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James Michael Yeoman
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The translocal experience of Spanish anarchists in South Wales, 1900–15
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Salud y Anarquía desde Dowlais

The translocal experience of Spanish anarchists in South Wales, 1900–15

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century a group of Spanish anarchists settled in the town of Dowlais, South Wales, as part of a wider migration to the area prompted by the town's ironworks. Over the following fifteen years this community kept in constant contact with their comrades in Spain through the networks sustained by the anarchist press. Examination of these records reveals the dislocation experienced by these migrants, and their efforts to retain their identity and standing within the movement they had left behind. This study highlights the benefits of a translocal approach towards anarchist internationalism, which focuses on the experience of ordinary members of the movement and their struggles to overcome the challenges presented by international movement.

Keywords Anarchism Spain Wales internationalism translocalism migration

Introduction

Studies of turn-of-the-century anarchist transnationalism are often framed around elite figures and propagandists (Bantman 2006: 961–62), such as Pyotr Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta and Fernando Tarrida del Mármol. Many of these figures lived truly fascinating lives, moving regularly through major cities on both sides of the Atlantic, driven by a combination of devotion to the cause and a need to stay one step ahead of the law. Influenced by the broader shift towards transnational labour history, some recent studies of anarchist internationalism have sought to flesh out the experience of these figures more fully (Levy 2010) while others have shifted their focus away from these exceptional, and largely atypical, individuals altogether. Far more attention is now directed at the experience of ordinary anarchists, whose reasons for movement

were – like most migrants of the era – as much material as political, and who often had little time or resources to engage in extensive political activity (Goyens 2007; Bantman 2013). Of particular relevance for this study is the increasing number of works dedicated to transnational networks formed between radicals separated by geographic and political borders (Turcato 2007; Khuri-Makdisi 2010). The Spanish movement has not been entirely isolated from these historiographical trends. Anarchist migration and networks between Spain and Latin America have received some attention from scholars such as Moya (1998), Sánchez Cobos (2008) and Shaffer (2010), as have anarchist links between Spain and the Philippines (Anderson 2005). Nevertheless, the trans-Atlantic networks of Spanish anarchism remain understudied; a fact noted by Martha Ackelsberg elsewhere in this special issue. Likewise, the movement of Spanish anarchists within Europe has received little attention in recent scholarship.

While the turn to transnational anarchist history is welcome and important, some questions about the premises of such studies remain. Many transnational studies focus on the period when the international anarchist movement was at its strongest, from the late nineteenth century up to the outbreak of World War I, which overlapped with one of the great periods of globalization. Capital flowed into and out of nation states, borders were relatively fluid and movement of people was both an opportunity and a compulsion for many. This situation presented internationalists with an unprecedented context in which to spread their message to the working class of Europe and the Americas. There is a risk, however, that transnational studies portray cross-border activity as a straightforward and ultimately positive activity, obscuring the difficulties and failures experienced by those engaged in transnational radicalism. For many, migration was an undesired and distressing experience, and even those of an internationalist outlook often maintained parochial or nationalistic ideas and practices (Bantman

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2006: 961, 970). Likewise, states and borders continued to function in the increasingly globalized world, presenting huge and complex obstacles for those who wished to undermine them (Bantman and Altena 2015: 7–10).

A further problem lies in the concept of transnationalism itself. While the state should not be ignored, its defined political and geographic frontiers can be problematized, yet concentrating on activity across national borders does not necessarily achieve this. Instead, it can maintain the 'notion of the world as formed and ordered by a static framework of clearly distinguishable nation states' (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 374). If historians of transnationalism are interested in the negotiations between individuals and communities, flows of information, exchanges and the crossing of boundaries, they should acknowledge that these processes occurred within as well as between nations. Far from undermining the study of internationalism and arguing for a return to national meta-narratives, this perspective asks the scholar to disrupt the fixed image of the state, regarding international exchanges and networks as part of a process, which continued into national interiors and localities (Werner and Zimmerman 2006: 36–37, 43–44).

These ideas are encapsulated by the term 'translocalism', a concept often employed by scholars of historical and contemporary social movements to emphasize 'spatial interconnectedness not necessarily limited to national boundaries' (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 373–74). This perspective is particularly suited to bottom-up movements such as anarchism (Goyens 2009: 448), for whom the local arena was a site of action for international goals. By establishing connections within and beyond nations, anarchists could build networks that spanned the borders of the local, regional and national without the need for formal structures, such as a political party (Featherstone 2008: 3–4). Engaging with a translocal approach thus helps to refine the broader terms of transnationalism, drawing attention to local features of international processes, for example the value of

grounded or 'situated' actors in internationally focused movements (Brickell and Datta 2011: 3–4) and 'material flows […] the movement of styles, ideas, images and symbols' in the creation of international networks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 376–77).

