complaining about the Stalinists, Trotskyists, and Socialists. To cultivate the sickening arts of apologia in order to protect the movement against its ideas— THIS, USUALLY IN THE NAME OF "protecting" it against its enemies—will do considerably more than destroy the movement. It will ossify it into another obstacle in humanity's torturous path toward liberation.

Post-Scarcity

Finally, I am rather tired of trying to explain the difference between post-scarcity and "abundance," between the historic problem of material want and the capitalist virus of consumerism. Postscarcity means that the technology now exists (however much we may have to modify it) to satisfy the basic material needs of humanity and provide for reasonable material amenities without miring the majority of people in lives of toil and renunciation.

As for my “idealization” of “affinity groups” (and Sam’s confusion regarding their meaning and function), I frankly fail to understand how I can even begin to answer Sam when he equates them with “chess clubs.” This is not misrepresentation: it is simply absurdity. I have a sneaking hunch that what bothers Sam is really my criticism of Abad de Santillan’s putdown of “affinity groups” when he abandoned all his anarchist principles to enter the Catalan government in 1936.

Sam’s observation that I laud “the anarchist terror groups” is a gross misreading of my book at best or a gross misrepresentation of my views at worst. In my account of the anarchist *pistoleros*, I tried neither to praise them nor to blame them—but primarily to *explain* what motivated them. The anarchist action groups of the 1920s and 1930s have been the target of cheap shots by every bourgeois philistine who writes on Spain. There has been little attempt to explain their idealism and their goals, quite aside from whether one agrees with them or not. For my part, I tried to convey to the reader some sense of their motives and aims. I find it in poor taste for Sam not only to accuse me of “lauding” them but to adduce one of the FAI’s chief *pistoleros*, Durruti, in support of his position—not to speak of my favorite ministerial anarchist, Montseny, who almost hysterically supported some of the craziest, adventurist “insurrections” of the early 1930s.

Why Durruti

Why, after all, do anarchists make such a huge fuss about Durruti? Because he plotted several assassinations and carried out a host of “expropriations”? Or because he urged the Barcelona proletariat to vote for the Popular Front in 1936 and became a commanding officer in the Republican Army? Frankly, it was Durruti’s courage as a member of the guerrilla *Solidarios* and *Nosotros*, the sheer guts of the man—right or wrong—in organizing the insurrections and strikes of the early thirties and not the tragic erosion of

The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years—1868–1936, by Murray Bookchin; Free Life Editions (New York).

The Spanish Anarchists, is not, like so many other books, a mere catalogue—a calendar of events. My old friend, Murray Bookchin, analyzes the events and forces which shaped the Spanish anarchist movement in relation to the economic and social background. Years of meticulous research went into the writing of this book.

Murray writes that the “Spanish Civil War was very much part of my own life and affected me more deeply than any other conflict in a lifetime that has seen a terrible international war and decades of nearly chronic warfare that followed it.” He has eminently succeeded in transmitting this feeling on every page. The result is the best survey of Spanish anarchist history in English.

I have neither the capacity nor the space to deal adequately with a work of such magnitude, and I must therefore confine my comments to a few general observations—not to provoke polemics, but to stimulate discussion. (Unless otherwise noted, the source of all quotes is Murray.)

By way of supplementing Murray’s remarks on Proudhon and Bakunin: Proudhon may have to some extent been “limited by the social barriers of a craftsman and a provincial” but Proudhon also envisaged large-scale industry, and was a precursor of syndicalism and workers’ self-management. Proudhon wrote:

“In future, large-scale industry and wide culture must be the fruit of association... we want associations to be the first components of a vast federation of associations... the means of production must be managed by associations of workers...” Proudhon anticipated Kropotkin’s theory of Mutual Aid and the theory of building the counter-society within the “shell of the old”:

“Beneath the apparatus of government,” wrote Proudhon, “under the shadow of its political institutions, society was slowly and

silently producing its own organization, making itself a new order which expressed its vitality and autonomy...”

Contrary to Murray’s assertion that “Proudhon’s emphasis was neither revolutionary, much less anarchistic,” a contract voluntarily negotiated is by definition a free agreement. And free agreement is a cardinal principle of anarchism.

Bakunin’s Urban Workers

Bakunin’s intense concern with revolutionizing the peasants, poorest workers, oppressed racial minorities and alienated intellectuals has given rise to the erroneous impression that Bakunin paid slight attention to the problems of the industrial proletariat in the comparatively advanced industrial nations of western Europe.

Bakunin, on the contrary, counted on the urban workers to play a leading part in radicalizing the peasants and marginal groupings. The most fruitful years of his life were dedicated to promoting the principles of a libertarian labor movement in the International. The noted Bakunin scholar, Arthur Lehning, emphasizes this:

“...Bakunin’s main historical achievement lies in having linked the ideas of anarchism with the movement for the emancipation of the working class and having sown the ideas of anti-authoritarian socialism and the theory and practice of Anarcho-Syndicalism *above all in Spain* (my emphasis).”

