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# The Spanish Anarchist Movement (1871–1939)

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ship took on during the civil war. Several activists would later reflect on the decisions taken at this time with regret. However, the contemporary advocates of state collaboration within the movement considered their position to be consistent with anarchist ideals of progress. Ambivalences within anarchist understandings of its stake in modernity thus led to starkly different political conclusions, and a bitterly contested legacy.

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crisis accepted the authority of the leaders. Although the CNT was pushed out of the central and Catalan governments in the aftermath of the May days, the role of the leadership stratum in collaborating with the Republican state arguably intensified in this period. No longer tasked with representing their membership, their function now became unequivocally disciplinary. New committees and structures were imposed that tended towards cohering the different branches of the libertarian movement under a single leadership. Militants were prevented from defending the conquests of the revolution which were renounced in the face of renewed governmental and police assaults. The underground newspapers of radical affinity groups, anarchist soldiers and defence committees were formally denounced by the leadership, as was the recently formed radical grouping Los Amigos de Durruti (Friends of Durruti). Although parallel structures of affinity groups and prisoner support were established by recalcitrant activists, no formal breach with the official organisations of Spanish anarchism was ever seriously entertained. By the beginning of 1938, the CNT assumed the programmatic implications of its new role by advocating a centralised war economy under union direction. However, with few signs of renewed influence in high politics, and with the Republican cause becoming ever more desperate, fissures began to appear within the movement's leadership that would endure through the long years of defeat and exile.

Spanish anarchism had entered a crisis because the Republican war effort demanded the national integration of the working class. Paradoxically, its non-integration had been a precondition of resistance to the military coup in July 1936. Self-organised combat organisations took to the street in those first, crucial days in a way that the state authorities could not. The socialists, republicans, and left nationalists who had failed to consolidate the Republican state project in the previous five years, now looked to the CNT to carry this out by bringing its membership on board. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, this is the task the CNT's leader-

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constituents, it demonstrated the continued viability of revolutionary tactics despite the non-revolutionary commitments of the CNT in government. Ten months after the outbreak of the civil war, however, revolutionary expansion was not taking place amid state collapse, as in the previous July, but in the context of increasing state authority. As such, the socialisation effort frequently met with the violent opposition of rival political groups and police forces. This dynamic reached its moment of culmination on 3 May 1937, when truckloads of armed police arrived at the central Barcelona telephone exchange with the intention of unseating the workers' committee that controlled it.

Over the course of four days, the anarchist uprising that responded to this police action expanded into a broader contestation of state power in Barcelona. As has been amply shown by Agustín Guillamón, amongst others, this was not a merely spontaneous insurrection, but a coordinated defence of the revolution effected through the CNT and FAI's network of workplace militants organised in affinity groups and defence committees. Its rapid capture of the greater part of Barcelona and the unanimity of the general strike that took place alongside it do little to support the frequently asserted claim that the CNT's membership had quickly accepted the rolling back of the revolution in the interests of a more efficient war effort. Conversely, the May days insurrection demonstrates the remarkable, perhaps historically unique extent to which Spanish anarchism was able to articulate both the resistance of the working class to its national integration and a revolutionary alternative to that outcome. However, the way in which the mobilisation was subsequently brought to heel was indicative of the fact that the movement's leadership was by this point both willing and able to obstruct these revolutionary aspirations.

Moreover, May represented a crossing of the Rubicon for those activists who had formerly occupied an intermediate position between the libertarian organisations' national committees and the 'mid-level' militants on the ground, but who in the midst of that

As such, Spanish workers were invited to consider themselves as members of a threatened national community. Certain anarchist leaders came close to understanding their role in terms of national integration. Federica Montseny (1905–1994) spoke of the anarchist war effort in terms of the threat to Spain of a ‘Moorish civilisation’, Juan García Oliver urged recruits to military training to consider themselves ‘cogs in a machine’, and Horacio Martínez Prieto (1902–1985) was determined that anarchists should form a single, disciplined bloc within the anti-fascist coalition.

