Comunismo Libertario and Communalism in the Spanish Collectivisations (1936–1939)

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February 1992
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When the Spanish civil war broke out on July 19th 1936, a social revolution started concomitantly. Following the collapse of the central government a political vacuum ensued that was immediately filled with spontaneous local initiatives and collective agrarian organisations. Simultaneously, collectivisation of industrial plants and urban services began. During the summer of 1936 these initiatives spread throughout all the areas that were under Republican control.

These phenomena of immediate collectivisation, which entailed transformations of social relations, and the socialisation of means of production rendered a unique feature to this revolution. The Anarchists played a cardinal role in the revolution spreading a wide-ranging propaganda campaign in which articles of the anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin were very popular. There are reports telling that chapters from his book *The Conquest of Bread* were read aloud at general meetings of the newly established agrarian collectives. (Dolgoff, pp.130–133). In the winter of 1936/37 which was the climax of the collectivisation process there were already about 1500 rural collectives and in the next year, by winter 1938, the number of collectives rose to about 2000, with approximately 800,000 people. This was an impressive phenomenon, considering the fact that the population in the Republican regions never exceeded 12,000,000 of which only about 5,000,000 were economically active. (Mintz 1977, pp.189–199; Bernecker, 1982, pp.108–111)

After the civil war there was a tendency to obscure the collectivisation, and most historians did not devote more than a short chapter to it. Recently, this trend has changed and several young Spanish historians have published a number of important monographs based on regional history. (Bosch 1983; Casanova 1985; Garrido 1979). The subject was treated better in the historiography of anarchism (James Jon, Daniel Guerin, George Woodcock, Murray Bookchin and others).¹ My paper may be perceived in this context and I intend to examine the anarcho-communist ideology and its role in formulating the utopians’ plans and in preparing the foundations for the communal experiments. I would like to suggest that anarcho-communism played a cardinal role in the trend that led to collectivisation in Spain and it moulded its social and economic character, giving a unique feature to the Spanish revolution.

Among all anarchist theories, anarcho-communism had the most utopian characteristics. It differed from all other streams of anarchist thought mainly because of its emphasis on communal principles of a future society. Kropotkin, its first and foremost exponent, had started to formulate these ideas in Russia as early as 1873 in a manifesto named ‘Must we occupy ourselves with an examination of the ideal future system?’ In his affirmative reply he portrayed the structure of a future society, its economy, values and education based on communal principles. (Kropotkin, 1970)

However, twenty years would pass before Kropotkin was able to elaborate on his theories systematically in two books published during his exile in England: *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) and *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899). These books express most of his utopian anarcho-communist ideas, consisting of these elements: the social revolution will lead to an immediate implementation of communism; following the revolutionary stage, private ownership will be abolished and all property will belong to society at large and be at its disposal, all central authoritarian forms of government will disappear; and society will be organised in federations of integrated, voluntary communities. These communities will strictly maintain individual liberty. This was one of Kropotkin’s cardinal principles which led him to define his vision as “a communism of free people, a synthesis between political and economic liberty”.

¹ See Editorial Afterword at the end of this paper.
The existing wage system will be abolished and instead a system of supply according to need — and work according to ability, will be adopted. Work is perceived as a person’s physiological need, an expression of his many potentials. Rural versus urban, or physical versus spiritual work differentiation was to be abolished and instead various functions, abilities and qualities were to be integrated within single communities. Each and every community would be able to supply its own basic needs. Education would enjoy a special status as an integrative social element to forge a new personality that could cope with the challenges of a new society.

Kropotkin’s utopian outlook was rooted in his anthropological concept of human nature, in the trends of mutual aid which he perceived in his studies of nature and history. Despite Kropotkin’s agrarian affinity, inspired by the experience of the Russian communities Mir and Obschina, his approach was a modernistic one. His utopian writings extol technological progress which would provide the means for developing remote places and thus contribute to the decentralisation of production and to the establishment of independent communities that integrate agriculture and industry. (Osofsky 1979, Miller, 1976)

During the 1880s Kropotkin’s reputation as the leading anarchist theoretician increased. Spain was one of the first countries in which Kropotkin’s anarcho-communist theories received a wide circulation since they were translated into Spanish and published in the prestigious periodical Tierra Y Libertad in the early 1880s. In the 1890s Kropotkin’s ideas were already widely acclaimed by Spanish anarchists. (Alvarez Junco 1976, 360–368)

In addition to the theoretical anarcho-communism of the 1890s in Spain, there were deeply rooted communal traditions in the rural areas. These traditions were absorbed by Spanish anarchists as early as the 1870s in Andalusia, forming a mixture of millenarianism and rural communalism. The prominent Spanish jurist and sociologist Joaquin Costa, (born 1846 in Aragon) pointed to this fact in his book on agrarian collectivism (Collectivismo Agrario en Espana, Madrid 1989). And so did later the historian Juan Diaz Del Moral in his book Historia de las Agitaciones Campesinas Andaluzas (1967). These traditions enhanced Spanish anarchism with a distinctive flavour and provided the background for the establishment of anarcho-communist trend in it.

