

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# *Gypsy Anarchism*

**Navigating Ethnic and Political Identities**

Maria Sierra & Juan Pro

Maria Sierra & Juan Pro

*Gypsy Anarchism*

**Navigating Ethnic and Political Identities**

September 28, 2022

*European History Quarterly* Volume 52, Issue 4, pp. 593–612, DOI:

10.1177/02656914221097011

Corresponding author: Maria Sierra, Departamento de Historia Contemporanea, Facultad de Geografia e Historia Universidad de Sevilla, C/ Dona Maria de Padilla, s/n 41004 — Sevilla, Spain.

E-mail: [msierra@us.es](mailto:msierra@us.es)

Open access CC BY-NC 4.0

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**

September 28, 2022



## Contents

Abstract . . . . .	5
Introduction . . . . .	5
Anarchist Gitanos: Participants in the Interwar Labour Movement . . . . .	10
Nomadic Anarchists and ‘Gypsies’ by Choice . . . . .	22
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	33



borders that gradually started to close between the final decades of the nineteenth century and the Second World War.

At this point, it is obvious that neither being an anarchist nor being Roma meant the same thing to interwar Spanish Gitano workers as it did to those other activists who opted for 'Gypsy' identities that they chose for themselves. But it should be acknowledged that neither alternative was strictly speaking a subaltern. So perhaps we could go beyond the dilemmas surrounding cultural appropriation to ask ourselves about the possibility of considering identities — including racially and/or ethnically defined identities — as useful political artefacts to confront those views that understand them as a 'reality' written in the genes and therefore inherited at birth. As we well know, this was the Nazi view, as they sorted the Romani population into various degrees of biological miscegenation; no one entered or left the Zigeunerlager voluntarily, of course. On the other hand, studying the multiple options available in the past for combining a 'Gypsy'-Roma and anarchist identity recovers the agency of historical subjects who fought Nazism, while at the same time allowing us to understand ethno-racial identities as spaces for (elective) political struggle.

## Abstract

One of the many stereotypes included in the generally negative — occasionally Romantic — representations and discourses that have burdened the Romani people is the alleged existence of a natural link between the 'Gypsy' way of life and anarchism. This article studies the extent of an actual historical relationship between anarchism as a political worldview and the 'Gypsy'-Roma ethnic status beyond reductionist stereotypes. It investigates, on the one hand, the agency of Romani subjects in the labour movement and anarchism by means of a case study of Spain in the interwar years, and, on the other, it examines the cases of a number of European emigrants who chose to closely link anarchism as a political option to a Romani identity in their struggle against capitalism and fascism. Both sets of case studies are used to reflect on the political nature of racial-ethnic identity constructions, to question the dilemmas of cultural appropriation and to propose a dense analysis that reveals the historicity of identities of this type.

## Introduction

The link between anarchism and the 'Gypsies' is a commonplace in modern Western culture. While anarchists have on occasion been pejoratively branded 'Gypsies', the groups known as 'Gypsies' by majority society have, in turn, often been associated with anarchy and anarchism. This popular stereotype has also been embraced by scholars and combined with a number of arguments: the allegedly anarchic anthropology of the Roma people, their innate resistance and defiance in the face of imposed law or authority, an irrepressible propensity for freedom, the absence of strong lead-

ership or political institutions, the parallel inability to be organized in a disciplined way, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

As with any well-established stereotype, the one linking ‘Gypsies’ to anarchism is constructed from a few negative images that stigmatize the group as a whole superimposed on other rather Romantic ones that tend to idealize them. Representations forged in this manner have an internal complexity that enables them to become firmly embedded in the consciousness of the majority, and even to penetrate the minority group thus interpellated. Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia, for example, the first *Gitano* (‘Gypsy’) to take a seat as a member of the Spanish Parliament (1977), reflected on this issue, stating: ‘It is said of us that we are anarchic and there is a lot of truth in that’ but then qualified his comment by saying that this relationship did not refer to anarchism in the strict political sense (he was a member of the Socialist Party), but that it was true in as much as ‘we may feel close to anarchism in view of the model of capitalist society that we live in’ and ‘[we are] unconditional supporters of freedom’.<sup>2</sup>

The reductionist link between the Roma people and anarchism persists today, attributing to the former an innate collective propensity for the latter. The idea is frequently found with neg-

---

<sup>1</sup> Here we use the terms Roma (Romani) to refer to persons and groups that have historically been identified in various majority languages by the names ‘Gypsy’, ‘Zingaro’, ‘Tzigane’, ‘Zigeuner’, ‘Gitano’ (or related administrative categories such as ‘Traveller’ or ‘Nomad’). While we are aware of the pejorative content and stigmatizing effect of these historical terms, we use them here nevertheless when quoting and analyzing the discourses being studied, and whenever they are (self-)identifications by the historical subjects themselves. In this latter context, we also use the binomial ‘Gypsy’-Roma when both terms are combined in certain representations. Finally, the term used in Spanish, *Gitano*, also appears as a self-identification, without inverted commas, because apart from being a historical name, the interpellated community has made it a proper noun defended with identitarian pride.

<sup>2</sup> Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia, ‘Politica social gitana’, *Documentation Social. Revista de Estudios Sociologicos y de Sociologi’a aplicada*, No. 41 (1980), 129–45, quotations on 133 and 136.

in majority society that could be used as a pretext for dissidents to gain visibility in public space.

Being ‘Gypsy’-Roma, therefore, was just one ingredient for anarchist activists. It could be activated or deactivated, disclosed personally or by one’s enemies, depending on the circumstances. The key to this fluidity and its capacity for hybridization lies in the cultural character of Romani identity: there may well be an element of hereditary transmission, but ultimately it is a human construction in which the will intervenes, rather than genetic inheritance, which, in most cases, turns out to be doubtful and full of blends and intermixtures.

This last conclusion leads to an even more compelling political reading based on an analysis of the immigrant anarchists who chose their Romani identity, understood as an accelerator of their aspiration for social change. The Romanian-American activists Konrad Bercovici and Romany Marie both articulated a Romani identity in their discourse and practices that was not determined by their families of origin, although both grew up in environments where coexistence with Roma was exceptionally close; for them, that identity referred above all to a way of life, and cultural practices that could come from the family or be acquired as a choice. For the Italian anarchist Leda Rafanelli, regardless of whether or not her grandfather was a Zingaro, this ‘Gypsy’ way of life represented the most complete opportunity for achieving the ideal of individual freedom, mobile identity, personal self-determination, and the rejection of state authority and national borders. In the cafes, newspapers, publishing houses and schools that they all chose as spaces for staging their proposals, the anarchist ideal served as a brilliant utopia of the future, while Romani culture, presented as an example to imitate, complemented it as a foretaste of a libertarian way of life. The underlying desire in the association was to use anarchism and ‘Gypsiness’ as a single tool to cut through the knot of racial identities and insurmountable national

of Romani origin participated in the anarchist movement, using anarcho-syndicalist organizations to break into public space calling for ideals of freedom and social equality. Two important clarifications should immediately be made: first, it should be borne in mind that class identity was dominant in this militancy, and that belonging to the Roma people was just another element that did not contradict the former; second, it should be noted that militancy in anarcho-syndicalism was achieved with a degree of commitment, efficiency and discipline that was comparable to, if not greater than, that of other non-militant Roma.