However, despite the willingness of some activists to reimagine anarchist principles in terms appropriate to a nation state at war, workers in the Republican-held territory resisted the reduction of their power and autonomy. Moreover, they understood this resistance in anarchist terms and were able to coordinate it through anarchist organisations. In the first months of 1937, the CNT-led socialisation campaign gained momentum. Based on votes held at assemblies of workers, the campaign was intended to increase the co-ordination and coherence of the Spanish revolution. It advocated the extension of workplace collectivisation to industry-wide socialisation, and for socialisation to extend beyond the realm of production into housing and food distribution. This latter demand was highlighted by *Mujeres Libres* and, amidst increasing scarcity and bread queues in Barcelona, it formed an important aspect of the polarisation of Catalan society in the run-up to the May days of 1937.

Because of the different pressures exerted on the CNT – an organisation which was involved in governmental coalitions, but also responsible for and beholden to a broader membership involved in a revolutionary process – the projected and actual outcomes of the socialisation campaign were somewhat ambiguous. However, at ground level the campaign represented a programmatic response on the part of the autonomously organised working class to the apparent impasse resulting from the co-existence of revolutionary transformation and state reconstruction in Republican Spain. To its

At the dawn of the twentieth century, millions of people believed that a revolution would transform their societies and establish new social relations based on cooperation and self-organisation. After the First World War, this was briefly acknowledged to be an imminent prospect by both its partisans and its enemies. By the mid-1930s, however, the consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the rise of fascism and military despotism elsewhere had seemingly banished revolution from the horizon. Yet it was precisely at that moment, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), that a revolution of extraordinary depth and scale occurred in Spain. This apparent paradox can only be explained by the exceptional strength of the country’s anarchist movement, given organisational embodiment by the anarcho-syndicalist union, the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour – CNT).

Initial attempts by historians to explain the endurance of anarchism in Spain tended to view it as an archaic expression of the country’s uneven industrial development. They counterposed it to the state-oriented parties of socialism and communism, whose approach was understood to be more suited to the demands of modernity. This remains an influential thesis amongst prominent historians of the Spanish civil war. By contrast, authors of monographs dedicated to specific aspects or locales of Spanish anarchism have, in the main, rejected this argument. They have pointed to anarchism’s flourishing in centres of industry and to its embrace of central tenets of modernity. Furthermore, the recent transnational turn in the historiography of anarchism has led to a downplaying of the exceptionalism of the Spanish case. While such developments have provided a welcome challenge to the somewhat complacent teleology of the movement’s early chroniclers, the result has been a notable absence of plausible accounts for the Spanish movement’s exceptional persistence into the 1930s.

This chapter seeks to address this absence by positing that anarchism is best understood as a movement that resisted what has

been called the 'national integration of the working classes'. Seen as a causal element in the European war mobilisation of 1914, this phenomenon can be taken as a central moment of capitalist modernity. It was enabled by multiple factors among which the development of transport and communications technologies, the dominance of the industrial economy, and the extension of the education system were fundamental. Where these were present within a national territory, they were typically accompanied by an enhanced sense of national prestige. The ambivalence of labour organisations towards such developments meant that they were often agents of national integration themselves. The support shown by many socialist parties and trade unions for their respective governments during the First World War was the culminating moment of this process. Incorporating the question of national integration into a consideration of anarchism's longevity in Spain has two main advantages. First, it provides an interpretive framework for understanding the structural factors emphasised by the movement's early and influential historians. Second, by exploring how anarchism attempted to articulate an alternative to national integration, the insights of more recent historiography that have emphasised the movement's modernity can be brought to the fore.

In what follows, a case is first made for anarchism as a movement that flourished where national integration was underdeveloped. Of necessity, this first section includes some observations of a general or comparative nature that deviate from an exclusive focus on Spain. Then follows an examination of the agency of the Spanish movement in presenting an alternative to national integration. The final section considers the climax and crisis of Spanish anarchism in the civil war years, arguing for the explanatory potential of anarchism as non-integration to the movement's most 'exceptional' period.