In 1911 a General Federation of Anarchist Unions (CNT) was established in Spain. The federation was mainly nurtured on two sources, on one hand anarcho-syndicalism that was anchored in the urban labour unions and on the other hand, on traditional agrarian communalism integrated with theoretical anarchist concepts in the spirit of Kropotkin. This unique integration between syndicalism and communalism was explicitly expressed for the first time in the resolutions accorded at the 1919 Congress in Madrid. On a programmatic level it was decided to adopt the ideology of Comunismo Libertario (Libertarian Communism), a Spanish term for anarcho-communism which emphasised liberty rather than the lack of government. (Bar 1981, pp.507–8; Kern 1974, pp.21–50, Bookchin 1980, pp.258–265).

At this stage their programme did not have a significant impact because for a few years after its publication, all legal activities of the CNT were stopped during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, which lasted until 1931. After the establishment of the Second Republic in 1931, anarchism became legal once again and different circum-stances opened up new horizons of activities and influence for Comunismo Libertario.

At a time when the worldwide anarchist movement was on the decline, it began to flourish in Spain. Moreover, the Spanish anarchists believed that a social revolution was imminent and this may explain the unusually large number of theoretical publications integrated Kropotkin’s
anarcho-communist theories with Spanish collectivist agrarian traditions rooted in the local history of many rural districts.

It was at this point that the term ‘comunismo libertario’ was adopted replacing the former term of anarcho-communism and thus stressing the element of liberty rather than the absence of government. Between 1932/33, revolts initiated by anarchists broke out in the rural areas of Andalusia, Catalonia and Aragon and their revolutionary motto called for the establishment of Comunismo Libertario. (Malefakis, 1970, pp.288–393). The revolts failed and as a result, reaction, arrests and persecutions of anarchist militants took place during 1934/35. Prompted by the harsh treatment the anarchists were faced with the necessity to intensify their ideological activities in order to prepare a revolutionary cadre for the future challenges. Under the prevailing circumstances the anarchists circles in Spain began to discuss programs for revolutionary perspectives and two approaches crystallised:

a. The communal approach which regarded autonomous communes as the driving force of revolution and as the core of libertarian society. This approach perceived Comunismo Libertario not merely as a slogan and a war cry, but as a vision of the future post-revolutionary society.

b. The Anarcho-syndicalist approach, which perceived the syndicate as an organism that would manage production after the revolution, under self management of the workers.

The main platform for these ideological deliberations was the theoretical journal La Revista Blanca and the publicist who carried it was Federico Urales — Juan Montseny. His approach integrated Kropotkin’s optimistic anthropological world view, and the appraisal of rural communities which he perceived to be the most suitable for the realisation of collective principles based on solidarity. Urales believed that the revolution must pass through the phase of capitalist crisis and proceed toward the renaissance of communal traditions in free Spanish villages. (Elorza 1970, pp.187–191).

These ideas were popularised in 1932 by the anarchist publicist, physician by profession, Isaac Puente, who wrote the book: Comunismo Libertario — Finalidad de la CNT. It enjoyed a wide circulation in 1933 and was reprinted in 1935. The book outlined a utopian plan to establish a regime of Comunismo Libertario in Spain. Like Urales he adopted Kropotkin’s concept on human society, as having been preconditioned by nature to cooperate, provide mutual aid and solidarity. Accordingly, he rejected the idea of a revolutionary, or post-revolutionary elite which would serve as a guide to the new society. The value of freedom was of cardinal importance and equal to co-operation. According to him, communalism would be a grass roots movement, as people tend to co-operate because of their social instincts.

Puente took into account a possibility that Spain might be the first to introduce Comunismo Libertario and that it would, therefore, have to withstand pressure from hostile countries. According to him, as long as the rural areas adopted Comunismo Libertario, thus ensuring food provisions, there was a chance to overcome the boycott. Puente buttressed his reliance on Spain’s collectivist tradition and his concept was mainly agrarian. (Paniagua 1982 pp.104–110).

Kropotkin’s theories, as well as Spain’s agrarian collectivist traditions are evident throughout. Puente relegated an important role to voluntary and economically autarchic, socially sovereign rural organisations. Believing in direct revolutionary actions and daily independence, he extolled
spontaneous local activities. He rejected the need for any kind of leadership by ‘so called architects of a new society’. His disregard for any kind of economic planning and industrial development were perceived by critics as the weak point in his Utopia. The book enjoyed widespread popularity and triggered an ongoing de-bate, also leading to disagreement among the various trends of anarchist thought in Spain. It caused *Comunismo Libertario* to become a normative principle, while the utopian programs multiplied.

The issue was widely discussed in the anarchist movement’s periodicals and its literature. There were several different approaches, but all had a common denominator namely, *Comunismo Libertario* was the main target.

Between 1932/36 Puente was not alone in dealing with the image of a future society. A substantial contribution to these deliberations was done by Diego Abad de Santillan, (born in Spain 1897 and emigrated to Argentina where he played a vital role in the anarchist movement) who came to Spain in the early 1930s and was involved in various anarchist publications. The climax of these endeavours was the book — *El Organismo Economico de la Revolucion* (1936). Its uniqueness was the emphasis on modern economics and the subsequent imperative to plan and coordinate the economies as the core of the whole collective endeavour.

According to Abad de Santillan, economic localism was an anachronism and hence all the theories regarding autarchic and free communes were regarded as reactionary utopias. A central aspect of his concept was ‘free experimentation’, to provide a variety of societies that would develop through mutual agreement. Santillan’s program tackled issues that had been ignored by Urales and Puente; in fact, he attempted to present *Comunismo Libertario* as an answer to the problems of an industrial society. (Abad de Santillan 1978).