Both points are pertinent in the case of Mariano R. Vazquez, who never publicly alluded to his Romani status, but rather arrived at anarchism and campaigned in its organizations strictly as a worker. His effectiveness as the head of the CNT, one of the largest mass anarchist organizations in Europe, contrasts with the negative stereotypes of laziness, ignorance and dishonesty that his opponents used to attack him, launching unjustified criticisms based on prejudice that highlighted that he was a Gitano in order to discredit him.

The same points apply to the career of the revolutionary artist Helios Gomez, which went from anarchism to communism and back again. In the emergence of his class consciousness, he took his dual identity as worker and Gitano (or Andalusian-Gitano) as a given, without needing to highlight or hide the Romani element. He began to use it as an argument only after a certain point, probably when he discovered that it was useful in the struggle against fascism; if the Roma were persecuted by the Nazi regime, this identity had to be vindicated as a victimized one. Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, defeated as an anti-fascist fighter, his Gitano identity became his focus, the last refuge for his rebelliousness in the prisons of Franco's regime. As ethnic identity gained prominence at the expense of class identity, the fact that Gomez was a graphic artist played a fundamental role in this process, since the association between Gitanos and art was another of the prevailing stereotypes

active connotations in the media and political space. An MP in the United Kingdom, for example, recently stated that Scottish 'Gypsy/Travellers' 'are complete anarchists' and so obviously 'they are not welcome'. The ultranationalist Bulgarian media, campaigning vigorously against the so-called 'Gypsy Menace', exposed, even more vehemently, a direct link to organized anarchism, for example in a newspaper piece titled 'Most Authentic Anarchists at Home'.<sup>3</sup> It is also true though that we find the same stereotype in current discourse with positive connotations; it sometimes occurs in statements from empathetic positions in the academic media and other cultural spaces that – ironically – emphasize the cliché. The resulting image is equally reductionist and erroneous, despite the good intentions. To state, for example, that the memoir of Walter Winter, an Auschwitz survivor 'reveals that, throughout the centuries, despite the persecution and attempts at annihilation, the Romanies have maintained their loyalty to their tradition, the anarchist tradition' is to ignore the fact that the Winter family was well established in German society through their relationships with neighbours, membership of professional trade associations, and participation in the town's sports teams and military service, as Walter Winter himself stressed, but which Nazism denied them.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Reported respectively in Sarah Cemly et al., *Inequalities Experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities: A Review* (Manchester 2009), 2011, [https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research\\_report\\_12inequalities\\_experienced\\_by\\_gypsy\\_and\\_traveller\\_communities\\_a\\_review.pdf](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research_report_12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf); and Georgia Efremova, 'Integralist Narratives and Redemptive Anti-Gypsy Politics in Bulgaria', in Michel Stewart, ed., *The Gypsy 'Menace': Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London 2012), 43–66, quote at 60.

<sup>4</sup> The opinion in Ferda Asya, 'Unveiling the Origin of the Romani Holocaust: The Anarchist Tradition in *Winter Time* by Walter Winter', in Valentina Glajar and Domnica Radulescu, eds, *European Literature and Culture* (New York 2008), 145–59. The reference work, Walter Winter, *Winter Time: Memoirs of a German Sinto Who Survived Auschwitz* (Hatfield 2004) (original edition in German *WinterZeit*, 1999).

This article interrogates this constantly asserted relationship. Starting from the assumption that every stereotype reduces, and consequently masks, complex social phenomena, our aim is to ask whether there was a historical relationship between anarchism as a political worldview and a ‘Gypsy’-Roma status as an ethnic label, exploring the reasons behind this relationship in its various historical contexts. We do this via an analysis of a number of case studies, which are uneven in their documentary possibilities and meaning, but have been selected with two objectives in mind. Firstly, to show the agency of subjects in the dual combination being analyzed, in order to go beyond the usual view that places the ‘Gypsies’-Roma in a passive role, either as the object of alterity in constructions that disparage both anarchism and Romani identity, or as objects of inspiration in the idealizations of Romantics and anarchophiles. Our study uncovers political spaces where Romani political self-consciousness and agency can be established: as a set of organized spaces, such as unions, educational initiatives, press and other publications, within the anarchist movement. The second aim is to compare this type of Roma agency with the political action of other anarchists who presented themselves as ‘Gypsies’, which introduces us to the problems of racial passing and cultural appropriation. From here, we want to reflect on ethnic identities as naturalized representations that have erased the processes of sociocultural construction: we start from the assumption that the ‘Gypsy’ label is a historical construction and, consequently, we believe that a deep analysis of specific cases makes the plurality of intersections and intentions visible.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> We understand the notion of identity as an open process of construction of a representation (individual and collective) and as a sense of belonging, in which both the subjects that are the object of the representation and ‘external’ observers are participants, using different political and cultural devices. Identity and alterity overlap in this process (Joep Leerssen, ‘Identity/Alterity/Hybridity’, in Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, eds, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey* (Amsterdam 2007), 335–42). Ethnic-type identities, which are socially fabricated by actors with

generation for herself that contrasted with the European canon. In contrast to white beauty and the idea of racial purity, her novels praised the beauty of negritude (the dark- and olive-skinned). In her memoirs, she proudly gave herself a dark skin, transferring her ethnic choice from her clothing to her body.<sup>54</sup>

Leda Rafanelli believed in the performativity of self-constructed identities and lived her life of anarchist combat on the basis of the completely free identity she constructed for herself. She understood anarchism as including an individual freedom so complete that it constituted the choice of who one wanted to be (or from where), and she therefore created her own place of articulation from which to oppose the capitalist order of the West, arguing that the revolutionary force of anarchism was strengthened by associating with groups that maintained ways of life that contrasted with the bourgeois order: marginal minorities, like the Roma, alternatives to the Western Christian worldview, such as Islam, and entire peoples dominated by European colonialism, such as the Arabs. Can her admiration for non-European cultures — or those excluded from the official European canon — be equated with the Orientalism (and ‘Gypsyism’) of successive generations of experts and admirers who locked their human inspiration in the cage of a static, aestheticizing and deeply colonial representation?<sup>55</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