CNT joined the cabinet of UGT leader turned Prime Minister Largo Caballero (1869–1946) in November 1936.

These events divided the anarchist movement, with a reaction gaining momentum among the CNT's mid-level activists against what they considered to be a fundamental transgression of principle. However, those who defended the CNT's position could point to the precedent of anti-dictatorial alliances during the 1920s. More fundamentally, anarchist advocates of state collaboration claimed that the loss of the civil war would imperil not only the anarchist organisations but also modernity and progress per se. This was the perspective advanced by José Xena (1907–1988), considered a 'purist' anarchist by his contemporaries, at the international anarcho-syndicalist Congress of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in Paris in December 1937.

By establishing the exceptional circumstances required for the anarchist movement to collaborate in a national government, the civil war had thus created the conditions whereby the Republic might accomplish the national integration of the working class. While not quite spoken of in these terms, this was recognised as a requirement of an effective war effort. As such, despite prompting internal debate and resistance, the incorporation of the workers' militia into the new Republican army, the removal of women from the frontlines and the reintroduction of pre-revolutionary judicial norms, were not only accepted but actively enforced by the CNT leadership. As with other examples of apparent disavowal of principle, anarchist collusion in the ejection of women from fighting roles was given the appearance of ideological consistency, insofar as women comrades were urged to take on roles more suited to their scientifically established predispositions.

Alongside structural developments, national integration implied an ideological corollary, promoted by Republican wartime rhetoric and propaganda, in which many anarchists participated. Speeches and posters depicted the civil war as one of national independence against German, Italian and Moroccan invasion.

their weaponry; convents, hotels and business centres were expropriated, and volunteer militia columns departed for the front amid raucous and celebratory displays of proletarian power.

The extent to which revolutionary achievements matched anarchist aspiration varied from region to region and from the countryside to the city. In some rural areas, money was abolished and in others it was replaced by labour vouchers. Land was collectivised and day-to-day decisions were taken in assemblies of villagers, thereby approximating the pre-war ideal of libertarian communism. In urban areas, workplaces were collectivised and run by workers' committees or, where the presence of the CNT was particularly strong, the whole industry was socialised and run through the CNT's structures. At the front, volunteers with the anarchist militia were equally remunerated and did not salute their commanders. Anarchist militia columns oversaw the setting up and protection of collectives in areas liberated from the mutinous army.

Although the revolution gathered momentum at ground level over the summer of 1936, it was not consummated in the sphere of politics. There, prominent members of the CNT came to arrangements with the leaders of republican, Catalan and Basque nationalist, and Socialist parties, establishing anti-fascist committees that served as quasi-governmental bodies until the autumn. Consequently, the anarchist movement became increasingly dislocated, as a leading stratum representing the CNT and the FAI in the committees and in talks with other parties took on decision-making functions. Meanwhile, the organs of the state began to reassert their executive power over those ad-hoc phenomena thrown up by the revolution. With limited, and at times non-existent, consultation of the broader membership, the leadership stratum of the anarchist movement connived in the dissolution of the anti-fascist committees and sent representatives into the traditional bodies of regional government. Finally, the

## **Anarchism as Non-integration, 1871–1919**

Anarchism emerged as a movement and ideology in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Originating within the currents of the labour and socialist movement that opposed formal political participation, from its inception anarchists warned of the potential of the workers' movement being placated by parliamentary representation and reform. Defining moments of international anarchism, such as the massacre of the Paris Communards (1871), the executions of the Haymarket martyrs (1886), of Francisco Ferrer (1909), and of the defendants in the so-called High Treason Incident in Japan (1911), all appeared to vindicate a position of hostility to the nation state. As such, anarchism established networks and constituencies in territories of Europe, Asia, and the Americas undergoing industrialisation and urbanisation. It was strongest in those places where its assertion of rupture rather than reform, of direct action rather than mediation, and of autonomy rather than parliamentary representation, appeared to correspond to the authorities' intolerance of working-class radicalism.

