

Libertarian Democracy

Gaston Leval

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Gaston Leval (1895-1978) was one of the CNT's delegates to the Red International in Russia in 1921, where he managed to visit Voline in prison, and helped put pressure on the Bolsheviks to release Voline, Maksimov and other imprisoned anarchists. Partly as a result of his report, the CNT rescinded its tentative affiliation with the Red International and affiliated with the IWA (Selection 114). In 1923, he left Spain for Argentina to escape the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, returning in 1936 to participate in the Spanish Revolution, recording its positive accomplishments for posterity.

On July 19, 1936, the Spanish military attempted to seize power. The militants of the CNT-FAI took to the streets, thwarting the coup in large areas of Spain, while the Republican government virtually collapsed and offered only token resistance. The people of Spain began a massive social revolution, taking over the land and the factories and creating their own directly democratic collective organizations to run their own affairs. In the following extracts from Gaston Leval's *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975; originally published 1971), Leval describes the general principles of "libertarian democracy" and emphasizes the original nature of the Spanish collectives.

There was, in the organization set in motion by the Spanish Revolution and by the libertarian movement, which was its mainspring, a structuring from the bottom to the top, which corresponds to a real federation and true democracy. It is true that deviations can occur at the top and at all levels; that authoritarian individuals can transform, or seek to transform, delegation into intangible authoritarian power. And nobody can affirm that this danger will never arise. But the situation was quite different from what it is or would be in a State apparatus. In the State which Marx...called a "parasitic superstructure" of society, men installed in positions of command are inaccessible to the people. They can legislate, take decisions, give orders, make the choice for everybody without consulting those who will have to undergo the consequences of their decisions: they are the masters. The freedom which they apply is their freedom to do things in the way they want, thanks to the apparatus of law, rules and repression that they control, and at the end of which there are the prisons, penal settlements, concentration camps and executions. The USSR and the satellite countries are tragic examples of this.

The non-Statist system does not allow these deviations because the controlling and coordinating Comites, clearly indispensable, do not go outside the organization that has chosen them, they remain in their midst, always controllable by and accessible to the members. If any individuals contradict by their actions their mandates, it is possible to call them to order, to reprimand them, to replace them. It is only by and in such a system that the "majority lays down the law."

...Did this mean that there were no minorities, no individuals, exerting an often decisive influence on the assembly, or in the daily life of the Syndicates, Collectives, Federations? To answer in the affirmative would be to lie and would deceive nobody. As everywhere and always, there were in those organisms militants who were better prepared, who were the first to stand in the breach, and to preach by example, risking their own skins, and who, driven by the spirit of devotion and sacrifice, were better informed on the problems, and found solutions to them more readily. The history of mankind concedes a worthy place to the minorities who have assumed the responsibility for the happiness of their contemporaries and the progress of the species. But the libertarian minority assumed that role according to anti-authoritarian principles, and by opposing the domination of man by man.

To emancipate the people it is first of all necessary to teach them, to push them to think and to want. The sizeable and enthusiastic libertarian minority sought therefore...to teach the masses to do without leaders and masters and to that end were always communicating information to them, educating them, accustoming them to understand the problems affecting them either directly or indirectly, to seek and to find satisfactory solutions. The syndical assemblies were the expression and the practice of libertarian democracy...

Normally those periodic meetings [of the assemblies] would not last more than a few hours. They dealt with concrete, precise subjects concretely and precisely. And all who had something to say could express themselves. The Comite presented the new problems that had arisen since the previous assembly, the results obtained by the application of such and such a resolution on the volume of production, the increase or decrease of any particular speciality, relations with other syndicates, production returns from the various workshops or factories. All this was the subject of reports and discussion. Then the assembly would nominate the commissions, the members of these commissions discussed between themselves what solutions to adopt; if there was disagreement, a majority report and a minority report would be prepared.

This took place in all the syndicates throughout Spain, in all trades and all industries, in assemblies which, in Barcelona, from the very beginnings of our movement brought together hundreds or thousands of workers depending on the strength of the organizations. So much so that the awareness of the duties, responsibilities of each spread all the time to a determining and decisive degree.

The practice of this democracy also extended to the agricultural regions. We have seen how, from the beginning of the Civil War and of the Revolution the decision to nominate a local management Comite for the villages was taken by general meetings of the inhabitants of villages, how the delegates in the different essential tasks which demanded an indispensable coordination of activities were proposed and elected by the whole assembled population. But it is worth adding and underlining that in all the collectivized villages and all the partially collectivized villages, in the 400 Collectives in Aragon, in the 900 in the Levante region, in the 300 in the Castilian region, to mention only the large groupings which comprised at least 60 percent of "republican" Spain's agriculture, the population was called together weekly, fortnightly or monthly and kept fully informed of everything concerning the commonweal.