This study uses the premises of translocalism to investigate one such 'material flow', between a group of Spanish anarchists based in the town of Dowlais in South Wales and their comrades in Spain. Links between anarchists in Spain and Wales were manifest through the movement's bottom-up publishing culture. Rather than a singular national paper – such as *El Socialista*, the organ of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) – the turn-of-the-century anarchist press consisted of an array of local periodicals, based in almost every town in Spain where there was a sizeable anarchist presence. Letters from Dowlais appeared across the whole of this publishing culture, in papers based in Madrid, Barcelona, Cádiz, La Coruña, Santander, Mahón, La Línea and Bilbao. By engaging in this network, Dowlais became a 'node' within the Spanish anarchist 'translocal imagination' (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 376–77; Cumbers et al. 2008: 184).

In the following sections these translocal connections will be explored, revealing a sense of the anarchist experience in Dowlais which differs from both the celebratory narrative of many anarchist transnational studies, as well as the main accounts of Spanish integration in Wales. Rather than willing and able internationalists, the anarchists of Dowlais portrayed themselves as isolated, and incapable of bridging the ideological and cultural distinctions between themselves, local workers and other Spaniards. Their translocal connections strengthened their solidarity with comrades in Spain, seemingly at the expense of local interaction, orientating the anarchists of Dowlais back to the movement they had left behind.

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The Spanish community of Dowlais and Abercrave

Dowlais is situated two miles north-east of Merthyr Tydfil, 24 miles north up the Taff valley from Cardiff. By the mid-nineteenth century, the town was the site of the one of the largest ironworks in Britain (Owen 1977: 35–36), which attracted migration to the area, initially from England and Ireland, and later from Eastern Europe, Italy and France (Williams 1926). Local–migrant and migrant–migrant relations were occasionally strained, as in nearby Tredegar, where riots in 1868 and 1911 contained elements of anti-Irish and anti-Jewish sentiments, respectively (Powell 2012), and in Merthyr itself in 1903, when Jewish and Irish workers became 'embroiled in altercations' (Álvarez Gila and Murray 2013: 11–12). Such episodes were rare, however, and most accounts of the period stress a general climate of tolerance and integration in South Wales by the beginning of the twentieth century (Rubinstein 1997).

Links between Dowlais and Spain originated in the movement of iron ore. The Dowlais Ironworks were one of the first in Britain to adopt the Bessemer process of steel-making, which required high grade iron ore, unavailable in South Wales but abundant in northern Spain. In 1873 the Ironworks' owners bought out the Orcenera Iron Company of Bilbao, which soon became their principle supplier of ore (Macho 1989: 1–4). In 1900 this flow of raw material and capital was joined by a flow of people. Conscription for the Boer War had left the works short of labour, prompting the company to recruit hundreds of labourers from Ireland (Dowlais Iron Company 1900) and experienced metalworkers from the Altos Hornos works in Bilbao. In May 1900 twelve Spanish workers sailed from Bilbao, their tickets paid for by the management on the understanding that they would repay the fare once they arrived (Álvarez

Gila and Murray 2013: 12–13). They were soon joined by larger groups of workers and their families, many of them taking up accommodation in a row of bungalows built by the works' management, officially named Alfonso Street but known locally as 'Spaniards Row' (Llewellyn and Watkins 2000: 8–12).

Few studies of the Spanish community in Dowlais discuss its earliest years in detail. This reflects the local source record,[1] which itself may be a sign of general indifference from locals, who regarded the newcomers as 'an anomaly' (Macho 1989: 16). This lack of sources makes it difficult to establish the exact size of the Spanish population. The initial wave of migration in 1900 is reported to have brought 'several hundred' Spaniards to Dowlais, although this is almost certainly an exaggeration (Álvarez Gila and Murray 2013: 12–13). A more reasonable estimate, based on inferences from other sources, would place the figure between 100 and 200, which then declined from 1903 to 1906 as more Spaniards left the area than arrived. The community then grew, following a sharp increase of Spanish migration to Dowlais in 1907, when once again the works' management actively recruited labour from northern Spain (Rosser 1974; Llewellyn and Watkins 2000: 19). As an increasing number of Spanish families began to settle in the area more permanently, some left Dowlais for Abercrave, a small non-conformist colliery town situated in the Upper Swansea valley, roughly twenty miles east of Merthyr. As in Dowlais, the Spanish community of Abercrave settled as a near-homogenous community, in this case based around Davies Street and the Brooklands (Francis and Smith 1980: 11).