Bakunin was not a strict collectivist. The anarchists in the International originally called themselves “communists’;’, but to distinguish themselves from the Statists who also called themselves “communists” and to avoid confusion, Bakunin and the anarchists took the name “collectivists.” James Guillaume, Bakunin’s close comrade, states flatly that “... the collectivist internationalists never accepted the theory of ‘to each according

sive and unstable situation in Spanish industrial cities, a subject that is highly complex and deserves careful study on its own terms. Sam reduces this immensely significant phenomenon (one which emerged in France, Italy, and Russia as well as in Spain) to a re-warmed version of “workeritis.” Thus, after Sam lectures me on peasant parochialism (as though this issue is not discussed in the book!) he tells me: “The reformist, urban industrial workers may not meet our revolutionary expectations, but the revolutionary (!) implications of their unremitting violent (!) struggles to wrest from the employers and ‘from the State immediate economic and social improvements must never be underestimated.”

Peasants and Workers

Really, Comrade Dolgoff! To place narrow peasant parochialism side by side with reformist proletarian economism, indeed, to do this by deprecating the former only to laud the latter, is specious to the core. Yes, there were many peasants who faithfully followed the Church and the “Lords of the Land.” But there were many peasants who revolted across Andalusia and Aragon, the Ukraine, and Vietnam, while workers goose-stepped into fascism in Germany and flocked into Stalinist trade unions in France, not to speak of the Socialist UGT in Spain. So what! Neither one class nor the other is more or less revolutionary if the appropriate circumstances do not exist. It would have been far more appropriate for Sam to explore the *circumstances* that make both of these social classes revolutionary or reactionary rather than to repeat old Socialist cliches about the “reactionary” peasantry and “revolutionary” workers. Even serious Marxists have gone beyond this shopworn level of discussion—and if some of our anarchists do not catch up with the real implications of reformist workingclass economism as a major factor in stabilizing a state capitalist society, we shall be in a bad state indeed.

quite honest, was not “strict” about many of his ideas—collectivism or communism—any more than many anarcho-communists totally reject aspects of anarcho-syndicalism and vice versa. Nor did I make such claims about Bakunin’s “strict” adherence to collectivism. Here, Sam simply misreads my book. My point was that Bakunin was *primarily* a collectivist—and, yes, at times quite a Marxist! For the purposes of a discussion on Spanish Anarchism, Bakunin’s *primary* emphasis was more important than the peripheral one and, accordingly, had to be discussed in explaining how the Spanish movement factionalized around collectivism and communism. Sam, in trying to diffuse these distinctions, would render the history of the Spanish Anarchist movement unintelligible. This may be admirable personal loyalty to the memory of Bakunin, but it makes for muddled history. It also makes for muddled theory because I do not believe that communism and collectivism are compatible with each other any more than capitalism and communism are compatible. Communism is guided by the all embracing concept, “from each according to her/his ability and to each according to her/his needs”; collectivism, by contrast, leaves this system of distribution ambiguous at best and determines the reward according to productivity at worst. Sooner or later, one or the other will prevail. If Sam is not clear about the fundamental economic, social, and even ethical reasons for the opposing, even explosive tendencies that would be created by an ecumenical “pluralistic” anarchist society, we are faced with disputes that go beyond a mere response to a book review.

By the same token, Sam totally misreads my account of the Spanish *pueblo*. Indeed, where the thrust of my closing chapter is a denial that *any* social “vanguard” exists, Sam saddles me with a notion of peasant “vanguardism?” To anyone who seriously reads my book, my whole point about the interaction of the Spanish peasantry with the proletariat is simply that a unique tension emerged between the preindustrial and industrial classes of Spain — peasant/ workers or worker/peasants —which produced a truly explo-



Mass rally of anarcho-syndicalist CNT during Spanish Revolution.

to the product of his labor... how the products of collective labor will be equitably shared must be left to the judgment of each group..”

Although Bakunin “deeply admired the traditional collectivist aspects of the Russian village (the mir),” he deplored the:

“...paternalism, the absorption of the individual by the mir, and the cult of the Czar... the despotism of the husband, the father, of the oldest brother over the family...the expression ‘whitewashed graveyard’ is a good description of the Russian family...”

In respect to Murray’s tendency to overestimate the revolutionary role of the Spanish peasantry (in the 1880’s) I would suggest a more balanced assessment: If “rural folk... from a precapitalist life-style... the landless peasants and laborers... who gave Catalan anarchism its mass following,” were indeed more revolutionary than the already urbanized proletariat; there were, on the other hand, hundreds of thousands of counterrevolutionary peasants who reinforced the armies of the reaction. If the already urbanized industrial workers were conditioned by capitalism, it is no less true that the rural masses were conditioned to be faithful servants of their masters, the Lords of the Land, the hierarchy of The Church and the State.

