

A Return to Principle

Diego Abad de Santillán

1938

Abad de Santillan was one of several prominent anarchists in the CNT-FAI to collaborate with the Republican government, becoming a Generalidad minister from December 1936 to March 1937. In May 1937, there was a civil war within the Civil War, the “May Days” in Barcelona, where the anarchists were forced to fight for their lives and the social revolution, attacked by Communist and Republican forces. Hundreds of anarchists were killed, including many prominent militants, such as the Italian anarchist writer, Camillo Berneri, and the Libertarian Youth leader, Alfredo Martinez, who were both murdered. Abad de Santillón ceased his collaboration with the government and later wrote the following article, “Apropos of Our Libertarian Goals,” published in *Timon* (Barcelona), No. 2, August 1938. In January 1939 he left Spain, was interned in various concentration camps in France, and towards the end of the Second World War returned to Latin America. The translation is by Paul Sharkey.

No idea has been so disfigured by its own and by outsiders as the anarchist idea has been, some in order to cover up their defection to the other side, others to halt its spread through the broad masses. Has any school of thought in modern times ever been attacked with as much vitriol as has been thrown at us by those whose over-riding aim is to live off another man’s labours?

But it must be conceded that no ridicule, no criticism, no underhanded tricks, no political dishonesty by our adversaries has ever done us as much harm, nor provoked us to such outrage, as the ridicule and criticism emanating from those who, having-thanks to our movement-attained a certain degree of popularity, have sought to use it as a springboard to defect to the other side where the pickings are easier and the thorns less sharp.

If they mean to tell us that they are not the stuff of which revolutionaries are made, that they have no faith in the people and that they are weary of “sacrifices,” there is no need for them to throw mud at an idea that stands above such pettiness and demands no reluctant tribute from anybody.

Our anarchy’s only defenders are those...whom understand it and feel for it. It does not force itself on anybody nor does it require that anyone make sacrifices for it. Be they few in number or many, anarchists are sufficient and more than sufficient unto themselves when it comes to bringing credit to their ideas, in no matter what terrain they operate. We force no one to become

an anarchist and to give his life or his sweat for anarchy, but neither do we remain silent as a sublime ideal is besmirched through the malice of unscrupulous adversaries or the weariness of faithless friends.

The doors are open for anyone to join us and open for any who would leave again. But there is not an open door when it comes to turning anarchy—a perfectly clear, well-defined teaching with a clear-cut profile—into a ridiculous monstrosity just to cover up desertions. Nor is there an open door for turning basic anarchist ideas into slavish pillars of diametrically opposed principles. Might we make so bold as to argue that this is not our movement's present function?

As for those who have learned over the past two years that a change of tack is called for, let them change tack! But let them leave our colours untouched, let them not drag them through the mire, let them not disfigure them just to carry on usurping the benefits; let them flourish the colours of whichever party or organization suits them best; or let them come up with a new doctrine, a new party. We will have no quarrel with them. But we do have a quarrel if they claim that anarchy can be turned to any use; that the revolution boils down to wading through the blood of martyrs and heroes to high positions of political and economic privilege. Against such, every anarchist with any love of anarchy has a right and a duty to resist and criticize...

Anybody taking fundamental exception to our ideas is entitled to do so. We shall even afford him space in these columns so that he may do so, but we reserve the right to respond immediately. We declare that, apart from the accretions of historical evolution, which bear out rather than rebut anarchy's underlying principles, there is nothing that we would strike from our ideological baggage. We are what our predecessors were.

As for methodology, the practices whereby we implement our aspirations, there is ample room for discussion. Tactics are circumstantial and dependent upon surroundings and opportunities, the locality and the time in which we live. There is no requirement to act the same in industry as in agriculture, or in a country that displays certain features as in another where conditions are different. We facilitated the victory of the republican left in the February 1936 elections, in order to thwart fascism's taking power by a lawful route. We had a comprehensive debate then on principles and tactics, stressing the fundamental character of the former and the contingent nature of the latter. We could return to this debate now. But the upshot will always be that we agree that certain methods leave us further removed from rather than closer to our goals.

Participation in political power, say, which we thought advisable due to circumstances, in the light of the war, will demonstrate for us yet again what Kropotkin once said of the parliamentary socialists: "You mean to conquer the State, but the State will end up conquering you."

...Contrary to the experience of all the socialist and revolutionary movements in history, we in Spain have known a phenomenon that is hard to comprehend. The best trained, most prestigious, sharpest-witted avant-garde minorities have not been in the vanguard of economic and social change; these have instead proved a hindrance, a brake, a hurdle to that change.

Awaiting instructions from none, the broad masses embarked upon the realization of what they carried in their hearts, and what they carried in their hearts was an intuitive grasp of and enthusiasm for a new order, a new regimen of economic and social relations.

With all of the shortcomings of impromptu, spontaneous activity, the Spanish people laid down the course to be followed from July 1936. And, no matter how this war turns out, the achievements of that people cannot be wiped from our memories and will live on in the memories of upcoming generations as a mighty spur to action and as a reliable guide.