While further cases could be supplied, several conclusions can be drawn from the histories analyzed. The first is that there is a link between Roma political activists and anarchism. The Spanish case provides some indications that a significant number of people

---

<sup>54</sup> Rafanelli, *Memorie*.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Accidental Orientalists: Modern Italian Travelers in Ottoman Lands* (Liverpool 2017), 154–210 proposes using the term *Orienteuse* instead of *Orientaliste*.



corroborate this, what we do know is that Rafanelli insisted on this 'Gypsy' ancestry and included it in her attire and photographic presentation – one of her favourite registers – in which she fused Arab, African, Indian and Romani elements. We also know that, shortly after her death, her former comrades-in-arms gave her the nickname of 'zingara anarchica'.<sup>51</sup> This would have gratified someone like her who took great pains with her autobiographical presentation, with a view to how she would be remembered. It recognized the effective association between anarchism and the Romani way of life, which was defined, according to Leda Rafanelli, by a magnificent contempt for money (shared with the Arabs) and freedom of transnational movement across state borders, among other things.<sup>52</sup>

She may have seen the Roma as the most complete metaphor for what she strove to do throughout her life, namely, trace her own path as an anarchist without accepting 'natural', historical or institutional limitations. As she said, 'Anarchists live their lives like nomads, they do not follow a specific path but their own path'.<sup>53</sup> Thus, while her self-fashioning as a public figure resorted to the reductionist idealization of certain identities understood as subaltern, paradoxically her literary discourse in the service of anarchism constantly questioned assigned essentialist identities of any kind (not just ethnic, but also gender identity). A firm believer in the performativity of identitarian options, she insisted on an ethnic misce-

---

<sup>51</sup> Term invented by Pier Carlo Masini, 'Introduzione', in Rafanelli, *Una donna e Mussolini*; Antonella Mauri, 'Entre colonialisme et métissage culturel: Leda Rafanelli, anarchiste et musulmane', in Isabelle Felici and Jean-Charles Vegliante, eds, *Oublier les colonies - Contacts culturels hérités du fait colonial* (Paris 2011), 177–95.

<sup>52</sup> Thus, according to the hero of one of her proletarian novels, 'the anarchist has the world for a homeland, and does not allow limits to his activity, nor imposes laws to be observed, nor routes to be followed', Leda Rafanelli, *L'eroe della folla* (Milan 1920), 189.

<sup>53</sup> Marina Monanni, 'Ricordo', in Fiamma Chessa, ed., *Leda Rafanelli, tra letteratura e anarchia* (Reggio Emilia 2008), 15–16, at 16.

Within this framework, we examine two groups of cases in turn. First, we consider examples of the participation of Roma in anarchism in particular, and the labour movement in general, in Spain during the 1930s; this was a time when, either because of the major change brought about by the Second Republic or the crisis of the Civil War, Spain became the epicentre of the struggle between fascism and democracy for the whole Western world. We then move on to a second group of case studies defined by the phenomenon of transcontinental migration, in which we stand back and consider the same binomial from the perspective of twofold estrangement. To do this, we focus on a series of anarchists who presented themselves as 'Gypsies'-Roma while they constructed their cultural identity as transcontinental migrants, even though their Romani family background was, at best, indirect or doubtful. This second line of analysis not only confronts the question of Orientalism (and 'Gypsyism'), but further raises the issue of the legitimacy of certain political strategies that were once acts of civil rebellion on behalf of subaltern groups and would nowadays be labelled as cultural appropriation.<sup>6</sup>

---

power differences before they become givens, should also be understood in the same way (Alejandro Grimson and Marcial Godoy-Anatívia, 'Introduction', *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, Vol. 17, No. 52 (2003), 507–17, at 509). For the Romani case, we share the proposal put forward by Wim Willems, albeit including the capacity for self-representation in the explanation (Wim Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution* (London 1997)).

<sup>6</sup> The connection between the well-known phenomenon of Orientalism and the much less discussed phenomenon of 'Gypsyism' is explored in the illuminating article by Ken Lee, 'Orientalism and Gypsyism', *Social Analysis*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2000), 129–65.

## Anarchist Gitanos: Participants in the Interwar Labour Movement

Everyone knows that labour organizations were a crucial space for the expansion of civil rights during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century across Europe and America. The successful struggle for workers' rights broadened the notions of political participation and the public sphere, allowing the inclusion of previously disenfranchised social groups. Nothing however is known of the Romani contribution to this historical process through their political commitment to socialist and anarchist ideologies. We deal here with the cases of Spanish Gitanos who were active in the labour movement between the wars. This was a period of intense politicization, when Gitanos were active in unions and parties, in the press and propaganda, at rallies and on the barricades, and also when the Civil War broke out, fighting against fascism from positions of responsibility and on the military front.

The development of anarchism in Spain took a very particular course through the joint efforts of the CNT-FAI. The CNT, *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour), was the organization of the masses, a network of workers' unions that had followed the anarcho-syndicalist model since 1910, combining trade-union practice with an anarchist ideological focus. After 1927, the vanguard organization, the *Federación Anarquista Iberica* (FAI) (Iberian Anarchist Federation), brought together pure anarchists to spearhead revolutionary action.<sup>7</sup> It constitutes a good laboratory therefore for studying the participation of Roma in the labour movement.

We know of two Gitanos — Helios Gomez and Mariano R Vazquez ('Marianet') — who were activist leaders and participants

---

<sup>7</sup> Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939* (London 2005).

and discussed; it is within this problematic framework that she also developed an elective connection to Romani culture as part of a comprehensive programme of social revolution. In her case, the mirror of her identity was not Transatlantic and American, but Trans-Mediterranean: the Arab world of North Africa and the Middle East. In her youth, her family had to leave Italy and settled temporarily in Alexandria, Egypt, where she came into contact with anarchism and also became fascinated by Arab culture, even converting to Islam. From then on, she dressed like an Arab, somewhat flamboyantly, and maintained a lifelong admiration for everything 'oriental', which she saw as a complex term that also embraced the Hebrew and the Indian.<sup>48</sup>

Back in Italy, Leda Rafanelli became a leading promoter of anarchism, both in her own publications — numerous novels for the working class and propaganda leaflets — and the two influential publishing houses she ran in Milan and Florence. Her activity was constant and risky, even in the time of Mussolini, with whom she had a special relationship.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, her fellow activists found it hard to digest such a larger-than-life personality, because, apart from her idiosyncratic combination of individualistic anarchism and Islamist faith, the construction of her ethnic identity included other characteristics. According to her autobiographical accounts, one of her great-grandfathers was an Arab 'Zingaro' from Tunisia.<sup>50</sup> Without it being easy to

---

<sup>48</sup> Andrea Pakieser, *I Belong Only to Myself: The Life and Writings of Leda Rafanelli* (Oakland, CA 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Friends, and probably also lovers when Mussolini was still an agitator for the workers' cause in 1913–1914, they later fought on opposing sides. The relationship is reflected in the novel published under the pseudonym, Sagra, *Incantamento*. Romanzo (Milan 1921) and in the letters published by Leda Rafanelli, *Una donna e Mussolini. La corrispondenza amorosa fra Mussolini rivoluzionario e una giovane anarchica in una nuova interpretazione dell'uomo e del politico* (Milan 1975).