Early in 1936 significant developments occurred in Spain. The anarchists participated in the February elections at which the Popular Front gained a small majority and managed to form the government. This was the background for the anarchists’ drive to reassess their ideological positions (including *Comunismo Libertario*) in the Congress that was to convene in Saragossa early in May 1936. Its 150 Dictamines included chapters that dealt with *Comunismo Libertario* as defined by local syndicates in the spirit of Isaac Puente.

The Saragossa Congress’ debate on Comunismo Libertario took place on May 9th. Most speakers dealt with the image of a future society without going into the details of how to achieve it. Many paragraphs dealt with a description of the communes’ consumer activities, the family and the status of women. Some addresses concerned free love, individual ethics, religion, rational education, art and even the rights of marginal groups such as the nudists...

However there was no mention of an organised revolutionary struggle or how to cope with production during and after the revolution. (Elorza 1970, pp.235–237). In general, one may say that at the Saragossa Congress there was a gap between the sense of approaching revolutionary events and an organised intellectual effort to prepare for it.

These decisions were unacceptable to some of the anarchists from the syndicalist wing who, during the debate, proposed to set up a committee that would examine the ways and means of realising – ‘comunismo libertario’. However there was not time for further discussions. On July 19th the civil war broke out.

When the revolution broke out on July 19th, in radical and anarchist circles it immediately raised the expectations that the anticipated revolutionary situation had arrived and that Comunismo Libertario would materialise soon. But developments during the first weeks of the civil war
showed how unprepared the CNT leadership actually was and that the extent of local initiatives preceded central instructions. (Abed de Santillan 1976, pp.370–72).

Despite deliberations on the inherent meaning of ‘comunismo libertario’, the convention’s decisions served as an inspiration during the first months of the civil war. Propaganda pamphlets about ‘comunismo libertario’ were published in thousands of copies during the autumn months. They served as an ideological and programmatic model for hundreds of small communities which declared their intent to establish ‘Comunas Libres’ in the spirit of ‘comunismo-libertario’.

The reorganisation of independent communities during the first months of the war is hard to understand unless one takes into account the impact of the anarcho-communist utopian vision. It entailed the abolition of private ownership of the means of production; the introduction of local work tokens instead of money; the requisition of large private estates that belonged to enemies of the Republic and which, combined with the small-holder’s land, were used to establish collective farms; the organisation of communal work-units in various branches; the abolition of salaries which were replaced by ‘family wages’ thus implementing the principle of ‘for each according to his needs’; the integration of agriculture and industry; free education, patterned on Francisco Ferrer’s rationalist schools for all.

It was a type of social revolution following in the spirit of Kropotkin’s utopian vision and Spanish ‘comunismo-libertario’. There was some uncertainty as to the ways and means of achieving it. Countless debates over the utopian program led to disagreements, compromise and a pluralistic attitude. Puente’s model was not adopted by the entire Spanish anarchist movement. Besides the followers of ‘comunismo libertario’ there were syndicalists who rejected it. Moreover this was a chaotic period which required improvisation and many different forms of organisation. Some communities preferred other forms of cooperation rather than the collectivist way of ‘comunismo libertario’.

It soon became evident that the implementation of a libertarian community utopia throughout Spain, had not yet been sufficiently prepared. The first sign of this awareness was the fact that the word ‘collective’ was preferred to ‘commune’ thus expressing the anarchists’ low expectations and their doubts as to the implementation of an all-encompassing ‘comunismo libertario’.

It should be noted that after the outbreak of the civil war, the revolutionary process called ‘collectivisation’ described a reality in which there were different forms of social and economic organisation, from cooperatives that integrated private farms with collective cultivation, to integral libertarian communism in which everyone handed over his entire property. The anarchists’ leadership use of the term expressed a willingness to postpone their immediate aspirations of anarcho-communism and to enable other forms of cooperation to exist simultaneously, even granting them a ‘freedom to experiment’. (Bernecker 1982, pp.86–90; Tiana Ferrer 1988, pp.32–41).

Most rural collective villages were established in Aragon during the first five weeks of the revolution. From there the movement spread to Catalonia, Levant, Andalusia and Castile. In the winter of 1936/7 out of 1500 agricultural collectives in the republic, 450 were in Aragon, comprising 300,000 people, about 70% of the entire population and 60% of the cultivated area. (Prats 1938, p.89). Moreover in Aragon the anarcho-communist trend had a vital impact on modes of collectivisation and therefore I have chosen to focus on it and review some developments in the Levant where the process of collectivisation continued until the fall of the republic.

The fact that the revolution broke out in Aragon and rapidly took root there, could be explained through a variety of factors: the collapse of Aragon’s central government provided a
suitable back-ground for a wide-ranging social experiment; the multitude of relatively isolated small villages, the lack of transportation and mobility and above all, the power of the CNT on both banks of the Ebro, even before the civil war, contributed to the revolution’s success.

The ideals and slogans of Comunismo Libertario had been voiced during the 1932/33 unrest when the anarchist militant elements thrived. (Carrasquer 1985, pp.13–28; Casanova 1985, pp.33–39). Prominent among them were circles of young anarchists: Juventud Libertaria who reacted to the government’s oppression by fostering a counter culture. They organised evening classes, lectures, discussion groups in which they envisioned a communal future based on anarcho-communism.