That context, however, was rapidly changing and, where there were factors that facilitated the national integration of the working class, anarchism struggled to retain its momentum in the years leading up to the First World War. For example, despite the presence of anarchist refugees, and the brief prominence of direct-action-oriented syndicalism, in Britain anarchism never became a mass movement. By the time of its emergence, most of the population lived in cities and had access to universal state education, and by the end of the nineteenth century, instances of class antagonism were tempered by such indications of national integration as Lib-Lab parliamentary candidates. A combination of Reform Acts and trade union expansion, on the one hand, and popular imperialism on the other, had served to encourage a variety of working-class outlook and organisation which tended not toward rupture but cooperation with the state and national

economy. The benefits to the UK state could be seen during the Second Boer War (1899–1902), when the seeming remoteness of the empire's cause to working-class people in the metropole did not preclude volunteers from joining the armed forces in numbers that foreshadowed the First World War. In contrast to Europe's southern and eastern periphery, where imperial misadventure led to working-class upheaval in Russia (1905), Spain (1909), and Italy (1914), in Britain opponents of the Boer War were a minority, confronted not only by the mainstream of popular opinion but also by the imperial and patriotic socialism typified by influential figures such as Robert Blatchford (1851–1943).

The example of Britain demonstrated the desirability of working-class identification with the nation state, and the amnesty granted the Communards in France (1880) and the lapse of the German anti-Socialist laws ten years later, were indications that national governments in Europe were modifying their understanding of working-class politics and considering alternatives to outright repression. As such, the conditions for anarchism's flourishing, namely, where its assertion of irreconcilable interests between the governed and governing classes appeared to match reality, were restricted in several European territories. The conciliatory gestures of governments found an echo in their respective labour movements. Socialist movements on the continent saw the growth of influential 'reformist' currents who argued that, in a context of expanding trade union membership and growing national economies, the interests of the nation state and the working class might be advanced in harmony.

This kind of argument was harder to defend in Spain. By contrast to Europe's first-rank powers and second-rank rivals – but in common with many other nation states struggling to establish economic power and geopolitical clout – Spain entered the twentieth century with a fractious and heterogenous ruling class, an unstable political system, and, in 1898, confirmation of its national decline. The anarchist characterisation of the state as fundamen-

achieved without the state chimed with a constituency that had experienced governmental authority as primarily repressive and hostile. Organisational innovations such as the CNT, the FAI, the defence committees, and Mujeres Libres, along with networks of free schools and publications, appeared to demonstrate the movement's capacity for survival in a complex, industrialising society. The civil war would reveal, however, that the unresolved problems of anarchism's relationship to modernity could lead to diametrically opposed political conclusions.

## **The End of an Exception, 1936–1939**

The military coup launched in July 1936 sought to take over a state that had not convincingly safeguarded the interests and privileges of the military, church, and landowners. Its methods, learned in the colonial wars in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco in the 1920s, included physically eliminating the openly rebellious, terrorising the population and enforcing order through militarised policing. The initial response of the Republican state to the coup was notorious for its vacillation. In the early months of the conflict, the forces confronting the military takeover were not those assembled by the Republican government but primarily those organised by the trade unions and parties of the working class.

Anarchists were at the forefront of these developments in several of Spain's cities and towns. Faced with the hegemony of working-class organisations in areas where the coup was defeated, sympathetic members of the police and even politicians put themselves at the disposal of the ad-hoc committees set up to co-ordinate the armed resistance. Without legal or forcible guarantees of private property, landowners and factory bosses disappeared and workers, now armed, stepped in to reshape their societies with varying degrees of violence. They patrolled the streets, women joining men in wearing overalls and displaying



Spanish anarchism as unsuited to the demands of modernity and thus incapable of meeting the challenge of the civil war. However, it must be understood that the CNT's members had experienced the centralised state primarily as an obstacle to, rather than guarantor of, modernity. The Spanish state in its various incarnations had, for example, set itself against anarchist educational efforts. If the most notorious case was its execution of Ferrer in 1909, it was also the case that in subsequent decades, vendors selling anarchist literature that discussed questions of sexuality and sexual health were prosecuted under anti-pornography laws.