<sup>50</sup> She reaffirmed this Tunisian 'Gypsy' ancestor in her posthumously published memoirs: Leda Rafanelli, *Memorie d'una chiromante* (Cuneo 2010).

her of being a leftist, she was able to keep open those spaces of freedom of expression, which were notable for the most brilliant, audacious, and innovative intellectuals and artists who frequented them.<sup>45</sup> Her cafes also provided a foretaste of a libertarian utopia, and artists, writers, and other people in whom she recognized creative talent could eat there for free when they were experiencing hardship, especially in their early days. There was even a space around the fireplace — where nothing was paid for, bought or sold — reserved for ‘a chosen few’ because of their creativity. Whenever someone asked Romany Marie how to enter this select circle, she would reply: ‘Be creative’.<sup>46</sup> Even more significant was her idea that artists and Roma shared the same creative, libertarian spirit. Whenever government persecution forced her to close her premises — she opened as many as seven to circumvent censorship — she announced the move with phrases such as ‘The caravan has moved’.<sup>47</sup>

In such mobile spaces, it was possible to live out ethnic identities that were not inherited from the family, but the result of choice and performativity. Identity was constructed with discourse and practices, music, decor and dress, friendships and solidarity, and from a resistance to the typecasting of identities assigned from the outside. It is true that her performance as Roma has similarities with certain Gypsy Lore Society games, but unlike the ‘Gypsy-lorists’, Marie did not develop an expert discourse on the ‘Gypsies’ that cannibalize the idealized referent.

The case of the Italian anarchist, Leda Rafanelli (1880–1971), adds a final variant to the dilemmas of the legitimacy of adopting a racial identity as a political option by historical subjects who, unlike those labelled ‘Gypsies’ from outside, were able to choose how to define themselves. Her Orientalism has been highlighted

<sup>45</sup> Rian James, *Dining in New York* (New York 1930), 194–6; Emily Kies Folpe, *It Happened on Washington Square* (Baltimore, MD 2002), 266.

<sup>46</sup> Balaban, ‘The “Gypsy” Lady Who Fed Bohemia’, 393.

<sup>47</sup> Schulman, *Romany Marie*, 68.

in the interwar anarchist movement, yet historians of the labour movement have paid surprisingly little attention to their careers. While Gomez is rather better known as an artist, since he was a remarkable graphic artist and author who used his talents in the service of the cause of the proletariat, his political activity deserves closer study. The case of Vazquez is still more extraordinary, since there is not even a complete biography of this former National Secretary of the CNT during the crucial period of the Civil War, despite the abundant documentation available. After Franco’s triumph, Vazquez made sure that the archives of the anarchist movement were removed from Spain. They are now kept at the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam).<sup>8</sup> Placing the profiles of the two syndicalists in dialogue with each other, paying attention to the way they articulated different facets of their class, political and ethnic identity helps problematize the relationship between anarchism and ‘Gypsies’.

Helios Gomez (1905–1956) was born in Triana, a Seville neighbourhood with a long Gitano and working-class tradition, and began his political career in anarchism at a very young age. He was also very young when he started to train as a painter and closely combined the two vocations in his public life. His first published illustration was in a novel by the anarchist writer, Felipe Alaiz, who was, at that time, the editor of the newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera* (Worker Solidarity), the mouthpiece of the CNT. His first exhibition was held at the Cafe Kursaal in Seville, a space that accommodated artistic avant-garde discussion groups, trade union meetings

<sup>8</sup> On Gomez, see Ursula Tjaden, *Die Hulle zerfetzen Helios Gomez 1905-1956 Andalusier Künstler Kampfer* (Berlin 1986); various authors, *Helios Gomez. Dibujos en accion, 1905-1956* (Seville 2010); Mana Sierra, ‘Helios Gomez: la invisibilidad de la revolution gitana’, *Historia y Poh’tica*, No. 40 (2018), 79–113; Juan Pro, ‘Helios Gomez: To Be Roma in the Revolution’, in Eve Rosenhaft and Mana Sierra, eds, *European Roma: Lives beyond Stereotypes* (Liverpool forthcoming). For Vazquez, Jose Luis Ledesma, ‘Veinte personajes clave del anarquismo espanol’, in Julian Casanova, ed., *Tierray libertad. Cien anos de anarquismo en Espana* (Barcelona 2010), 278–80.

and flamenco singing.<sup>9</sup> He was forced to flee his home town in 1927 because of his activism, and this marked the beginning of a long odyssey to Paris, Brussels and Berlin, and afterwards Amsterdam and Vienna, during which time he came into contact simultaneously with the international labour movement and the European artistic avant-garde. In 1930, having already acquired a certain reputation as a working-class artist, he settled in Barcelona, undertaking a wide range of cultural activities in the service of the CNT: prints for the press, posters and book covers for Spanish and foreign media.

His experience of Europe, apart from defining his artistic style (a personal fusion of futurism, cubism, expressionism and other tendencies), also redirected him towards communism, which he thought was the best way to combat the threat of fascism. As a communist, he held rallies, spent time in prison, and visited the USSR during the early 1930s. He also fought in the Civil War as a communist, although before the war was over, he returned to the anarchist fold, where he continued to excel as the first-rate propagandist that he was. Proof of this was the achievement of the newspaper *El frente* (The Front), whose layout he was responsible for from 1938 onwards, which was published to a high quality even in the worst conditions.<sup>10</sup> During the death throes of the Republican regime, and also in their final departure from Spain once Franco's army entered Barcelona in 1939, Helios Gomez and Mariano Vazquez must have crossed paths frequently. In France, Gomez

---

<sup>9</sup> Felipe Alaiz, *Oro Molido* (Seville 1923). The date of the exhibition was 1925.