The oppression of ‘the two black years’ (1934/35) led to an arrest of the older activists who were soon replaced by young local members of the Juventud Libertaria. (Kelsey 1986, pp.66–69). Abad de Santillan mentioned them in his book Por que perdimos la Guerra, a personal account written right after the civil war,

They (the young activists) began to act spontaneously... without waiting for the leadership’s directives... Most of them were simple villagers who had earlier absorbed various revolutionary ideas... After the Congress of Saragossa they took upon themselves most of the activities in the rural areas. (p.115)

When the contact with Saragossa (the capital of Aragon) was cut after it had fallen, republican Aragon developed a dependence on Barcelona in Catalonia. The region was on the front and the anarchist militia, comprised of CNT activists from Barcelona and Catalonia, enlisted. They attempted to free Saragossa and re-establish contact with the County Basque. Although they failed in regard to Saragossa, Eastern Aragon fell into the hands of a republican militia prompting the CNT activists to start a social revolution and establish collectives in Aragon.

Historians would disagree as to the amount of coercion used by anarchist militias to achieve their aims. Eventually it has been consented that compulsion did indeed play quite a role. Nevertheless, it can not be an exclusive explanation for the collectivisation. Formally the principle of voluntary incorporation into collectividades coexisted side by side with private farmers. Moreover, in many areas that were far from the front, collectivisation was widely adopted, without having any militia troops around, for example, in the Levant.

Generally, collectives tended to have local characteristics and there were many differences. Testimonies abound, with different descriptions of the enactment of collectives. In 1979 Ronald Fraser collected and published testimonials about the Spanish civil war in a book called Blood of Spain, which obviously show the different attitude: the memories of Angel Navarro, a small holder from Alloza, are of special interest. He admitted that there was a climate of fear and uncertainty and that the main concern was to avoid bloodshed.

“We agreed to collectivise — simply to ensure that lives were spared...” As to the procedure by which it was carried out, he tells that “...a village — assembly was called... They (the militiamen and the CNT representatives) have come and told us that other villages have collectivised and they want everyone to be equal.” The CNT representatives had stressed that no one was to be maltreated, and had suggested how to organise the collective. Eventually Navarro admitted that...“once the work groups were established on a friendly basis everyone got on well... there was no need for coercion”. And he concludes saying “A collective was not a bad idea at all”. (Fraser 1979, pp.358, 360)
A serious problem was the internal contradictions between the anarchists’ ideals and their actions during the war, in regard to force and coercion. CNT leaders admitted that: “…compulsive collectivisation ran contrary to libertarian ideals. Anything that was forced could not be libertarian…” Forced collectivisation was justified, in some libertarian eyes by “the need to feed the columns at the front... One must remember that a war was going on and that coercion was not always to be avoided.” CNT activists realised that Comunismo Libertario couldn’t be established without force as long as the people are not convinced of its justification... Altogether, there was great confusion among the CNT militants. In their own words:

...We were attempting to put into practice a libertarian communism about which, it’s sad to say, none of us really knew anything...

...All this had been talked and written about, but it had been no more than slogans until then... (Fraser 1979, pp.349–351).

Some admitted that

Without realising it we had created an economic dictatorship! It went against our principles... We did not want to impose a dictatorship, but rather to prevent one being imposed upon us... Someone has to be responsible for giving orders, things couldn’t work simply with people doing as they wanted... (Fraser, 1979, p.357)

Sometimes collectivisation was adopted enthusiastically, especially if there existed a core of local anarchists who co-operated with the farmers in the area. Whenever there was no such core, coercion was an inevitable outcome of the circumstances. The rapid and spontaneous process led to variegated forms of collectives, from total communes to cooperatives, in which private property was maintained. In some of the collectives people had to hand over their property, while in others this was not obligatory.

One should bear in mind that in Aragon, which was very close to the front, collectivism was introduced under war conditions. They had to start from scratch in the material as well as the social sense. The organisers had to provide solutions to daily problems without having any preparation. In fact, most of them were villagers or agricultural workers who had no experience in any official capacities before the civil war.

In a soul searching article written at a later stage of the war Diego Abad de Santillan admitted that many mistakes were made by CNT activists and remarked:

They lacked all professional preparation for the constructivist tasks ahead... in many cases anarchist activists had to fulfil public offices without any formal education... we wasted intellectual energy discussing how to prepare for the revolution instead of how to cope with constructive tasks... (Abad de Santillan 1976)

And in spite of this they managed to improvise and were successful in several areas. Aragon farmers, who were generally considered as individualists that adhered to their plot of land unexpectedly displayed a large measure of adaptability to the new way of life. By joining a collective many of the farmers raised their standard of living and turned towards modern mechanised farming. In addition the collectives provided jobs for everyone, including women and old people, thus abolishing coven unemployment on the small farms. (Prate 1939, pp.89- 128)
During 1937, it became evident that in Aragon agriculture had prospered. According to official data, wheat crops were 20% higher than in the preceding year. During the same period, in Catalonia which had not collectivised to the same extent, crops were lower. It transpires that the introduction of a rationalised work organisation, mechanisation and fertilisers, had contributed to the success. There were also beginnings of experimental farms to foster cultivation and animal husbandry. (Thomas, pp.253–255; Casanova 1985, p.195; Bernecker 1982, p.256).