In one of his best chapters, Murray tells us that in the 1930’s hundreds of thousands of peasants joined the UGT reformist Socialist Party-dominated peasant syndicates and even “...made serious inroads into traditionally anarchist areas...” The peasants are by no means as revolutionary as Murray assumes, and petty peasant landlords are at least as bourgeois minded as the urbanized, relatively affluent workers—if not more so.

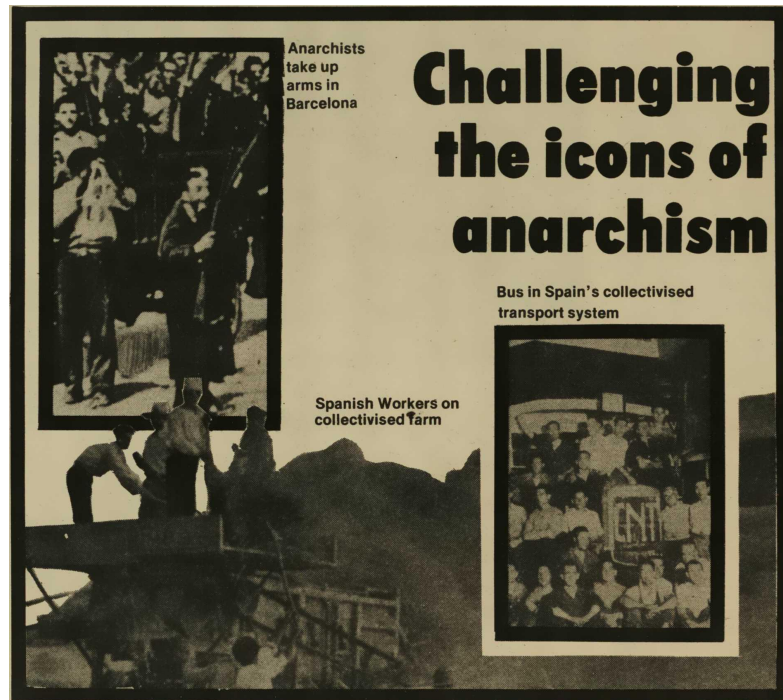
The reformist, urban industrial workers may not meet our revolutionary expectations, but the revolutionary implications of their unremitting, violent struggles to wrest from the employers and

that Proudhon was a liberal in “proletarian disguise.” In my own opinion, the man was so inconsistent in his intellectual meanderings that one could just as easily regard him as fare for Italian fascist corporatism as for Kropotkin’s anarchism. A patriarch who would have been shocked by any kind of feminism, an anti-Semite, a man who detested revolution (however much he was sucked into the 1848 events) and briefly flirted with Louis Bonaparte, he was far too many things to too many people to earn the credibility he has received. A case can be made for the fact that Proudhon fostered the idea of decentralization and federalism, but certainly not communism and possibly not even socialism. If this case is enough for Sam to regard him as an “anarchist,” so be it. What really disturbs me is Sam’s reverence of the “voluntary contract” as a “cardinal principle of anarchism.” If anarchism is to be more than a system of “libertarian logistics,” if it is to be the *ethical* association of free individuals and communities that he evokes in his opposition to my “materialistic” emphasis on post-scarcity, if it is to be based on affinity rather than negotiation, loving trust rather than bookkeeping, I believe that the first thing an anarchist society will want to abolish is that most bourgeois of all contrivances—the contract. Contract belongs to the sphere of bourgeois right because it emphasizes juridical over organic relationships and quantitative ratios over genuine qualitative and loving relationships. This system reached its fullest theoretical expression in the writings of Locke—and, pathetically, in Proudhon. The day that contract becomes “a cardinal principle of anarchism,” I for one will have to look for a new word to express my commitment to libertarian communism.

Icons of Anarchism

Bakunin! — dare one, today; even suggest he was not perfection itself! I’m uncomfortable about Sam’s persistent effort to present the icons of anarchism as beyond reproach. It was partly this kind of religiosity that drove me away from Marxism. Bakunin, to be

Murray Bookchin's Reply



The last issue of *Open Road* (No. 4, Fall 1977) contains Sam Dolgoff's review of my book, *The Spanish Anarchists*, and to speak frankly, I'm not very sure I know how to handle the whole thing. Sam and I have known each other for some twelve years. I value him as a friend and comrade and I'll try to be brief and nice about it all. But, believe me, it's not easy to do this in view of the many contradictions and misunderstandings that mar so much of the review.