<sup>10</sup> From 1939, *El frente* was published as '*Boletm de guerra de la Columna Durruti*' [*War Bulletin of the Durruti Column*] and was published with a completely plain layout of blocks of text throughout with no graphic support whatsoever. After some changes, it was published from May 1938 onwards with a modern, dynamic composition, bold headlines, various typefaces, two colours of ink, and with photographs and drawings – unsigned – presumably by Helios Gomez, who did however sign his name on the new header (No. 127, 8 August 1938).

and food were Romanian style, and her own clothing and personal adornments were recognizably 'Gypsy', as was her performance as hostess: she read the future in tea leaves and told the fortunes of the young artists and writers who gathered around her. There are (uncorroborated) news items about the possible Romani origin of her mother, although it seems more likely that she was Jewish but had close ties to Moldavian Roma. What is certain is that Romany Marie's identity, starting with her name, was an elective one rather than based on blood ties or assigned labels. She was consistent in this throughout her life. Even those who did not consider her as Romani, but thought that it was all a performance, had to recognize the special nature of her character: 'for six decades she played the role of Gypsy'.<sup>43</sup>

Where others used the political soapbox or the press as platforms to defend an alternative way of life to capitalist society, she constructed her own space for dissidence in her cafes. In late nineteenth-century America and up to the Second World War there was a certain fashion for venues that combined ethnic exoticism, transgressive sexuality and proximity to the labour movement.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the Balkan melting pot in Romany Marie's cafes was different, in that it was the setting for a small-scale social revolution.

A worker before she became a businesswoman, she had been a follower of Emma Goldman and active in the New York City Ferrer Center since she arrived in America at the age of sixteen. After the first Red scare (1917–1920) and Goldman's expulsion from the United States, she continued to collaborate in anarchist protest actions, but channelled her defiance elsewhere as the hostess in her increasingly famous cafes. Even though the police suspected

---

<sup>43</sup> Obituary, 'Marie Marchand, Village Figure', *The New York Times*, 23 February 1961, 27. She was also called a 'Gypsified gajo', Irving Brown: *Gypsy Fires in America*, 131. *Ga(d)jo* is the Romani term for non-Roma.

<sup>44</sup> Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1888–1940* (Chicago, IL 2009), 185–6.

authoritarianism, opposed both to racist ultranationalism and social inequality. He deliberately chose to wear the label and its symbols in order to provoke: 'The legend of my being a Gypsy was growing, and I didn't care to dispute it. I wore flamboyant cravats and vests and welcomed the excuse to wear them; everybody said I was a Gypsy'.<sup>40</sup>

The dilemmas of the legitimacy of adopting a racialized self-presentation may have been even more challenging in the case of another sympathizer of anarchism whose embodiment of Romani identity was more complete: Marie Marchand, known as Romany Marie (1885–1961). Like Bercovici, she came from Moldavia and her family emigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. For decades, she ran a number of successful cafes in Greenwich Village, which served as places of sociability for the Bohemians of the city and its visitors.<sup>41</sup> Both the locales and her personality were part of an identity that was deliberately constructed to recreate in New York the Romania in which she had grown up:

My mother had an inn for gypsies and that's why I had a place for artists. They go hand in hand. When I was three years old, I used to dance in my mother's place. I love[d] my mother so much I found myself imitating her in many ways. Bohemia means 'land of gypsies' and when I found myself in New York I thought what better thing to do like my mother did.<sup>42</sup>

Romany Marie's cafes did not feature jazz, which was fashionable at the time, but the Romani music of the Carpathians; the decor

---

<sup>40</sup> Bercovici, *It's the Gypsy in Me*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Schulman, *Romany Marie: The Queen of Greenwich Village* (Louisville, KY 2006); Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Princeton, NJ 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Dan Balaban, 'The "Gypsy" Lady Who Fed Bohemia' (1962) in June S. Sawyers, ed., *The Greenwich Village Reader: Fiction, Poetry, and Reminiscences, 1872-2002* (New York 2001), 390–97, at 391.

was interned in the refugee camps and Vazquez lost his life by drowning in the Marne River in 1939.

By the time of his death, Mariano R. Vazquez, 'Marianet' (1909–1939), who was once described as being 'as dark as if the juice of the olive were running through his veins', had risen from nothing to become Secretary of the CNT, or from less than nothing, from the shelters and correctional facilities where he spent his childhood.<sup>11</sup> When his mother died, his father abandoned him in institutions of this kind, which were well known places of child exploitation and abuse. Marianet escaped as a teenager and, since he had no family or trade, he faced a difficult existence in the Barcelona of the 1920s. In a way, prison saved him, bringing him into contact with anarchist prisoners from whom he learned that he had the right to consider himself a worthy subject, as well as how to read and write. They became his elective family. From then on, according to Manuel Munoz Diez, who introduced him to anarchism, Marianet dropped his father's surname as a reproach and honoured his mother by signing himself only as Vazquez. Once he was free, and in the new political context of the Second Republic, he joined the CNT through its affiliate the Construction Union, of which his mentor was President. According to the latter, he was indefatigable and persistent, which served him well for office duties and the struggle on the streets alike. Between 1931 and 1936, Vazquez continued to combine activism, prison and study, and the weeks spent on prison ships or in the Barcelona Model Prison, which Helios Gomez was also familiar with, served to make him a 'man of a certain culture'. Meanwhile, he gradually rose through the ranks in responsible positions in anarchist syndicalism.<sup>12</sup>

When the military coup d'état took place in July 1936, Vazquez had been elected Secretary of the Catalan CNT, a position that put

---

<sup>11</sup> A physical description by Felix Martin Ibanez, taken from in Manuel Munoz Diez, *Marianet. Semblanza de un hombre* (Mexico City 1960), 11.

<sup>12</sup> The expression and an account of his career in Munoz Diez, *Marianet*, 33ff.

him in the eye of the hurricane. The key role of armed workers, led by the anarcho-syndicalists, in disrupting the coup in Barcelona put the CNT in a position of power that was as much a source of conflict as a source of promise. Just when the doors were being opened to a long-overdue social revolution and the process of the collectivization of property was being initiated, the anarchists had to respond to the Catalanian government's call and take responsibility for forming an alliance of anti-fascist forces to halt the military advance of Franco. Vazquez was in a prime position to promote anti-fascist collaboration, which he did by defending this position to the anarcho-syndicalists, even more so when, also in 1936, he was appointed National Secretary of the CNT and moved to Madrid, where four other well-known anarchists had accepted a responsibility that was unprecedented in the history of the movement: to form part of the central government of the Republic, thereby joining forces with those of a heterogeneous anti-fascist coalition. After that appointment, Vazquez's life ran in parallel to the events of the war that marked the future of Spain: he was in Valencia when the government took refuge there against the advance of Franco's army and went to Barcelona when the anarchists and communists became embroiled in a lethal feud to control the city. He supported the Republican government from the CNT, which was reorganized into sections for greater effectiveness, contributed to the armed resistance against the fascist advance until the last moment, and finally, he crossed the French border and went into exile. In Paris, despite police persecution, he led the reorganization of the libertarian movement and took part in the evacuation of Spanish refugees, nurturing the idea of a future in the welcoming Mexico of Lázaro Cárdenas. Although he personally did not manage to cross to the other side of the Atlantic, many other Spanish anarchists did.