By 1911 census reports show 264 Spaniards living in and around Dowlais, many of them based in cramped, unhygienic

[1] Casimira Dueñas was one the few interviewees of the South Wales Coalfields oral history project to remember the Spanish community at this time. Her positive recollections of Dowlais are contrasted with her family's initial difficulties in Abercrave, where they moved in 1908 (see Dueñas and Dueñas 1972).

Conference of Historical Geographers (London, 2015) and the Bristol Radical History Group.

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— (1912), 'Inglaterra,' 14 December, *El Látigo*, p.4 (Baracaldo).
— (1915a), 'A los grupos anarquistas de lengua española,' 10 March, *Tierra y Libertad*, p.3 (Barcelona).
— (1915b), 'Contestando,' 21 April, *Tierra y Libertad*, p.2 (Barcelona).
— (1915c), 'El proletariado ante la Guerra: Congreso Internacional del Ferrol,' 13 May, *Soldaridad Obrera*, pp.1–2 (Barcelona).

appeared to be little scope to develop the everyday, local interactions necessary to build an anarchist presence in the town. These difficulties can help to explain why numerous attempts to fashion an international anarchist organization failed in this period (Bantman 2006: 962–69). Outside large, cosmopolitan centres, the experience of anarchist transnationalism was localized, and dependent on the ability and willingness of self-declared internationalists to forge lasting bonds across boundaries of geography, culture and politics. To show that the Spanish anarchists of Dowlais found these boundaries insurmountable is not a criticism, nor a judgement on their commitment to the cause; rather, it is to assist in our understanding of why a period of great international movement did not necessarily result in dramatic episodes of anarchist internationalism. Instead, the turn of the century saw a great many informal, fluid international connections between anarchists. These bonds were conducive enough to sustain a remarkable series of overlapping networks of movement and communication, but alone were not enough to transform traditions and outlooks – including those of the anarchist movement in Spain – which remained largely rooted in national, regional and local experiences.

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houses in streets to the north of the main ironworks (Cross Street, Brecon Street, Erins Row and Union Street).[2] While this official figure may understate the true size of the Spanish population, it would fit the perception given in a number of testimonies of high initial migration (1900–02), followed by a drop (1903–06), and a second wave of movement (1907–11), which may not have been drastically larger than the first, but was ultimately more permanent. Thus, at best one can estimate that a community of around 200 Spaniards lived in Dowlais between 1900 and 1915, although at any given point may have been considerably lower or higher.

Most studies of the Spanish migration in South Wales focus on the period from 1907 onwards, making use of the oral histories conducted with former residents of Dowlais and Abercrave in the 1970s (See Beamish 1969; Macho et al. n.d.; Watkins 1972; Evans 1972; Fernández n.d.; Macho *c.* 1985). These testimonies depict a pattern of initial difficulties and occasional hostility between local and migrant communities, followed by eventual assimilation. Many point to the shops selling Spanish food and the willingness of some Spaniards to join Protestant churches as signs of growing integration. Barriers of language and culture were also gradually eroded, often through the bilingual abilities of the children of Spanish families who attended local schools. Spaniards also learned English and Welsh at the workplace, and shared snippets of their own language (often swear words) in exchange (Macho 1989: 31–55).

One of the strongest memories of the Spanish workers was their commitment to unionism: they were 'good union men', 'never behind on their dues' and always voted for socialist candidates in union elections and ballots. The arrival of Spanish workers in South Wales coincided with an increasing politi-

[2] The accident books of the Ironworks reveals both the increase of Spanish workers in 1907 and the location of their housing (see Dowlais Iron Company 1905–1915).

cization in the region, evident in the growing criticism of the established leadership of the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) from its grassroots (Williams 1996). At the forefront of this development was the SWMF's Unofficial Reform Committee (URC) and its pamphlet *The Miners' Next Step* (1912), which challenged the federation's stated goal of nationalization, in favour of a syndicalist model of worker-control of the mines (Egan 1996). These developments are often seen as the origins of the radicalization of the coalfields over the following decade, yet militants in 1920s Abercrave recall that their 'sharpened consciousness' was due more to their 'exposure' to socialism and anarcho-syndicalism from their Spanish comrades than the URC (Francis and Smith 1980: 13). The well-established Spanish presence in these communities is also seen as a key factor in explaining the high number of South Walian volunteers to the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War (Francis 1984).