The avant-garde minorities, over the two turbulent and hazardous years of our war against fascism, give the impression that they were taken aback by their own daring and they have gladly retreated to older positions that the broad masses have long since left in their wake with their revolutionary creations. Fear of freedom? Fear of the unknown? Ignorance? Stuck in a rut, even though that rut be as anti-revolutionary and anti-proletarian as can be? We shall leave it to historians of the future to unravel that mystery, which may in any case be explained thus:

1. The avant-garde minorities were not equal to their task nor were their words thought through and heartfelt.
2. The broad masses were better prepared than their supposed mentors and guides when it came to revolutionary reconstruction.

It is otherwise hard to understand the ease with which those who seemed to be marching in the vanguard reconciled themselves to what they had been fighting only the day before as if it were Public Enemy Number One.

In every revolution, the vanguard minorities aim to strike as deep as possible into the territory of practice, for the destruction of the old regime and the building of new ways of life. In the Spanish Revolution those minorities facilitated, not society's advance, but its retreat. Because there has been a lot of ground lost since the early months after the July events. And that ground was lost, not at the people's instigation, but at the prompting of what appeared to be the most advanced revolutionary minorities. But those minorities were revolutionary only in appearance, for show, and the people were more revolutionary than those minorities!

History teaches us that a motley society contains a large inert mass bereft of any will of its own, readily dragged to the right or to the left, depending on whether the minority forces of progress or reaction wield the whip in hand. Events in Spain have caused us to amend that outmoded outlook: in Spain there was a huge mass yearning for revolution and some so-called leading minorities, our own among them, which not only failed to egg on, articulate and facilitate the realization of that yearning, but indeed did all they could to clip its wings. The Spanish revolution was not the doing of any organization or party, but was eminently an achievement of the people, of the greater number. The retreat was made by so-called progressive social minorities...

We commonly hear remarks that mirror unhappiness with current conditions, but which also disclose an utter ignorance of our ideas and our methods. There is all too much glib talk such as: Dictatorship for dictatorship, ours would have been the better option!

It would have been preferable for those who act out the part of dictators, but not for the producing masses, the people, the community. As far as the people are concerned, no dictatorship is to be preferred over any other; they are all equally repugnant.

The dictatorship approach, its methodology and its demands are the same, the very same, whether it is exercised by self-styled fascists or those who profess to be communists, republicans, democrats or anarchists.

Dictatorship is a reversion to the most bestial tyranny and absolutism which should have been beaten back by revolutionary social progress. It now offers itself to us in a new garb, be it fascist or communist, but totalitarian rule which is to be enforced and employed as a pre-requisite cannot help but arrive at the same destination, regardless of how it is dressed up, the name it goes under or the colours it flies.

An anarchist dictatorship would be as poisonous for Spain as a fascist or communist dictatorship. Not to mention that in practicing it, we would become the very negation of what we are and what we stand for. It is not a question of personnel, but one of systems and procedures. As government men we are no worse and no better than anybody else and we know by now that our intervention in government serves no purpose other than to bolster governmentalism and in no way upholds the rights of labour against its parasitical enemies, economic and political.

As dictators, as tyrants, we are not, and no one is, made of better stuff than any other dictator and tyrant. On the other hand there is no need for us to lend a willing hand to the doing of evil and the practice of iniquity, forging the chains of human slavery. All of this has been proceeding for centuries without our being missed. Passivity or tolerance from us is enough if we want to stray from the path of freedom and justice for all; but let us at least fight shy of active complicity.

We have already highlighted the outstanding difference in our revolution. The minorities that seemed to be leading from the front were the biggest brakes on the constructive revolutionary action of the people. Might these minorities, less daring than the broad masses, be called upon to embody the anarchist dictatorship?

The merest whisper and hint of the nonsensical lamentation that we should, when we had the chance, have imposed our dictatorship should not be countenanced by comrades. The “going for broke” argument is a latent expression of the craving for dictatorship that the libertarian movement has had the good sense to thwart.

Since we have proved incapable of entrenching the revolution begun by the labouring people, let no one accuse us of being the grave-diggers of that revolution or accessories to the smothering and crushing of the revolutionary movement. And our dictatorship would, like any other, have smothered and buried that revolution.

Heads everywhere, centre nowhere! We have said it over and over, a thousand times. We continue to say it. From the organizational viewpoint, our own, as well as from the politico-national point of view.

No doubt about it: we have made mistakes and had our shortcomings; but rejection of our own dictatorship was neither a mistake nor a shortcoming, for our social message consists precisely of systematic opposition to all dictatorship, on the grounds that it is anti-revolutionary and anti-human...

The grounds for our irreconcilable opposition to statism are economic, moral and intellectual in nature. Day to day experience and the lessons of history furnish unambiguous proof to support us. The State subsists, not because of any *raison d'être*, not because it has convinced its victims to put up with it and support it, but because it has strength and, as long as it has more strength than its adversaries, it will carry on playing the lion's part in social life, carrying on with its drive to smash culture and stifle individual and social life.