The question of industrialism was more vexed, and the subject of internal debate in the movement. Historians have tended to emphasise the polarised positions of anarchist intellectuals such as Federico Urales (1864–1942) and Diego Abad de Santillán (1897–1983), who respectively idealised the pastoral and asserted the indispensability of industrial mass production. What emerged from the Zaragoza Congress, however, was less an expression of either tendency than an assertion that relations between city and country had to be reimagined. One of the key experiences of modernity, of moving from the countryside to the city, was fundamental to the emergence of revolutionary movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because its promise of rapid and irreversible change was accompanied by squalor and precarity. The CNT's attention to the rural as a zone to which programmes for the future had to orient themselves left the organisation open to the charge, both externally and internally, of archaism. It nevertheless represented an attempt to respond to a key structural problem of Spanish society, one which the country's various twentieth-century governments had failed to resolve prior to the civil war.

Through their revolutionary project, anarchists in Spain attempted to uphold their understanding of the promise of modernity, understood as technological, medicinal, and social progress, individual autonomy, gender equality, free love, and rational education. Their contention that this promise could be

tally repressive continued to chime, in general, with the experience of the working-class and peasant population. In the years prior to the First World War, the development of anarchism in Spain was not markedly different to other countries where the movement had maintained a significant presence in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. It had established a network of newspapers and alternative educational centres and, after a brief period in which 'propaganda of the deed' appeared to predominate as its primary expression, the bulk of its adherents returned to the movement's roots in the labour movement. There, they attempted to combine the goal of anarchy with the methods of direct-action unionism, a strategy that would come to be called anarcho-sindicalism. As with other anarchist efforts at encouraging mutual aid and resistance, the response of the Spanish state was one of wide-ranging repression, and the newly established CNT was declared illegal in 1911, with many of its activists arrested.

The organisation returned to legality in 1914, the test year for the national integration of the European working classes. As a neutral country, Spain avoided this test, and the significance of this is hard to overstate as a factor in explaining the endurance of the country's anarchist movement. The outbreak of the First World War prompted European socialist organisations and trade unions, including the anarchist-influenced *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, to support the war efforts of their respective governments. The anti-war minorities in the belligerent countries underwent harsh repression. Even in territories where revolutionary crises at the war's end allowed for a renewal of anarchist activity, this was short-lived. The rebranding of anti-war social democracy as communism and the attraction of the Russian Revolution saw many anarchists throw in their lot with Bolshevism. From the perspective of this chapter's central hypothesis, the post-war trajectory of both social democracy and Bolshevik communism confirmed the role of state socialism as a mechanism for the integration

of the working class. In such a forbidding context, the remaining redoubts of anti-state socialism were few and far between.

It is impossible to say what outcomes would have resulted from Spanish participation in the First World War. However, it can be posited with some confidence that it would have made much less likely the vertiginous growth of the CNT that occurred as the conflict drew to a close. Its increasing organisational coherence, through the adoption of the *sindicato único* model, and its success in the famous conflict at La Canadiense in Barcelona in 1919, meant that it could meet the post-war challenge of Bolshevism with confidence. Furthermore, the disillusioning reports from Russia encouraged the Spanish movement to clarify the meaning of its preferred form of society, 'libertarian communism', to which goal the CNT was constitutionally committed from 1919.

While these events positioned the CNT as the strongest organisational expression of anarchism in the world, they cannot entirely account for the exceptional endurance of Spanish anarchism into the 1930s. The heady days of 1919 were followed by the violent employers' offensive known as *pistolerismo*, and the subsequent dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera (1870–1930) from 1923, under which the CNT was made illegal until 1930. Had either of these phenomena achieved their aim of disarticulating the CNT, then Spanish anarchism would have likely remained broadly historically comparable to its sister movements in Portugal, Italy, Russia, and Argentina, which were largely suppressed in the 1920s. Accounting for the political failure of Spanish anarchism's enemies in that decade is beyond the scope of this chapter. While state authorities struggled to implement the structural reforms that facilitated anarchism's decline elsewhere, the movement in Spain was able to survive into the 1930s. This was partly owing to these structural factors, but it was also due to the characteristics of Spanish anarchism in those years. Namely: organisational innovation, the movement's pre-existing strengths in print culture and education, and

appropriate to their gender on the other. As with other aspects of modernity, the question of women's equality was a long-standing problem whose centrality would only become perceptible during the civil war.