It is difficult to establish the exact size of the Spanish anarchist group in Dowlais. Added to the problems stemming from a lack of sources and the transience of most migrants, which apply to the whole Spanish community, the fluid, porous nature of anarchism as a political identity complicates judgements on who exactly belonged to the group. If engagement with the movement's press and solidarity campaigns are an indicator of anarchist identity, then at times a substantial proportion – perhaps 20–25 per cent – of the Spaniards in Dowlais were anarchists.[3] Yet this is too generous a reading. Collections for campaigns, for example, almost certainly included individuals who may have agreed with the cause at hand, but otherwise had little engagement with the movement. At the other extreme, if only those who wrote to the movement's press, distributed pro-

[3] For example, if the census figure of 264 Spaniards in Merthyr in 1911 is correct, at least 20 per cent of this population contributed to a campaign led by *Solidaridad Obrera* (Gijón) in 1910 (no. 24).

Conclusions

In their own words, the first fifteen years of the anarchist community in Dowlais were isolating and miserable, and offered little hope for the progression of their cause. Recognizing these difficulties helps to undermine the image of the anarchist movement as one of exceptional figures, whose commitment and zeal set them apart from their contemporaries on the left. Instead, the anarchist experience in Dowlais was one of dislocation, an experience common to many, if not most, migrants of the early twentieth century. Their movement was not one of tours and speeches to packed crowds through the anarchist centres of Europe, but of economically driven migration, often followed by return to Spain, or frustration at their inability to leave.

Through the periodical press, the anarchists of Dowlais engaged in a network of material and ideological exchange across international boundaries. Yet there is little evidence that this process extended beyond the confines of the movement and into truly 'internationalist' activity. The translocal bonds maintained by the press helped to maintain a distinctly anarchist identity, based upon the ideas and practices of the movement in Spain, from which the Dowlais group was separated. Judging from the reports they sent back home, these connections came at the expense of interactions with the local community and reinforced political divisions between Spanish migrants. The subsequent isolation conveyed by the anarchists of Dowlais, added to the broader difficulties experienced by the whole Spanish community, appears to have overwhelmed the potential for cross-community solidarity and organization (compare with Chalcraft 2006).

The Spanish anarchist experience in Dowlais demonstrates how the internationalism at the core of anarchist ideology jarred with the day-to-day struggles of migration. Dowlais was not 'fertile terrain' for anarchist initiatives, as there

15). In later years the 'rich brew' of influences in the area may have aided the development of syndicalism in Wales, helping to link the anarchist ideas brought from Spain and local traditions of grassroots organization (Egan 1996: 28). Esteban, at least, clearly made an impression in Abercrave, and by the 1920s was seen as an important figure in the town's unions and general political make-up (Francis and Smith 1980: 11–12; Heath 2011). Yet the accounts from 1907 to 1915, like those of 1900–07, reveal that if anarchist ideas did eventually influence their Welsh counterparts, this was a long and highly challenging development.

While anarchist ideas did influence the development of syndicalism in South Wales prior to World War I, there is little documented evidence which suggests that this process was instigated by Spanish migration; indeed, most sources written by Spanish anarchists themselves imply that little interaction took place with the local community until at least 1915. The development of these ideas in Britain clearly owed a debt to international thinkers and activists, as well as organizations such as the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and later the American International Workers of the World (IWW) (Mates 2013: 42–44) whose leading figure Bill Haywood visited South Wales in 1910 (Egan 1996: 15). More local influences will also have played a role. The Welsh anarchist Sam Mainwaring, born 25 miles south-west of Dowlais in Neath, was an early and ardent advocate of syndicalism, and was close friend of both the Italian anarchist exile Errico Malatesta and Tarrida del Mármol, with whom he launched the short-lived periodical *The General Strike* in 1903. Tarrida was himself an influential figure in the British movement and wrote frequently for the anarchist periodical *Freedom*. Yet these connections were forged in London, between high-profile theorists and propagandists, and not in the Welsh Valleys.

paganda, and organized unions and meetings – in short, highly visible activists and propagandists, known within the Spanish movement as *obreros conscientes* – can be seen as members of the movement, then at best there were between four and ten anarchists in Dowlais at any given time.

