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Ada Martí

Revolutionary Fetishism

January 1937

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An early critique of the fashion for revolutionary images in Civil War Barcelona. The author was a member of the Libertarian Youth and a leading light in the Federación Estudiantil de Conciencias Libres (Student Free Thought Federation). Originally published in *Estudios* No. 160.

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Revolutionary Fetishism

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For some time now there has been a flowering – and cultivation – in the kiosks, newspapers and similar, of an infinity of badges and medallions, some quite expensive, that bear the effigy of heroes and forebears of the Spanish Revolution.

Lenin and Karl Marx, Sebastian Faure and Anselmo Lorenzo, sit happily alongside Macià, Companys, Ascaso and Durruti – and what would that brave and modest comrade say if he could see it? – and are offered to the public like religious images at Holy Week.

It would seem that the fetishist instinct of the Spanish people, accustomed since childhood to the cult of idols and dominated by an inheritance of multiple generations of religious authority, cannot yet do without it. Indeed, they rise up in irresistible number against those who would wipe it out forever, and thereby destroy the educational and cultural work of those they glorify and degrade the blood they spilled generously in combat. They have formed a new cult out of the images of our men, a new religion, that substitutes the one which has done so much harm to the working class and which has cost us and which still costs us, enormous efforts to dismantle.

And of course, the traders in Revolution have fallen over themselves to take advantage of the occasion presented them by the naïve fetishism of a people who in spite of their proven strength, remain weak in some respects, and have taken up their posts to sell icons in the same way that they once did with images of Saint Teodisfrasia, virgin and martyr, or of his Holiness Pius XI.

Beware new idols! It may be the case that deep, very deep, in our hearts we preserve the sweet and grateful memory of those who contributed with the pen or with blood to the triumph of the proletariat; but we must not convert our home into a museum or, more accurately, into a tacky adolescent's shrine, our walls covered with drawings and photographs of gallant heroes of novels or the silver screen.

A revolution is not made by sentimental, absurd or picaresque idolatry. The future is not made with the eyes fixed on the past, as beautiful and glorious as it may have been. We have to forge ahead, towards the light; and in the past there is always – always! – something of shadow or fog. No one leaves a transparent past behind them..., and even if it were so, time would envelop it in any case with its grey mist... But let us leave aside such digressions and continue with the matter at hand.

We have to face reality. Fetishism, regardless of the character one wants to give it, serves only to stultify the mentality and energy of the people, encouraging them to think that some other being, whether supernatural or human, will get them off the hook. Of course, someone else might step in, but the people will be left hanging in any case.

In the long run, if they persist in such a lamentable and mistaken attitude, this will prove the end of our men. It won't be long before we see Saint Buenaventura Durruti, Saint Francisco Ascaso or Saint Aida Lafuente, for example, canonised and on some altar – or public monument, which to me, frankly, amounts to the same thing – until a new purifying revolution

does to them what we have done with the ancient and moth-eaten idols of the Catholic Church.

No, a revolution isn't made like this. At least, it's not how one should be made. To create a new epoch, the first element required is a new spirit, clean, open to new renovating currents, and sunlit, brought to life by the burning and luminous torch of culture.

One is not a revolutionary because at the end of one's bed, in the place of Christ or a scantily clad pinup, one has put a bust of Stalin or Kropotkin; nor is one a revolutionary who belongs to half a dozen committees and libertarian athenaeums; nor does it depend on the authors on your bookshelves or, as some would have it, attending innumerable rallies and reading the Confederal press from cover to cover every day. No. The revolutionary – and I make no mention here of parties or ideologies – is, like the poet, born. Whether they are able to develop or not, whether, like so many young authors, they languish and die before reaching full maturity, is the least of it. One can be a revolutionary born of aristocrats or bourgeois. The most important thing is that the spirit is there. Then, the circumstances will determine whether or not it bears fruit.

It is true that a revolution may come about – and generally does – as a result of hunger, or contagion, or environmental factors. But for it to continue existing in its pure state, it first requires an ideal – if not, look at what occurred in Russia; and second it needs vigour, to develop fully.

If we don't take care, the same thing will happen in Spain. There are too many two-faced revolutionaries and more still who have become revolutionaries to satisfy the demands of their stomach. And that is most dangerous, because if we continue like this, it will lead us to failure, or what is still worse, to fall headlong into a statist dictatorship.