Notwithstanding collectivisation must not be assessed via economic data only. The experiment’s short duration and the prevailing circumstances of war, make such an assessment futile. Moreover, they did not merely aspire to achieve economic success, but rather to establish a new society.

One of its outstanding aspects was the abolition of money. This policy was not anchored in a financial theory but rather on a moral attitude and symbolism of the aims and values of their revolution. Fraser, in the above mentioned book, quotes a villager from Mas de Las Matas... "Money was immediately abolished. All produce from collectivised land was to go to 'the pile' for communal consumption... We thought that by abolishing money we would cure most ills. From early age, we had read in anarchist thinkers that money was the root of all evil. But we had no idea the difficulties it would cause..." (Fraser, 1979, p.354)

All collectives modified the wage system and material benefits. In September 1936, most introduced family wages as a pragmatic means to apply the communal principle. Accordingly, the head of a family received an amount of 7–10 pesos daily, his wife 50% and any additional family member 15% etc. This money could only be spent on consumer goods thus preventing the accumulation of capital. In February 1937 food coupons were introduced throughout the Aragon collectives. (Thomas, pp.259–260; Mintz pp.120–2, 139; Bernecker 1982, pp.180–8)

An important innovation was the collective work organisation that had been adopted in most collectives. Everybody, with the exception of pregnant women, was expected to work. Most worked from dawn to dusk. There was a trend of maximum involvement for all as well as a decentralisation of authority. Work groups of 5–10 people were established and current issues were discussed by them. Most collectives adopted a system of rotation in regard to popular jobs. Daily reports were required and workers were transferred from one branch to another according to need. Industrial plants were integrated within the economic system and thus a symbiosis between agriculture and industry emerged. (Carrasquer 1985, pp.143–146).

The collectives adopted a system of direct democracy. The general assembly, which convened once a month, served as prime authority. Autonomous committees were in charge of economic and community issues, and were elected immediately. During the early months there was no evidence of an emerging bureaucracy. This was prevented by adherence to the egalitarian principle and the absence of privileged officeholders. At the beginning central members did not receive any material remuneration for their labours and enjoyed special status. Secretaries and treasurers received the same salary as production workers. (Carrasquer 1985, pp.171–186)

Despite the war and work efforts, members managed to find time for educational and cultural activities. Every collective had a cultural centre where people of all ages would gather to listen to lectures, meet socially or celebrate certain events.

The anarchist movement had a long tradition of educational activities, ever since Francisco Ferrer had established rationalist schools, with modern teaching methods, in Barcelona early in the 20th century. As soon as they could, anarchist began to establish educational institutions in all collectives. They introduced free education for both sexes up to the age of 15, thus preceding
the national school system. Schools, which had formerly been a rarity in the rural areas, were now an integral part of the countryside.

The anarchist tradition fostered a type of *Obrero Consciente* farmer who learned reading and writing as a means of expressing himself and of understanding the world around. This motivated many labourers and farmers to get an education without actually having gone to school. (Tiana Ferrer 1988, pp.193–202; Carrasquer 1985, pp.129–137).

The collectives fulfilled an important role in pioneering health and welfare services. Health care was everyone's concern — and everybody's right. Medication was free as were dispensaries and the local doctor's services. Several doctors even joined collectives and participated in community activities while attempting to improve preventive medicine.

One of the most impressive aspects of the collectives was the care for the sick, the invalids and the aged. Despite the short time at their disposal several succeeded in establishing old people's homes and hospitals that served the entire area. Hospitals were established where none had ever existed. In addition, health committees helped members to reach specialists in the large cities. (Carrasquer 1985, pp.160–169)

In the Aragon collectives there ensued a process of women's liberation. Apparently they enjoyed the same status as men and they were relatively independent. Women now enjoyed an option to work outside the home or in it; many volunteered to do community work in addition to seasonal jobs and their chores. This contributed to their sense of being equal partners, yet former traditions tended to hamper the full realization of equality. For example when family wages were fixed, women received less. Feminist anarchists protested against the gap between an egalitarian theory and a reality in which women were bound by their household chores. (Casanova 1985, pp.59–60; pp.198–202)

Six months after the revolution, Aragon collectives still had no co-ordinating federation. By January 1937 it had become evident that some collectives were affluent while others were not. They claimed that it was imperative to establish a co-ordinating federation to direct new collectives and make them more equal.

The Congress of the Collectives' Federation convened in Caspe on February 14th and 15th 1937. It was attended by 600 delegates who represented about 300,000 members from 500 collectives. This was a most impressive number if one takes into account that the entire population in the republican sector of Aragon was about 500,000. In fact, the Congress, which founded the Aragon Federation of Collectives, represented a majority of the population. (Casanova 1985, pp.178–185, Santillan 1975, pp.117–121). It decided to foster collectivist propaganda; to establish experimental farms and technical schools; to abolish the internal use of money; to introduce mutual aid among collectives, such as lending out machinery, and assisting with work. None of this materialised because hostile clouds were massing on the horizon.

In the winter of 1937, the collectivist movement in Aragon was at its highest, but it had become harder to expand. Republican institutions had been established and there was no longer room for local initiatives. The parties that had formed the coalition of the Republican government were not well disposed towards the collectives. The communists, who feared the radicalisation of the countryside because of global political considerations, were hostile. Under the minister for agriculture, Uribe, a communist, the collectives' development was affected, and *colectividades* of Aragon were the target of harassment. (Bernecker 1982, pp.138–51).