Such difficulties in pinning down the exact size of anarchist support applied on a much larger scale in Spain. In towns where anarchism was present but far from hegemonic amongst the working class, as in Dowlais, one can estimate that around 10 per cent of the population sympathized with the movement; a figure which could swell during periods of unrest or intense campaigning and shrink to a small core during periods of inactivity and repression. Although imperfect, this remains the most satisfactory way of estimating the strength of anarchism in an area such as Dowlais, given the lack of harder evidence such as membership figures and the 'elastic' nature of the movement's support (Bar 1983: 230–33).

The fact that a notable part of the Spanish community in South Wales identified as anarchists has made little impression in local historical records. One of the very few comments regarding anarchists in Abercrave suggests that they were more transient than other migrants, and unwilling to fully commit themselves to work at the pits. Once they had earned enough for their weekly keep they declared that they had been 'exploited enough' and did not turn up to work, drawing criticism from figureheads in the Spanish community (see Leandro Macho, in Macho et al. n.d.). The suggestion that anarchists were less inclined to settle may explain their absence from the historical record, unlike the accounts left by the relatives of Spaniards who remained in the area, who tend to stress the positive processes of integration which marked their family history. It is also possible that the Welsh community were not aware of, or did not care about, the distinctions in the politics of Spanish socialists and anarchists.

Despite gaps in local sources, the anarchist experience of the years 1900–15 can be approached through an examination of the letters sent from Dowlais to the movement's press in Spain. While they provide an imperfect and often conflicting account, these sources also offer a rare insight into the migrant community in Dowlais from the perspective of those who identified as anarchists, which has concerned few historians.[4] They reveal how anarchist migrants wished to portray their experience back to the movement in Spain, as well as evidence of the networks of communication which situated Dowlais as an important locality within the movement.

The Dowlais 'Node', 1900–07

Sustained communication between the Spanish anarchist press and Dowlais began in early 1901. One of the earliest communiques from the area appeared in the *Suplemento a la Revista Blanca* (Madrid; hereafter *Suplemento*), which published the names of 35 Spaniards who had contributed to a strike fund for workers in Gijón (Anon. 1901a).[5] A month later, a further collection was sent to Gijón, and in June a larger collection was made for imprisoned workers in Barcelona (Anon. 1901b; 1901c). In Spain such collections they were often made at the workplace and at social events, where a collection plate would be passed around, and the total wired over to a periodical (Herrerín López 2013: 166). These collections regularly took place in Dowlais over the following years. In 1910, for example, over 50 individuals sent over their contributions for a fund to cover the

[4] One notable exception to this is Heath (2011).

[5] It was not only the anarchists in Dowlais who made such collections; a constant stream of money was sent from the area to Spain for a variety of causes, which continued into the 1930s when support was sent for participants in the Asturian uprising and the Republican war effort during Civil War (Francis and Smith 1980: 350–70).

taking place within the Dowlais anarchist group, most significantly in the identity of its new correspondent – a 'Marcus Harris', possibly Marks Harris, a Russian draper who was naturalized as a British citizen in Merthyr in 1911 (Harris 1911). If this was Marks, he would not have been the only Eastern European to have had relations with the anarchist group; indeed, the original 'Seccion Varía' included an 'Edmundo Kaminski', while names such as 'Un Ruso' occasionally appeared as contributors to solidarity campaigns. Unfortunately, little else was published about Harris in the anarchist press, except that his given address was on Upper Union Street, where many of the Spanish community also lived. His prominent role within the anarchist group may suggest that some of the boundaries of culture and politics were being eroded in Dowlais, which can also be inferred by the handful of English and Welsh names – such as 'William Evans' and 'Jhon Burns' [*sic*] – which began to appear in collection lists. Yet these were the few exceptions rather than the rule, as the membership of the anarchist groups in South Wales remained overwhelmingly Spanish (Anon. 1910b).

The few lengthier reports of this period suggest that the attitude of the anarchists towards the political climate in Wales had hardly changed. A report from Esteban to the Basque periodical *El Látigo* (Esteban 1912), for example, revealed that his views on British unions were as scathing as García's: they were run by bureaucrats who extorted and ignored their members. His views were shared by Francisco Torres Segado, who wrote an open letter to the Spaniards of Dowlais in 1914, calling for the formation of a Spanish-speaking union in response to the well-known 'vices and defects' of local organizations (Torres Segado 1914). Hostility towards traditional labour organization may suggest a growing commonality with sections of the working class in Wales, where the Independent Labour Party and union lodges were articulating similar grievances against their established political and union leadership (Tanner 2003: 213–

gold', which would fall into their pockets. In truth, Dowlais was a site of exploitation and misery, as bad as Spain and 'the rest of the world' (Ramos 1907).