In the years preceding that conflict, many anarchists who debated the terms of libertarian communism did so on the understanding that the routes to modernity modelled by other national territories and advocated by rival organisations in Spain would eliminate their movement. Military dictatorship, liberal or social democratic capitalism, authoritarian state socialism, and fascism, were variants of modernity that had accomplished the integration of the working class into various national economies by 1936. In all cases, the system adopted had pushed anarchism either underground or to the fringes of society. The conflicts that benighted the Second Republic tended to confirm this perspective. Rather than representing an anti-modern project, however, libertarian communism represented Spanish anarchism's alternative articulation of modernity.

When the CNT finally drew up an outline of this vision, on the eve of civil war in May 1936, it was the synthesis of over a hundred proposals debated in union branches and submitted for consideration at its Congress in Zaragoza. The need for a definition of libertarian communism had been widely assumed by the movement following the anarchist-inspired uprisings of 1932–1933. The years of the Republic had witnessed a boom in pamphlets by activists, alongside scores of articles in the press, which provided sketches of the projected society. The document eventually produced by the CNT emphasised the possibility of a rational reordering of society through a confederation of unions and communes organised from the bottom-up. It affirmed the equality of the sexes and the central place of education in the new society.

Historians have been struck by this document's apparently naïve anti-centralism and failure to prioritise the potential of industry. These have been central planks in the characterisation of

the organisational level, and which would re-emerge in the testing conditions of the civil war.

The question of gender was another aspect of anarchism's complex relationship with modernity. As with the question of democracy and progress, it exposed fault lines in the movement, and led to a further organisational innovation. The anarchist movement had long provided spaces for mixed-gender socialisation in educational and cultural centres and excursion groups. Women were actively encouraged to join the CNT and attend meetings, while anarchist publications attempted to counter the obscurantism that shrouded questions of sexuality and sexual health in Spanish society. As would be revealed by the enthusiastic participation of thousands of women in the revolutionary mobilisations that accompanied the outbreak of the civil war, a significant number of Spanish women saw anarchism as a means through which their own emancipation could be effected. However, while anarchists were quick to trumpet the anti-patriarchal aspects of their movement, they were generally defensive when confronted by their limits.

In some ways, the formation of the anarchist women's grouping, *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) in 1936, testifies to the capacities for renewal built into the anarchist movement's traditions of autonomous organising. Thus, in the face of insufficient activity on the part of male comrades, women anarchists founded their own organisation dedicated to both self-education and anti-sexist critique. Several male anarchists assisted *Mujeres Libres* and advertised its existence to women CNT members. Nevertheless, the organisation was never granted the official status it desired as a branch of the anarchist movement. The ambivalence with which its presence was greeted by many anarchists was not reflective of a contradiction in the anarchist embrace of modernity but rather of the ambivalent role of women within modernity as such. For many male – and even some female – anarchists, it was no contradiction to affirm the equal place of women in society on the one hand and the scientifically established predispositions of the sexes to tasks ap-

the appeal and seeming plausibility of its vision of an alternative modernity.

## **An Alternative Modernity, 1920–1936**

The violence of the state and employers' campaign against the CNT, particularly in Barcelona, met with a response in kind from anarchist action groups in the early 1920s. This activity was characterised both as self-defence and as working-class vengeance by one of its partisans, Juan García Oliver (1901–1980). During the years of the Second Republic, an attempt was made to convert the action groups into what were called 'defence committees'. By contrast to their previous incarnation, the defence committees were intended to have a more formalised structure, a greater degree of responsibility to the CNT, and were to be deployed in a more cohesive and coordinated fashion. There is some debate regarding the extent to which this transition, which was theorised and championed by García Oliver, was successful. In common with other organisational innovations within the movement in these years, it was not unanimously welcomed. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the defence committees in Barcelona, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, were fundamental to the movement's defining mobilisation in July 1936.