Following the events of Barcelona (May 1937) the government of Largo Caballero was replaced by Juan Negrin’s and the internal struggle against the anarchists and their stronghold in
Aragon was intensified. In August a battalion under the communist Enrique Lister was transferred to the region and ordered to abolish the Aragon defence council and the anarchist collectives.

On August 11th, the action began. The Aragon council was dissolved and its anarchist members arrested. It was replaced by Jose Ignacio Mantecon, who was appointed governor general by the central government. Immediately he ordered Lister’s brigades to start actions against the collectives. A third of all collectives were affected; about 600 office-holders were arrested, some executed and others exiled never to return to the region. The governor appointed committees to manage the communities and to abolish their collective framework. Land cattle and machinery were to be returned to their former owners. Those who were responsible for this policy, were convinced that the farmers would greet it joyfully because they had been coerced into joining the collectives. But they were proven wrong. Except for the rich estate owners who were glad to get their land back, most members of the agricultural collectives objected and lacking all motivation they were reluctant to resume the same effort in the agricultural work. This phenomenon was so widespread that the authorities and the communist minister of agriculture were forced to retreat from their hostile policy. (Coletividades, 1977, pp.314–331; Mintz 1977, pp.180–183)

Thus the crusade against the collectives ended on September 21st. Through the widespread reluctance of collectivists to co-operate with the new policy it became evident that most members had voluntarily joined the collectives and as soon as the policy was changed a new wave of collectives was established. However, the wheel could not be turned back. An atmosphere of distrust prevailed between the collectives and the authorities and every initiative was curtailed. Eventually collectivists resumed work but unfortunately had to bring in their harvest under Franco. By March 1938, republican Aragon had fallen and the collectives had been dissolved.

Aragon collectivisation was abolished because of external factors, yet symptoms of weakness had already been evident earlier. These symptoms appeared simultaneously in all the regions where collectivisation had been introduced, but were more evident in the Levant, where collectivisation continued until the fall of the republic in March 1939. Therefore we can use it as a relevant example for the trends that started but had not developed in Aragon.

In spite of limitations and difficulties the Levant experienced an increase in the momentum of collectivisation and by 1937 there were about 400 collectives. In the early months of the revolution, collectivisation proceeded chaotically because several opposing elements were active at one and the same time. Different places adopted different norms and procedures and neither the syndicats nor the government introduced a general program. After an initial ‘confiscation fever’ (Noja p.30), they resumed cultivation and most governmental factors as well as the CNT and UGT tended to ignore differences and co-operate. (Bosch 1983, pp.236–244; Noja 1937, pp.40–52)

Generally, one can divide the CNT collectives in Valencia into two groups: those affiliated with the radical revolutionary trend which aspired to Comunismo Libertario and others that belonged to heterogeneous groups. There were less of the former than in Aragon. Having emerged in a few communities during the early months of the revolution, they existed only for a short while and were gradually replaced by agricultural collectives whose members belonged to the CNT. They adhered to the syndicate which formed a comprehensive social and organisational unit and ignored all state institutions. (Bosch 1983, pp.243–253)

The moderate means adopted by the anarchists were a kind of ‘pragmatisation’ of ‘comunismo libertario’. It was an attempt to achieve economic efficiency and provide for the war effort while adapting their ideal to the prevalent situation. They did not regard compromise as a deviance from
their principles, but as a temporary measure required by circumstances. Victory over fascism, was all that mattered at that stage. The collectives could not maintain their independence and had to adapt to governmental dictates in order to be legalised. They had to act according to norms and sets of rules imposed by the government agencies and all local initiatives were stifled. Instead, the collectives were integrated into the regional economy and thus lost their autonomy and economic uniqueness.

Local monetary notes became less popular and official money was used again. Family wages lost their importance as a means of implementing the communal principle. Most collectives reintroduced wage differentiation and people started to be paid according to their ‘social contribution’, their profession or their job rather than according to their needs. The change was a result of pressure of professional workers inside the collectives. Late in 1937 committee members already received four times as much as agricultural workers. The 1938 Valencia congress discussed the abandonment of family wage as an exclusive system and recommended the integration of family wages with professional grades. There was also a difference of 5–10 pesetas in wages paid in the different entities according to each collective’s material circumstances. (Mintz 1977, pp.350–1; Bernecker, 1982, pp.187–88)

The growing differentiation between affluent and poor collectives signified a severe deterioration. In 1938 many anarchists criticised the emerging ‘neo-capitalism’, due to the collectives' different points of departure. Some had started on rich estates, productive land and high income produce, while others were poor to begin with and deteriorated rapidly. According to these critics: "Instead of solidarity and mutual aid, collective selfishness prevails and the poor collectives are exploited by the richer ones". (Bosch pp.280–82; Broue 1972, pp.162–66. See also Archivo Histórico National — Salamanca P.S. [M] Carpeta 2467)