As before, a minority within this wave of migration identified as anarchists. Many of the practices identified in 1900–07 continued into this period – the anarchists made collections, held meetings in protest against the Spanish state, and formed workers' groups based upon anarchist principles of organization (Ocaña 1909). They also maintained strong connections to the Spanish anarchist press. In the period 1909–19, for example, Dowlais was referred to 77 times in *Tierra y Libertad*, the third highest of any of the 600 international towns and cities in contact with the paper, behind only Paris and Buenos Aires. If taken together with Abercrave (37 references), the anarchists in South Wales received more notices in this paper than any other locality in the world (Zambrana 2009: 915–32).

García's role as correspondent for the area was taken up by new figures. In Abercrave this was Melchor Esteban – the son of Modesto, one of the earliest migrants to Dowlais – who worked as a coal hewer in the international pit (Heath 2011; Álvarez Gila and Murray 2013: 14). Esteban received a wide range of the movement's papers and pamphlets, and later formed a propaganda group which also included Nicolas Dueñas, another son of one of the first migrants of 1900 (Anon. 1912; Macho 1989: 55–56). This Abercrave group had followed the example of the anarchists in Dowlais, who had reformed the 'Sección Varía' into the 'Apoyo' group in 1907 (Anon. 1907), which was renamed as 'Revindicación' in 1910 (Anon. 1910a). Numerous other Spanish anarchist groups formed in both towns, including 'Pro-Prensa' – formed specifically to aid the spread of anarchist propaganda – 'Ni dogmas ni sistemas' and 'Ferrer', all three of which affiliated to the El Ferrol anarchist peace congress in 1915 (Anon. 1915a, 1915b and 1915c).

Longer reports from South Wales were far less common in this period. Nevertheless, it appears that some changes were

legal costs of a *gijonés* anarchist who had shot and wounded a local employer ((Anon. 1910b).

The first substantial report from Dowlais informed the Spanish movement that a bi-lingual conference had taken place in the town on 5 August 1901. Amongst the speakers were the Spanish Cuban exile Fernando Tarrida del Marmól and the Welsh anarchist Sam Mainwaring, both of whom used their platform to advocate anarchist models of labour organization, while attacking the existing local unions as 'defective' (Manubens 1901; Heath 2011).

The Spaniards present were reportedly so inspired that they immediately formed a 'Sección Varía' (general trades union) and affiliated to the newly formed anarchist labour federation in Spain (Federación Regional de Sociedades de Resistencia de la Región España: FSORE). The Dowlais group remained a part of this organization for at least two more years (Anon. 1903b). Although the FSORE achieved little of note and was soon abandoned by most anarchist groups in Spain, it did provide a sense of identity to its members, mainly because it was distinct from the socialist national union (Unión General de Trabajadores [UGT]), which claimed a similar level of affiliates across Spain. By signing up to the FSORE, the Dowlais section were thus making an active choice to align with a particular set of strategies and objectives for labour organization, distinct from both British unionism and the UGT.

Shortly afterwards there was an upsurge in communication between Dowlais and Spain, prompted by the arrival of the prominent anarchist publisher, Vicente García. In Spain, García had edited the paper *El Combate*, based in Bilbao in 1891, and was the main correspondent from the Basque region for most anarchist papers. In 1900 he had set up and run a small anarchist free school in Sestao, although this was closed shortly afterwards by the local authorities (Estebaranz 2011: 37). Although his reasons for leaving Spain are unclear, there is a suspicion that he was placed under police surveillance in early

1901, and left some time around July (V. García 1901). Once in Dowlais, García soon established himself as a key correspondent for the *Suplemento*, *La Protesta* (La Línea) and *Germinal* (La Coruña), and inspired others in the anarchist circle to follow his example. He also arranged and chaired meetings, such as a commemoration of the execution of the Haymarket martyrs, held at the Holly Bush Hotel on 9 November 1901 (V. García 1901b).