When placed in dialogue with each other, the careers of Gomez and Vazquez allow us to reflect upon a number of issues. First of all, both these cases show that subjects from a Romani background

Bercovici shared his idea with Chaplin in 1938 and they agreed to write the script together. Shortly afterwards, though, Chaplin wrote and directed *The Great Dictator* (1940) separately, which severed their relationship and resulted in a court case.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the film format, the battle against fascism was the crux of the matter for Bercovici. After travelling round Europe to interview the politicians of the day (including the Nazi hierarchs), he wrote in the press and gave lectures, which even earned him a few beatings by fascist sympathizers. The Nazi regime represented the culmination of the system of classifying humanity into races and nations that he had fought against all his life. Indeed, a visit to his native Romania, by then under the influence of the Iron Guard, brought him the pain of losing his truest homeland: his childhood. And this feeling of belonging to an imagined, multicultural, anti-State homeland, which had accompanied him as an emigrant, was associated precisely with the Roma people and their way of life. Shortly before Nazism condemned that way of life as 'asocial', Bercovici had described it as a model for all humanity because of its anti-authoritarian, fraternal foundation. The Roma were 'a people whose vocabulary lacks two words — "duty" and "possession"', who live happily in the present and do not restrict their freedom of movement by tying themselves to a territory.<sup>38</sup> They alone had resisted the unjust, immoral, impoverishing institutions of modernity. The connection with anarchism was obvious to him: 'Did Proudhon hear the phrase "*La propriete, c'est le vol*" from the Gypsies living at the gate of Paris?'<sup>39</sup>

No wonder that being identified as a 'Gypsy' was a source of pride for someone who understood anarchism as universal anti-

---

<sup>37</sup> Plagiarism Claim, *Bercovici v. Chaplin*, U.S. District Court New York City, 17 April-1 May 1947, *Law Library - American Law and Legal Information: Notable Trials and Court Cases - 1941 to 1953*: <https://law.jrank.org/pages/3002/Bercovici-v-Chaplin-1947.html> (accessed 11 October 2020); Milton, *Tramp*.

<sup>38</sup> Bercovici, *The Story of the Gypsies*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

He went to Paris, rather than Palestine, where he was formally educated in places such as the *Universite Populaire* (Popular University), attending classes given by Jean Jaures and Kropotkin, among others, before emigrating with his young family to the United States. Not surprisingly, when he arrived at Ellis Island, his baggage already included the multiculturalism, anti-racism and transnationalism that he later consolidated and cultivated in early twentieth-century New York. We know of his relationship with Afro-American intellectuals and activists such as the Robesons, confronting prevailing prejudices and discriminations,<sup>33</sup> but there were also opportunities to deal with anti-Semitic prejudices too. His interest in the cultural diversity of New York led him to become a chronicler of the immigrant communities in the city, to whom he dedicated a book that constitutes a valuable testimony to the American melting pot.<sup>34</sup>

The success of his stories brought him into contact with the world of the cinema and Hollywood, where he forged a close friendship with Charles Chaplin as a result of their common appreciation for Romani culture. Bercovici had dedicated one of his books of stories to Chaplin, and Chaplin gave him an authorized interview in which he told him of his Romani ancestry.<sup>35</sup> Despite the doubts surrounding this genealogy, Bercovici took it as supporting the filmmaker's resistance to the constraints of the film industry.<sup>36</sup> It was in this context that he found a new format to express his anti-authoritarianism and conceived the idea of a film that would ridicule Hitler and denounce the rise of fascism in Europe.

---

<sup>33</sup> Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Konrad Bercovici, *Around the World in New York* (New York 1924).

<sup>35</sup> The interview opened with: 'Did you know that Charlie Chaplin had a gypsy ancestor?'; Konrad Bercovici, 'Charlie Chaplin: The True Story of the Real Man Who, After Years of Poverty, Wants More Than Anything Else to Make his Mother Happy', *Collier's: The National Weekly*, 15 August 1925, 5–6 and 36.

<sup>36</sup> Joyce Milton, *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* (New York 1996). Chaplin himself stated it again in *My Autobiography* (Harmondsworth 1964).

experienced the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat from a position they shared with many other non-Roma workers: they acted as subjects who identified as workers and discovered that anarchism — and other working-class ideologies — gave them leverage to transform a world that treated them unfairly. Secondly, it seems that Gomez and Vazquez were only the tip of the iceberg of the much more extensive phenomenon of Gitano participation in anarchism in particular, and the labour movement in general, during the first third of the twentieth century. This phenomenon is as yet undocumented, although partial data taken from the files of the Francoist courts that were responsible for the post-Civil War repression — those of Military Tribunal number 23 in particular, which dealt with eastern Andalusia — indicate that a significant number of Gitanos had anarchist, socialist and communist affiliations.<sup>13</sup> This would not be an isolated phenomenon, bearing in mind that similar political and social dynamics could have occurred in any place in Europe where the Romani population was involved with the working classes. In fact, wherever it has been studied — in the USSR and Bulgaria — there is clear evidence of Romani worker commitment to the interwar labour movement.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the cases of Gomez and Vazquez, their role in Spanish anarchism also allows us to appreciate their contribution to the labour movement understood as a transnational public space and a creator of political awareness, highlighting their intervention in media aimed at disseminating ideas and representations. The im-

---

<sup>13</sup> The details can be found in Eusebio Rodriguez Parrilla, 'La represion de los gitanos en el Franquismo', in *El pueblo gitano en la guerra civil y la posguerra. Andalutfa Oriental* (PhD thesis, University of Granada, 2004), 11–127. There were also anarchist *Gitanas*, such as the case recorded in Tomasa Cuevas Gutierrez, *Testimonios de mujeres en las cdrceles franquistas* (Huesca 2004), 282.