Let us summarize the economic basis for our anti-statism:

1. The State is an unduly expensive parasitical organism. It performs no service that could not be performed directly by those concerned at infinitely less cost and, above all, with much more efficiency. Twelve thousand million dollars are squandered yearly in the United States on the fight against crime. Prior to the war, Spain had 55,000 men spared productive toil and engaged in so-called public order duties. And the United States has not succeeded in eradicating the usual instances of so-called crime; and in Spain, the public order authorities have never managed to guarantee any such order.

2. Starting out as an agency defending the position of the wealthy classes, the modern State has become an end in itself, a supreme master of lives and finances, at the heart of everything. Which is why its bureaucracy, police and militarism have expanded. With every passing day the costs rise and humanity is thrust into shortage and penury just so that the State can be maintained. The tastiest and finest tidbits from life's banquet are gobbled up by statism, and the economically privileged devour the rest. Leaving only crumbs for the toilers of society. All in order to preserve a redundant agency whose functions society could perform for itself through its own direct organs, at no discernible cost to the producers. The State is unduly expensive and thoroughly sterile and sterilizing. It performs no essential social function. Bureaucracy, the military and police are its very essence. Although the State had meddled in it, nothing else is essential to statism. For instance, the railways, the posts and telegraphs services, public education, etc. Do we need the State to get the trains running, to get the mail distributed, so that we have schools, to make the wheat sprout in the fields?
3. As the ever-expanding ramifications of the State gobble up the greater and better part of socially useful labour, its existence represents a standing offence to human life, a curtailment of the right to life and development inherent in every human being.

But in cultural terms, the State is like Attila's horse: it leaves devastation in its wake. Its centralism cannot be reconciled with thoughtfulness, because it wants to see everything subjected to its guns, its ordinances, its interests, and thought, unless it be free, is nothing or only a caricature of thought. The creative endeavours of the mind require freedom and that freedom perishes on contact with statism...

We will always falter, make mistakes and make wrong moves: that was true yesterday, just as it will be today, tomorrow and always. Our human condition and our condition as dynamic activists ever ready to give it a go, will always keep us teetering on the edge of error. But trial and error are the cornerstone of all progress, in science as well as in matters political and social. We must give it a go and risk error so that we can harvest morsels of truth from the unknown.

It is not the making of mistakes that frightens us. Given a choice between error on the one hand and passivity, indifference and a deadly coldness in the face of life's many problems on the other, we should rather make mistakes, groping in the dark, and stumble. If we fall by the wayside, let us do it in our own style, while searching for the light, a better way for humanity. More damaging than error is persisting with an error and an inability to set mistakes aright.

But what we are concerned to state as our conclusion is that whereas there is no infallible criterion for truth, there is one way of always looking truth in the face: the people. If we are with it in good times and the bad, in its successes and its failures, we may not always feel satisfied but we shall never feel that we have strayed from our course. With the people, alongside the people, interpreters of its grievances and aspirations, carrying out its mandates. That must be our unvarying position, the only sure and always worthy one.

But one cannot serve two masters at once. If we are with the people, we cannot be with the State, which is its enemy. And right now we are with the State, which is tantamount to being against the people. For the first time in history, in anarchism's name, we prize the interests of governmentism over those of the people. And the people, which has a healthy instinct, and an intuitive feel for the truth, is beginning to see plainly, to feel disheartened and hopeless when it

sees us who had always offered our lives in defence of its cause forget it for a mess of ministerial pottage.

Nearly all of you, beloved comrades, will have been stung by some spontaneous popular exclamation, the truthfulness of which you cannot gainsay: "They're all the same when they make it to the top!"

We are all the same as those who went before us in the manning of high public and government office. The people cast this up to us. And the people are right. In order to hang on to those posts, from where the only thing we can plant is decrees, fresh taxes, new impositions and burdens, we must stand up to the people's demands. And should the people tomorrow, wearying of suffering, take to the streets as they so often have when we were on its side and in its midst, it will fall to us to massacre them. And unless we want to find ourselves facing that splendid prospect, we must deploy our every organizational resource to ensure that injustice, hunger and outrage are supinely and universally borne without complaint.

For how long, comrades? This sacrifice that we have made of our revolutionary identity: can there be any other outcome to it than furnishing all too much justification for snuffing out the trust that the people had placed in us? In government we are all the same! And we cannot serve two masters. Hence our insistence that we make our minds up. With the people, or with the State? Our conclusion is that in standing with the State and thus against the people, we are not only committing an irreparable act of betrayal of the revolution, which is taken as read, but we are also betraying the war effort, because we are denying it the active support of the people, the only invincible force, provided that it and its boundless resources are properly deployed.

For the future of the revolution and the prospects of the war, comrades, we may yet be in time, if we stand always alongside the people!

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