In the previous decade, many of the movement's 'men of action' were forced into exile, along with other activists, by the arrival of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in 1923. The CNT was declared illegal and those of its activists remaining in Spain were subject to arrest and harassment. Nevertheless, the movement was not entirely repressed. A significant wellspring of future militancy was maintained through anarchist educational projects. The *Escuela Natura*, for example, under the stewardship of the anarchist pedagogue Joan Puig Elías (1898–1972), maintained a continuous existence throughout the dictatorship, despite its connection to

the CNT's textile workers' union in the Barcelona neighbourhood of Clot. Likewise, anarchist print culture continued to serve its role as debating forum and networking mechanism, both in exile and within Spain. The famous anarchist publication, *La Revista Blanca*, began its second run in 1923, headed by the Montseny Mañé family. It was partly due to debates and affirmations in the anarchist press that the impetus was found for a further organisational innovation in this period. The Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation – FAI) was formed in 1927, in a bid to increase the cohesion of the peninsula's affinity groups, albeit that most of its members were based in Spain. Likewise, anarchist educational efforts were the primary driver behind the formation of the Libertarian Youth as a further branch of the movement in 1932. This combination of armed activity, education, print culture, and organisational innovation, helped create the space in which the anarchist movement could present itself as one possible variety of modernity in Spain.

The interwar period saw several national territories engage in experiments in new forms of governance intended to resolve the revolutionary crises that had followed the First World War. The consolidation of the CNT meant that, despite the seven years of illegality it endured in the 1920s, its vision for the future of Spain, libertarian communism, was viewed by its sizeable constituency as a potential outcome of the political and social struggles of the period. As indicated in the previous section, this was owing in part to the unsettled question of what form Spanish modernity would take. However, the fractured nature of the possible alternatives to libertarian communism, which ranged from social democracy and republicanism to fascism and military-clerical authoritarianism, also emphasised and tested certain ambiguities in the anarchist approach to modernity.

Years of shared repression meant that many of anarchism's prominent figures had crossed paths with republicans and social democrats in alternative educational projects and courtrooms.

Many also shared ideological precepts with liberals and Marxists, through a common understanding of societal progress, an (often) uncritical embrace of science, and a commitment to secular education. There were thus both practical and theoretical grounds for united activity. Prior to the advent of the Second Republic in 1931, leading figures in the movement were in contact with republicans with a view to coordinated action. Exiled members of action groups liaised with Catalan nationalists hoping to foment an insurgency. When the Spanish Republic was born amidst mass jubilation, many in the CNT welcomed the opportunity to return to open activity in a freer and democratic environment. This was not only a pragmatic consideration but was also an echo of a broader current in the historical anarchist movement which associated itself with the traditions of the Enlightenment. This perspective, which was not confined to moderates within the movement, considered that anarchism would be the result of a societal evolution involving a great deal of prior educational labour. From this perspective, the transition from a dictatorial to a democratic society could be considered a step in the right direction.

This was a contested aspect of Spanish anarchism's modernity. Some anarchists argued that such a faith in progress was redolent of the movement's social democratic rivals in the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party – PSOE) and its trade union counterpart, the Unión General de Trabajadores (General Union of Workers – UGT). To an extent, the FAI provided a vehicle for asserting anarchism's rupture with Enlightenment determinism – more typically characterised as 'Marxism' – in the years that followed. This was a debate that foreshadowed the bitter, albeit largely temporary, split in the CNT around the question of so-called 'treintismo', which was only resolved in May 1936. But both the heterogeneity of the FAI and the attachment of even 'purist' anarchists to ideals of progress point to a broader tension within anarchism's relationship to modernity that could not be solved at