<sup>14</sup> Ilona Klimova-Alexander, 'Development and Institutionalization of Romani Representation and Administration. Part 2', *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2005), 155–210; information about Sliven in Bulgaria, where there was a highly active Romani trade union movement, in Donald Kenrick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)* (Lanham, MD 2007), 31, 100.

portance of Helios Gomez's contribution to the visual construction of the interwar worker and anti-fascist imaginary is indisputable, with universal themes such as the alliance of proletarians and peasants, the struggle against fascism, criticisms of clericalism and obscurantism, the heroic representation of worker leaders, and so on. He sought to adapt his creativity to graphic journalism, poster art and other formats of proletarian propaganda published in Europe and America; his preference for black and white bichromatism is itself a manifestation of work that was intended to be published in cheap, serialized mass publications.<sup>15</sup> While Mariano R. Vazquez was not an artist, he too was very aware of the importance of cultivating the cultural territory of the worker: thus, he managed an anarchist newspaper, advocated opening up a platform for women within the movement, paid attention to international propaganda books, and wrote frequently for the workers' press. In 1938, for example, the head of the CNT-FAI Propaganda Office informed him that anarchists in the Americas from New York to Buenos Aires were asking for his articles: 'I know you won't have time to do these articles for the American press, but I suggest that you make a few more copies of the ones you prepare for the Spanish press and hand them in at our Offices, and we will send them to any comrades who ask for them'. Despite the war, a few days later Vazquez sent an article 'written expressly for comrades in America'.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of the political careers of Gomez and Vazquez between the wars challenges the stereotype that characterizes the Romani people as having an anarchic anthropology, presupposing a collective tendency towards sociopolitical forms defined by rejection of authority, being organization-

---

<sup>15</sup> Helios Gomez himself reflected on the political importance of art that was in touch with the reality of the worker, *La Rambla*, 24 September 1934.

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated 11 December 1938 from Martin Gudell, Head of the Foreign Propaganda Office of the CNT-FAI, to Mariano R. Vazquez and Vazquez's reply on December 19, 1938 [Documentary Archive of the CNT-FAI (IISH)]. The issue of women in *Solidaridad Obrera*, 10 October 1935.

cused on Romani themes — his famous 'Gypsy stories' — which he approached with the attitude of someone recapturing what he had experienced in person years before, but who also tests the present by telling these stories to his American Romani friends to see whether they are credible.<sup>30</sup>

It is true that his 'Gypsyism' can be called Orientalist, but it is also true that Bercovici's affection for the Roma as a people was part of an anti-racist attitude that he championed every day of his life. At this point, the ambivalent and multi-layered play of the chosen identities has a very precise political meaning that signalled high commitment and even risk in both twentieth-century America and Europe. The roots of his anti-racism can be found in the multicultural world in which he grew up, since the region of Moldavia was one of those intersections of paths, influences and linguistic minorities so abundant in the Balkans before the 'ethnic cleansings' that were to follow. As a child, he had also travelled the region extensively with his father: 'We went every day to a different village, ate at a different inn, and spoke to different people, Roumanian peasants, Hungarians, Tartar, Turk, Greek and German settlers', as a result of which, apart from Romanian and Romani, Bercovici also spoke Greek, French and German before becoming an English writer.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, he had experienced racism for himself, since his father died as the result of one of the many anti-Semitic attacks that took place in eastern Europe in the final decade of the nineteenth century. At that time, his resistance to being locked up in the cage of a racial identity defined by others manifested itself in refusing the option of seeking refuge in Palestine: 'I was no Jew; I was a human being'.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Some of these stories are Konrad Bercovici, *Ghitza and Other Romances of Gypsy Blood* (New York 1921), *Murdo* (New York 1923), *Love and the Gypsy* (London 1923), *Singing Winds: Stories of Gipsy Life* (London 1926) and *A Romany Chai* (London 1933). He also wrote *The Story of the Gypsies* (London 1929).

<sup>31</sup> Bercovici, *It's the Gypsy in Me*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



ing figures of the movement such as Emma Goldman, took part in the activities of the New York City Ferrer Center, which was a key space of anarchism, and a well-known one, that also housed the Modern School, where Bercovici's children (named, significantly, Revolte, Gorky, Hyperion) were educated.<sup>28</sup>

Bercovici was not a Romani by birth, but he was regarded in public as a 'Gypsy-Jew' and, as he said of himself in his autobiography, which he entitled *It's the Gypsy in Me*, 'a kind of scribe and representative of the Gypsies of Lower Manhattan'.<sup>29</sup> His knowledge of Romani culture came from his Romanian childhood. His nursemaid, and second mother, 'Mama Tinka', was a Roma woman who took him to Romani camps, where he remembered playing and learning in a way that was different and better than in formal school. Along with the Romani language, which enabled him to help his father in his work as a horse dealer, Bercovici also credited his love of music and knowing how to play the violin to his childhood in close contact with Romani people.

Years later, already settled in the United States, his nostalgia for the 'Gypsy' Romania that he associated with a happy childhood prompted him to visit his country of origin. But it was mainly after he had come to America that Bercovici lived with Romani groups, whole families of immigrants that he helped as they arrived in New York, and enjoyed spending days and nights with, singing, playing the violin and listening to stories. His most successful works fo-

---

<sup>28</sup> Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton, NJ 1995). The fact that Bercovici is included in this oral history of American anarchism confirms his place in the genealogy of the movement.

<sup>29</sup> The identification as a 'Gypsy-Jew' in Lara Rabinovitch, 'The Gypsy in them: Imagined Transnationalism amid New York City's Little Rumania', in Ava F. Kahn and Adam D. Mendelsohn, eds, *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History* (Detroit, MI 2014), 165–84. For a self-presentation, see Konrad Bercovici, *It's the Gypsy in Me: The Autobiography of Konrad Bercovici* (New York 1941), 170. Also, in Michael Kraike, 'An Interview with Konrad Bercovici', *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (Montreal, 27 November 1931), 5–17.

ally weak, the adoption of anti-system positions, and having no homeland. As we know, the tensions and clashes between different workers' ideologies was a phenomenon characteristic of the 1920s and 1930s. In the specific context of the Spanish Civil War, the emergence of communism had wide-ranging international implications. Both Gomez and Vazquez had to navigate a conflict that tore the workers' movement apart, which they did by combining political orientation with class identity. During this navigation process, their Gitano background did not determine their spontaneous ascription to a 'primitive' anarchism, far from it, but was combined with it in different ways and with different results.

Helios Gomez brought up the cause of the emancipation of the Romani collective in an interview he gave during the war. In his view, the victory of the proletariat in the struggle would mean recognition of the capabilities of the Gypsies as an integral part of that same working class, as opposed to the stereotypes about their laziness and limited intelligence. But this allusion to a collective Romani subject was part of a wider discourse aimed at exalting the Soviet utopia as a revolutionary solution that included the recognition of this minority: 'What excited me most in Russia was to see that Roma there have been fully integrated into social life. In the great Republic of the Soviets, Roma have the same social status as every other inhabitant'.<sup>17</sup> As previously mentioned, he joined the Communist Party motivated by the priority of fighting fascism internationally, as he himself explained, which is what other Spanish anarchists had chosen to do in the 1930s.<sup>18</sup>

Mariano R. Vazquez chose a different way of navigating the tensions between anarchism, syndicalism, communism and other options in the context of the Civil War. In his case, he chose to use his influence as Secretary-General of the CNT to extend his full

---

<sup>17</sup> *Cronica*, 18 October 1936.