I will not wander with Sam through the mazes of Proudhon's writings. Perhaps the kindest remark I can make about Proudhon can be taken from Lakoff's *Equality in Political Philosophy*, namely,

from the State immediate economic and social improvements must never be under-estimated.

Murray's idealization of the "affinity group" as the perfect anarchist organizational form render» him unable to perceive its limitations. (There is a built-in tendency on the part of such exclusively-organized societies in particular, to separate themselves from the masses and develop a sort of elitist leadership complex.)

The "affinity group" defined by Murray as "an organizational form based on friendship and deep personal involvement," is not simply "a remarkable achievement of Spanish anarchism." The world is honeycombed with "affinity groups", from chess clubs to anarchist propaganda groups like the FAI. They are formed, dissolved or re-constituted according to the fluctuating inclinations of the individual members. It is precisely because they reflect *individual preferences* that such groups are the lifeblood of the free society.

But the anarchists have also insisted that since the necessities of life and vital services must be supplied without fail and cannot be left to the whims of individuals, they are *social obligations* voluntarily assumed which every able-bodied individual is honorbound to fulfill if he or she expects to enjoy the benefits of collective labor. The intricate network of federations and confederations reflecting the complexity of social-economic life must therefore underpin the free society. Both "affinity groups" and such stable organizations *anarchistically organized* as a vast network of cooperative labor, constitute the very essence of anarchism as a viable social order. The problem of the relationship between group affinity and economic function needs clarification.

I did not expect to run across a passage lauding the anarchist terror groups, in spite of the disastrous consequences for the anarchist movement. (Even now Federica Montseny, in a recent interview, strove to dispel the impression that anarchists are killers and bandits and the national organ of the CNT carried an article to the same effect.)

Murray argues that “the terrorism of the Spanish anarchists was designed to provoke the Spanish bourgeoisie and undermine the stability of the social system.” But Kropotkin warned that “it is not by such... acts that revolutions are made.” And as Durruti matured he condemned his and his group’s former terrorist tactics:

“Terrorism,” Durruti declared, “must not compromise the life of the movement nor its prestige before the working class... banditry is in opposition to the revolutionary practice of anarchism... carrying out the Great Revolution requires other tactics—mass action, expropriation of factories, of mines, of the land... the method used will be direct action and the revolutionary general strike...”

Murray’s statement that the “CNT lacked revolutionary foresight... lacked discussion of problems that might face the organization during revolutionary period,” are unconsciously refuted in his text:

“The uprising of the fascists was predicted and the CNT issued a prophetic manifesto; it was in anarcho-syndicalist Barcelona that serious preparation and effective efforts were undertaken to cope with the military rebellion. ”

Eight Million Collectivists

Murray even calls attention to the fact that at the same time the CNT-FAI sparked a Libertarian Social Revolution affecting eight million people self-organized into rural collectives and socialized urban industries.

There is no substance whatsoever to the assertion that voting for leftist parties in the February 1936 elections to free 30,000 political prisoners led the CNT-FAI to join the republican government a few months later. One does not have to endorse the ideas of the governmental collaborationists to take into account the tragic circumstances, which rightly or wrongly, led them to adopt this policy. Murray also refers to the “increasing bureaucratization of

the CNT,” but offers no evidence to support so serious an accusation. Throughout his book, Murray’s statements are carefully documented. Regretably he slipped up in this case.

In his concluding chapter, Murray makes it abundantly clear he feels that “material want limits the forward thrusts of revolution and prevents the workers from directly organizing and controlling society... communism will be the result of abundance...” In an interview a few years ago, I addressed myself to this problem in the following terms:

“If the realization of the socialist ideal depends on affluence and abundance, we are finished. No Such thing will take place in the foreseeable future. If we cannot learn to live together in a condition of relative scarcity, we are sunk... in the absence of ethical motivations, abundance in relatively affluent countries, instead of leading to free socialism (for me a synonym for anarchism), led instead to the bourgeoisification of the proletariat and the erosion of the socialist movement.”

If scarcity halted the “forward thrust of revolution,” abundance made revolution itself more and more unlikely. The phenomenal productive capacity of modern technology (as Murray implies) enabled modern State capitalism (or State “socialism”) to quench the fires of revolution by adopting socialistic welfare measures.

It is just such developments which make it all the more necessary to re-examine traditional socialist theory and explore new roads to freedom. The foregoing remarks touch on themes still being debated in the anarchist movement. Murray merits high praise for posing these problems and stimulating discussion by providing adequate data—pro and con.

The Spanish Anarchists constitutes an invaluable source for all concerned with the history and impact of Spanish Anarchism.

(Sam Dolgoff is the author of, among other works, *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers’ Self-Management in Spain, 1936–39* and the newly published *The Cuban Revolution: An Anarchist Perspective*.)