This writer was present at a number of these assemblies in Aragon, where the reports on the various questions making up the agenda allowed the inhabitants to know, to so understand, and to feel so mentally integrated in society, to so participate in the management of public affairs, in the responsibilities, that the recriminations, the tensions which always occur when the power of decision is entrusted to a few individuals, be they democratically elected without the possibility of objecting, did not happen there. The assemblies were public, the objections, the proposals publicly discussed, everybody being free, as in the syndical assemblies, to participate in the discussions, to criticize, propose, etc. Democracy extended to the whole of social life. In most cases even the individualists could take part in the deliberations. They were given the same hearing as the collectivists.

This principle and practice were extended to the discussions in the municipal Councils in the small towns and even in sizeable ones...[W]hen, because of the exigencies of war, our comrades had joined these Councils...they secured the agreement of the other parties, who could not easily refuse, that discussions should be open to the public...And often social reforms of immediate value (building of schools, nurseries, children's playgrounds, decent conditions for the old) were snatched from the political majority which would not have been granted if the discussions had taken place behind closed doors...

One of the dominant characteristics which impresses whoever studies the Spanish Revolution is its many sidedness. This revolution was guided by certain very clear and very definite principles, which involved the general expropriation of the holders of social wealth, the seizure by the workers of the organizational structures of production and distribution, the direct administration of public services, the establishment of the libertarian communist principle. But the uniformity of these principles did not prevent a diversity in the methods for their application, so much so that one can talk of "diversity within unity" and of a surprisingly diversified federalism.

In a very short time, in the agrarian regions and especially in Aragon, a new organism appeared: the Collective. Nobody had spoken about it before. The three instruments of social reconstruction foreseen among those libertarians who had expressed themselves on a possible future were firstly the Syndicate, then the Cooperative, which did not win many supporters, and finally, on a rather large scale, the commune, or communal organization. Some foreshadowed-and this writer was among them-that a new and complementary organism could and should appear, especially in the countryside, seeing that the Syndicate had not assumed the importance it had in the towns, and the kind of life, of work and production, did not fit into an organic monolithic structure which was contrary to the multiformity of daily life.

We have seen how that Collective was born with characteristics of its own. It is not the Syndicate, for it encompasses all those who wish to join it whether they are producers in the classic economic sense or not. Then it brings them together at the complete human individual level and not just at a craft level. Within it, from the first moment, the rights and duties are the same for everybody; there are no longer professional categories in mutual opposition making the producers into privileged consumers compared with those, such as housewives, who are not producers in the classical definition of the word.

Neither is the Collective the municipal Council or what is called the Commune, the municipality. For it parts company with the political party traditions on which the commune is normally based. It encompasses at the same time the Syndicate and municipal functions. It is all-embracing. Each of its activities is organized within its organism, and the whole population takes part in its management, whether it is a question of a policy for agriculture, for the creation of new industries,

for social solidarity, medical service or public education. In this general activity the Collective brings each and everybody to an awareness of life in the round, and everyone to the practical necessity of mutual understanding.

Compared with the Collective the Syndicate has simply a secondary or subordinate role. It is striking to observe how in the agricultural districts, it was more often than not spontaneously relegated, almost forgotten, in spite of the efforts that the libertarian syndicalist and the anarcho-syndicalists had previously made. The Collective replaced them. The word itself was born spontaneously and spread into all the regions of Spain where the agrarian revolution had been brought about. And the word "collectivist" was adopted just as quickly and spread with the same spontaneity.

One could advance the hypothesis that these two words-collective and collectivism-better expressed the people's moral, human, fraternal feelings than did the terms Syndicates and syndicalism. A question of euphony perhaps, and of a breadth of views, of humanism: man as something more than the producer. The need for syndicates no longer exists when there are no more employers...

Going deeply into these matters it could perhaps be said that they were developing a new concept of liberty. In the village Collectives in their natural state, and in the small towns where everybody knew one another and were interdependent, liberty did not consist in being a parasite, and not interesting oneself in anything. Liberty only existed as a function of practical activity. To be is to do, Bakunin wrote. To be is to realize, voluntarily. Liberty is secured not only when one demands the rights of the "self" against others, but when it is a natural consequence of solidarity. Men who are interdependent feel free among themselves and naturally respect each other's liberty. Furthermore so far as collective life is concerned, the freedom of each is the right to participate spontaneously with one's thought, one's heart, one's will, one's initiative to the full extent of one's capacities. A negative liberty is not liberty: it is nothingness...

On this subject we would like to make an observation to which we attach great philosophical and practical importance. The theoreticians and partisans of the liberal economy affirm that competition stimulates initiative and, consequently, the creative spirit and invention without which it remains dormant. Numerous observations made by the writer in the Collectives, factories and socialized workshops permit him to take quite the opposite view. For in a Collective, in a grouping where each individual is stimulated by the wish to be of service to his fellow beings, research, the desire for technical perfection and so on are also stimulated. But they also have as a consequence that other individuals join those who were the first to get together. Furthermore when, in present society, an individualist inventor discovers something, it is used only by the capitalist or the individual employing him, whereas in the case of an inventor living in a community not only is his discovery taken up and developed by others, but is immediately applied for the common good. I am convinced that this superiority would very soon manifest itself in a socialized society.

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