While a number of the Spanish community may have identified as anarchists prior to García's arrival, it was only after this point that the town became fully embedded into the movement's print network. His role became akin to that of a translocal 'imagineer', a term used to describe figures who 'facilitate communication and information flows between movements and […] grassroots communities', helping to 'embody the networks in which they work […] represent[ing] the connective tissue across geographical space' (Cumbers et al. 2008: 196). García's high standing in the anarchist press established his position as the figurehead of the Dowlais group, making him an elite figure. Yet unlike his comrades in London and Paris, García was not a theorist or touring orator, and was based far from the main exile 'hubs' of the international movement. His status was informal and localized (Cumbers et al. 2008: 188–89), and was manifest more as a facilitator of communication than an instigator for action.

From this point onwards, information flowed out of Dowlais while anarchist print flowed in, channelled in both directions through the 'node' of García. Papers were sent to Dowlais from every anarchist publishing house in Spain, from Madrid to Barcelona, Valencia to Cádiz, La Línea, Mahón, Santander and Valladolid. The group were often amongst the first in the movement to subscribe to new publications and made numerous bulk requests for pamphlets and other forms of propaganda. Money also flowed between Dowlais and publishing groups in Spain. As well as one-off collections,

ten days after their arrival in the town.[8] When writing about this loss, García criticized a local Catholic priest, who had visited his home prior to Fraternidad's funeral to berate the family for letting her die unbaptized (Anon. 1901d; V. García 1901b).

A common response to the hardships in Dowlais was to return to Spain. When ten Spaniards returned to Spain in 1902 the anarchist press claimed that the only reason the figure was not higher was because their comrades could not afford the passage fare (Anon. 1902a). Another option was further migration. While most migrants from Spain at this time stayed within a 'Latin' international labour market (Sánchez Alonso 2000: 731) those in Dowlais had entered into a system orientated around the British Empire. Rather than Argentina or Cuba, migrants who had already made the step to Britain saw prospects for further migration in places such as Australia and Canada (Williams 1926: 151). García was one of those tempted to move to Canada, particularly after local unions did nothing in response to pay-cuts in the works in late 1901 (Calpe 1901b). In the event García stayed in the town until 1906, when he left for Bordeaux, before moving to London six years later, where he stayed until his death in 1930 (Íniguez 2001: 250).

Spanish anarchism in Dowlais, 1907–15

Those anarchists who remained in Dowlais were present during the second major wave of Spanish migration to the town, which began in 1907. Many earlier migrants attempted to dissuade their comrades from joining them in Wales. F. Ramos, for example, wrote to *Tierra y Libertad* in September 1907 to ridicule those Spaniards who believed that in Dowlais 'the ham hangs from the trees' and 'iron was transformed into

[8] A year later García had another daughter (his fourth in total) whom he also named Fraternidad, who died in London aged 15 (Anon. 1902b; F. García 1902 and 1918).

work he received no assistance from the socialists, whose 'love of money' and bureaucracy made them blind to the true meaning of solidarity, and culpable for perpetuating the 'Malthusian' misery in Dowlais. In contrast, the 'moral and altruistic' anarchists of the town had helped him return to his family in Sestao (Fernández 1902). This letter highlights the translocal processes that linked migration and the anarchist press. Fernández had moved almost 600 miles to Dowlais for work, and made the same trip back less than a year later. From there he had written to a paper based in La Línea, a further 508 miles south of Sestao, which he had addressed to 'The Spaniards in Dowlais' who subscribed to the paper. A single story of political division had thus taken shape across three localities, relating the experience of migration through the medium of print across a journey of 2000 miles.

The anarchists of Dowlais also used the press to give a sense of their personal difficulties in Wales. Some of their concerns were rather prosaic, such as a dislike for the weather and food. Housing was also an issue for one correspondent, who made the (slightly unbelievable) claim that Spaniards were forced to pay twice as much in rent as the 'English [*sic.*]', because Jewish landlords in the area resented the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 (Calpe 1902a). They also suffered – as did every community in Merthyr – from diseases brought by the failures of public sanitation to match the borough's rapid industrialization (Beresford 2006: 2–31). At least three children of the anarchist group died at a young age, including Eduardo del Mazo, the 3-year-old son of the local anarchist Juan. Eduardo's funeral was paid for by members of the 'Sección Varía' and was conducted 'without religion' (Calpe 1902a). Vicente García also lost his daughter, Fraternidad, who contracted diphtheria only

regular payments were sent to the editors of periodicals such as Federico Urales (founder of *La Revista Blanca* and *Tierra y Libertad*) via the Dowlais branch of Lloyd's Bank (Álvarez Gila and Murray 2013: 14).