In January 1938 the CNT’s economic plenum convened in Valencia to discuss economic issues and the war effort. Following a year and a half of war there was a tendency to adopt a ‘realist’ and reformist ideology. A demand to co-ordinate war economics was voiced and the CNT and the UGT grew closer to one another. Representatives criticised the collective selfishness of members who managed the collectives, the deterioration of the anarchist ideals into a new kind of capitalism; and the lack of solidarity between the Valencia collectives. Apparently, they had not succeeded in overcoming the former stage of improvisation. (Mintz 1977, pp.202–220; Bosch pp.196–98)

After the plenum session it was evident that the CNT had changed and begun to avoid traditional communal anarchism. Talks of a union between CNT and UGT indicated the rapprochement between these syndicalist organisations. They agreed on economic targets and the adoption of governmental demands in regard to the war effort. Various anarchist papers published a great number of complaints against what they termed the dictatorship of committees that intervened in individual affairs and laid down arbitrary limitations. In general assembly notes there is mention of sanctions against indecent behaviour, non-participation at assemblies and particularly against people who did not come to work without a valid excuse ... Although this seems to have been sporadic behaviour, it points to a regression from early puritanism. In general, one may deduce that anarcho-communist collectivisation was constantly deteriorating.

Anarcho-communists in Spain attempted to establish a society of autonomous collective communities that were united in an alternative federative bond. They were to form the nucleus of a future model society, one that would expand to include society at large after the revolution had reached its final stage. Achievements were very far from their original targets. At most they
established anarcho-communist cells which struggled to survive in conditions of a civil war and were faced with the hostility of warring sections. They were forced to compromise in order to survive and this, naturally, affected their anarcho-communist characteristics. In fact, *Comunismo Libertario*, which had served as an inspiration for the starting stage, gradually lost its meaning in the process of realisation.

During the three civil war years, the ‘comunismo libertario’ movement withstood numerous trials and challenges. It achieved merely a partial and limited realisation in the social revolution, involving only certain parts of the rural communities and none of the cities. The people were not ready. Most of the movement’s office holders were farmers and union functionaries with limited education. Furthermore, the best qualified among them were drafted into the militias and had to be replaced by young and inexperienced members. Having to cope with daily burdens, their ardour diminished and they were mainly busy solving practical and pragmatic problems. Eventually, they had to adjust to state instructions which led to a gradual regression from the communal structures. Co-operation was reduced; family-wages were abolished; the salary system was introduced; solidarity and mutual aid were curtailed and wide gaps opened up between rich and poor collectives. Throughout the entire process the anarchist movement was forced to compromise and did not attempt to put pressure on recalcitrant peasants who wanted to renew the cultivation of their individual farms. All initial cases of violence and enforcement, which had occurred during the first stages, were criticised and steps were taken to reduce them. This was due to the anarchist concept of voluntary organisation.

There were no attempts to cope with the problems of the implementation on a theoretical level and the second year of the civil war could be regarded as a series of delaying actions of retreat. Nevertheless, even if achievements were merely a pale shadow of the anarcho-communist utopian vision, they expressed anarchism’s inherent power even in poor and war-stricken districts. If one takes into account the prevalent war conditions, one can only marvel at the collectives’ achievements in realising what may be termed ‘constructive anarchism’ in spite of all the trials and tribulations.

Despite its failure to materialise in practice via collectivism, anarcho-communism enhanced it with a vision and with social content that gave a special aspect to the revolution in Spain’s rural areas. It inspired the thousands who participated in it, with an uplifting ideal. None of the other partners in the collective experiment in rural and urban Spain had insisted on integrated communities; none had been spiritually and practically inspired by a utopian vision parallel to the one which the proficient libertarian anarchism had been propagating during several years before the outbreak of the Civil War. Many testimonies have remained and all tell about the atmosphere of enthusiasm and of a dreamlike experience. Many have attested that in spite of cruel hardships, “those were the best years of our lives”, and have insisted that they would willingly repeat them once again. (Bosch 1983, pp.378–379; Carrasquer 1985, pp.217–294).

The Anarchist collectives in Spain existed for a short time. The oldest and most stable of them lasted two and a half years before they were conquered by Franco’s army with the fall of the Republic. Although they were short-lived, they had a unique historical significance. It was the first attempt in modern history to establish a society run on anarchist principles which was broadly based in terms both of territory and of population.

Formerly, there were only sporadic attempts to form small anarchist communes in France, USA, Brazil and in Russia during the first years after the Revolution. None of these attempts can
be compared with the Spanish episode: not even the anarchist regime which existed in the area ruled by Machno in South Russia during the Revolution (1919–1920).

The Spanish anarchist communes had no predecessors to imitate, since they rejected in principle the example of Russian *kolkhoz* and *Sovkhoz*, considering them as activated by political and bureaucratic mechanisms. They also ignored the anarchist and socialist communes which existed in the USA and there were no links at all with the socialist kibbutzim in Palestine, being remote both geographically and ideologically. Therefore no patterns of external inspiration could be traced.

This was a unique implementation of what could be denominated as Constructive Anarchism, manifested in a wide ranging attempt to apply Anarcho-Communist principles within a system of rural communities. In spite of the uniqueness of the phenomenon and its originality there were elements which could be bases for comparison with other experiments especially in the manifestation of communal life. These included the reorganisation of society in an integral communal system involving production, consumption, education, cultural life and even personal familial and public morality. Although the anarcho-communists’ ability to achieve their utopian vision was not put to the test in full, within the limited boundaries of the Spanish experiment some cardinal problems of communal realisation were exposed, such as:

- the divergence between the utopian vision of free and voluntary communes and the enforcement attempts made by the militias during the first stages of the civil war.
- the establishment of social units that were expected to create a new world without being able to receive proper professional and educational preparation.
- the discrepancy between the principle of rewards according to needs as conceived by the ideology and the pragmatic wish to encourage people with ability to achieve more by granting them bonuses.
- the appearance of contradictions between rich and poor collectives and the manifestations of ‘collective capitalism’ in the relations between the communities.

It should be taken into account that in the complex reality of the civil war, the anarcho-communist utopia in Spain suffered from an erosion via compromises and a constant retreat from its integral principles. The process of erosion had started in the early days of the second Republic, ever since the utopian vision was turned into a factional debate.

The settlement of the disputes between the different concepts required compromises. Thus on the eve of the war, at a stage when the struggle for realisation was just beginning, only a vague vision of *comunismo libertario* remained, instead of a clear-cut plan of action. On the other hand, the anarcho-communist achievements, though meagre and short-lived, did not have to cope with the cardinal problem of Utopia, namely: it was not led to distort the ideal by using force to achieve it. Despite compromises which curtailed its impact, the spirit of utopia was left intact as a normative ideal, a ray of hope for the future. The civil war’s end, which led to the fall of the Republic, truncated the experiment of collectivisation and with it the unique historical opportunity of testing ‘constructive anarchism’ on a broad scale.
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Author Bio

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An Editorial Afterword

Our interest in publishing Yaacov Oved’s paper is that it is based on the published works of ‘several young Spanish historians’, though curiously he adds that the subject was treated better in the historiography of anarchism! He names Joll, Guerin, Woodcock, Bookchin ‘and other’. Surely Gaston Leval and Augustin Souchy not to mention José Peirats, the historian of the C.N.T. who all participated, or observed, the struggle at first hand — and who have recorded what they saw, when it happened, are more worth considering, including their conclusions, than say Hugh Thomas who only ‘discovered’ the collectives in a new edition of his massive history and who Yaacov Oved uses as one of his sources!

And last but not least, though Burnett Bolloten is included in the bibliography there is not one reference to this, the most important history, now in its third much enlarged edition, too important and detailed to summarise in a sentence. (The Spanish Civil War — Revolution and Counter-Revolution, Harvester Wheatsheaf, £50)

In the Notes to a Bibliographical Postscript in the third edition of FREEDOM PRESS’ Lessons of the Spanish Revolution (not included in Yaacov Oved’s Selected Bibliography), the author wrote of the 2nd edition of Bolloten’s magnum opus:

One chapter from the original edition has been omitted [in the second edition] though it hardly filled a page. Yet it seemed to me at the time that it was one of the most important statements in the book and endeared the author to me from the start. The paragraph read: ‘Although the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July, 1936, was followed by a far-reaching social revolution in the anti-Franco camp — more profound in some respects than the Bolshevik Revolution in its early stages — millions of discerning people outside Spain were kept in ignorance, not only of its depth and range, but even of its existence, by virtue of a policy of duplicity and dissimulation of which there is no parallel in history.’

To my protests at the exclusion of this brief chapter the author generously replied: “I am in total agreement with you that it was a mistake on my part to eliminate the opening paragraphs that appeared in The Grand Camouflage. Whenever I get a chance to revise the book again I shall restore those passages.” And his reason for wishing to do so is significant: “for I have since learned that even though they were written twenty years ago people, on the whole, are still unaware of the unparalleled revolution that took place in Spain”.

That journalist-historian kept his word. This new 1075-page History — it’s more than a history — introduces Part I with that very paragraph which surely sums up the forgotten, but ‘unparalleled’ revolution of our times, with all its mistakes, which have been pointed out not only by Bolloten but by the anarchists such as Peirats and Leval.

Bolloten has an excellent piece of advice for the academics who feed on each other for their histories. He points out in the Preface to this third and definitive edition that:

Above all, this work reflects the extensive use I have made of Spanish Civil War newspapers and periodicals. Unlike those historians who do not appreciate the value of using newspapers as a primary source, I strongly believe that it is impossible to
understand the passions, the emotions, and the real issues that touched the lives of Civil War participants without consulting the press.

How right he was and how wrong are the historians who rely on the empty utterances of the politicians — including the anarchists and syndicalists turned politicians.

One has not waited for historians to ‘reveal’ the ‘failures’ of the anarchists and the syndicalists in the Spanish Civil War. Had they followed Bolloten’s advice and read the anarchist publications at the time they would have seen that worldwide the anarchist press was critical of the compromises and at the same time unable to provide practical assistance for them to fight on two fronts. Apart from these reservations, we think that Yaacov Oved’s paper does recognise the originality of the collective movement in Spain in 1936–1939, and for interested readers there are still a few copies of Gaston Leval’s Collectives in the Spanish Revolution (FREEDOM PRESS, £8, hardback) and many other Freedom Press Distributors tides.
Yaacov Oved
Comunismo Libertario and Communalism in the Spanish Collectivisations (1936–1939)
February 1992

Retrieved 30 June 2022 from https://libcom.org/article/raven-17-use-land
This article was originally written for The Raven Anarchist Quarterly #17: Use of Land, pp. 40–62. Paper submitted to the XII World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, 9–13 July 1990.

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