In December 1904 García offered to set up a new publication in Wales. Although this plan was never realized, that it was even suggested is telling of the strength of connections established between Dowlais and Spain. The proposed paper would circumvent the increasingly restrictive publishing climate in Spain,[6] providing the movement with a base from which to maintain its networks of communication. Had press restrictions continued in Spain, it is possible that the main publication of the movement would not have been based in Madrid or Barcelona, but on Gellifaelog Road in Dowlais, in view of the Ironworks which had brought García and his compatriots to the area (Anon. 1903a; V. García 1904).

The anarchist experience in Dowlais

As well as revealing the workings of anarchist translocalism, the letters from Dowlais can help to explain the 'difficult' early years of the Spanish community, as seen through an anarchist lens. The anarchists in the town appeared to have felt isolated, not only because of the cultural barriers between themselves and the local community – as is suggested in the few broader accounts of this period – but also because of their political differences with both Welsh and Spanish workers.

For anarchist correspondents, Dowlais was a centre of 'ignorance' in regards to political and labour organization. In September 1901 Avila Calpe (almost certainly García writing under a pseudonym) wrote to *La Protesta* to deride local labour activism, stating that the 'worker of the country of

[6] The number of anarchist publications in Spain halved from 1905 to 1907, following a succession of terrorist attacks.

Wales finds himself behind that of Vizcaya [and is] completely ignorant of his rights', evidenced by their willingness to compromise with employers (Calpe 1901a). This was one of many reports from Dowlais to Spain which stressed the weakness of local unionism. British unions were powerful on paper – they reported to their comrades in Spain – but only because they collected extortionate dues from their members and did nothing to help them (Calpe 1902b). These critiques of British unionism demonstrate how turn-of-the-century anarchists were far from 'pre-' or 'anti-modern' in their analysis of labour organization. If anarchism was an anomaly amongst twentieth-century models of collective action, one may expect their reaction to British unionism to be one of incomprehension, rather than contempt. Their comments were also markedly similar to those taken up by the grass-roots of the SWMF – regarded as a crucial moment in the modernization of the organization – almost a decade later (Williams 1996: 125). Neither anarchist nor the SWMF radicals called for an abolition of labour organization, rather they considered existing unions as in need of radical overhaul into bodies which genuinely reflected the interests of the working class. Despite these similarities, the anarchists in Dowlais did not appear to be aware of changes within South Walian unionism, and gave no indication that their own ideas had gained traction in the area. Two years of living and working in Dowlais did little to alter García's initial impression of Welsh workers: they were fools, duped by their union leaders ('the lackeys of the bourgeoisie') because they were 'drunk and stupid' and thought of nothing other than the 'bar and (Calpe 1902b; V. García 1903).[7]

[7] The anarchist reports were seemingly unaware of the revival of non-conformity in Wales through this period (Williams 1952), or saw little significance in it.

Cultural differences, particularly those of language, are challenging for most migrant communities. It is not surprising that the anarchist community in Dowlais felt estranged from those around them, nor that there was no great confluence of ideology between the migrants and locals. Evidencing these problems does not contradict the broader narrative of the Spanish experience in Dowlais and Abercrave, but it does suggest that the specific ideas of anarchism accentuated problems faced by all Spaniards in the town. The 'bar and Church', for example, are often cited as sites where interactions between the Spanish and Welsh community flourished. If, as reported, the anarchists within the Spanish community abstained from the 'vices' of religion and alcohol, they may have denied themselves access to key sites of sociability where international interactions could have taken place. This may be seen as a stifling influence of the Spanish anarchist tradition, which was so ideologically hostile to alcohol and, above all, religion, that its supporters in Dowlais were unable to put aside critiques of cultural practices which may otherwise have helped foster cross-community labour activity.

There is a sense that the anarchists in Dowlais saw themselves as a minority within a minority, most evident in their discussions of Spanish socialists in Wales. As well as the FSORE-affiliated 'Sección Varía', Dowlais was home to a Spanish socialist association ('Fondos', made up of around 30 Spaniards in 1902) and later a branch of the PSOE (Macho 1989: 23–24). As in their critiques of Welsh unionists, the anarchists in Dowlais stressed the 'ignorance' of their socialist compatriots, who doggedly followed a hierarchical model of labour organization and parliamentary, reformist tactics (Calpe 1901b; V. García 1913). One letter from Jorge Fernández in 1902 reported that the Spaniards in Dowlais were unable to live as a 'colony of brothers', and had split into factions that reflected the divisions in the workers' movement in Spain. When illness forced Fernández out of