<sup>18</sup> Gomez's reasons in *Por que me marcho del anarquismo*, fly sheet, 18 June 1930.

support for collaboration with the governments of the Republic, as well as to negotiate with the communists to form a common anti-fascist front in the struggle against Franco and his European allies. This decision was contested inside the anarchosyndicalist movement, since it meant the social revolution took second place to the war effort against fascism. In 1939, once the Republic was defeated and its supporters annihilated, and Vazquez himself was dead, several spokesmen for the anarchist militancy in exile settled scores with their past by blaming the policy of anti-fascist collaboration and the concessions it made as the reason for the catastrophe. It also meant pointing an accusing finger at the Secretary of the CNT. The book *El eco de los pasos (The Echo of Footsteps)* by Juan Garcia Oliver is a prime example of how Vazquez was made the scapegoat for a particular anarchist tradition in exile, being described as controlled by the USSR, a puppet of other, more talented, anarchist leaders, and stressing the intellectual limitations and lack of experience of one who would not know how to 'think and write a manifesto, prepare a report, [or] chair a meeting' on his own.<sup>19</sup>

A cursory sample of the CNT Secretariat's documentation returns a quite different picture of Vazquez: that of someone who ran the organization in an orderly and unfaltering way, but also employed his own judgement and political and cultural resources. The correspondence shows that he was as concerned about the situation of the Durruti Division on the war front, as he was about relations with Mexico, attracting a union in Buenos Aires or seeking to make heroes of those killed at the front.<sup>20</sup> One example is his

<sup>19</sup> Juan Gomez Oliver, *El eco de los pasos* (Barcelona 1978), at 212. There is a kinder portrait by Federica Montseny ('Nuestros hombres', *Cenit. Revista mensual de sociología, ciencia y literatura*, No. 103 (1959), 2749–52), which does however touch on the usual comments concerning his childish nature and lack of culture.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from the Secretary of the CNT to the Minister of Public Instruction and Health, Segundo Blanco, 2 January 1939; letter from the head of the Office of Foreign Propaganda to the Secretary of the CNT, 15 December 1938; letter from Secretary of the CNT to the head of the Office of Foreign Propaganda, 7 January 1938; letter from the Secretary of the CNT to the head of the Office of Foreign

criss-crossed by multiple cultures, and propitious therefore for bold processes of identity reconstruction. Among the inhabitants were a few sympathizers of the libertarian movement who took their shared admiration for Romani culture — regarded as an alternative to dominant Statist and capitalist culture — to the extreme of introducing themselves publicly as 'Gypsies'. Konrad Bercovici and Romany Marie, as we shall see, displayed their allegiance to Romani culture as a daily life challenge to authoritarianism, national borders, unjust laws and inequality arising from private property; in short, the natural companion of the anarchism with which they both sympathized. While their admiration undeniably contains traces of the operation of idealization of 'Gypsiness' that has a bearing on the stereotype, it is also true that they lived out their allegiance to the culture by living among and collaborating with Romani subjects or giving it substance in a way that calls into question the concept of cultural appropriation. In the historical period when these anarchists claimed the label of 'Gypsies' for themselves, identifying themselves as such did not benefit them personally, nor was it used to impose an expert discourse on the Roma minority. It was one more tool within a set of political strategies aimed at fighting social injustice and, more particularly, breaking the stigmatization of certain racialized groups.

This was the case of Konrad Bercovici (1882–1961), who arrived in the United States in 1914 from Romania via France. Born into a Jewish family, he had been sympathetic to anarchism and a trade union activist as an adolescent and young man in Europe. When he arrived in America, he remained committed to the anarchist movement, both in the very difficult early period, when he had to carry out a wide variety of jobs in exploitative working conditions, and also later, when he achieved success as a writer and scriptwriter. Without being a theorist of anarchism, he was associated with lead-

*Fires in America: A Narrative of Life Among the Romanies of the United States and Canada* (New York 1924), 18).

## Nomadic Anarchists and ‘Gypsies’ by Choice

To summarize, while there were militant anarchists among workers of Romani origin, they do not bear out the myth of the natural ‘Gypsy’-Roma bias towards anarchism, in the sense of instinctive rejection of rules. However, although their anarcho-syndicalist activism was compatible with a high degree of commitment, and even discipline, they had to live out their militancy in a social framework that took this myth for granted. Turning from this first problematization of the anarchist-‘Gypsy’ binomial, we now delve into other aspects of it via a second movement that takes us away from Europe and projects the stereotype onto the mirror of overseas migration.

Emigration can be seen as a historical laboratory in which aspects of the identity question that stay dormant in the place of origin can be better observed. Identities take on new profiles in the country of destination, giving way to new creations and hybrid forms. The redefining of identity is vital to immigrants and exiles, in so far as it connects them with communities that are essential for their new life; it can also cut them off from burdensome legacies and, in short, allow them the freedom to reinvent themselves as human beings. There, within the fluidity of the reasserted – but at the same time recreated – identities of migrant communities, we find another sort of ‘Gypsy’ anarchism: activists who claimed a ‘Gypsy’-Roma identity for themselves as part of their statement of ideological principles.

This is what happened, for example, in ‘Little Europe’, in New York at the end of the nineteenth century, a space representing the thousands of European immigrants who formed the backbone of American anarchism between 1870 and 1920.<sup>27</sup> It was a place

---

<sup>27</sup> Among the 20 million immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1870 and 1920, there were also Roma, frequently not identified as such in the immigration records; according to Irving Brown, ‘In America there are gypsies from every portion of Europe, and a few from Asia’ (Irving Brown, *Gypsy*

correspondence on the occasion of the publication of *El fascismo al desnudo* (*Naked Fascism*), a propaganda book that had caused problems for the CNT. When it was presented to him before being distributed, Vazquez did not lose sight of its editorial aspects: ‘I have glanced at it and it seems to me that it is well produced, although the paper could have been better, which is obviously a major defect’, but nor did he lose sight of the content, stating: ‘There’s one detail missing that I think is practically essential, which is a concise prologue by way of introduction from the National Committee’, before going on to detail exactly what should have been said, what kind of typeface used, and to whom it should be sent.<sup>21</sup> The documentation of the CNT Secretariat is not the only proof of Vazquez’s activity, diligence and ability. An analysis of his lecture ‘Presente y futuro’ (‘Present and Future’), delivered and printed in Barcelona in 1938, also shows his ability to organize a speech, appeal to an audience and explain his own ideas; he was far from the culturally impoverished young man that some guardians of anarchist history would later present him as. It is interesting that Vazquez himself should include a reflection in his lecture about precisely how anarchism ought to be recorded in history. In contrast to the purists who preferred to sacrifice themselves rather than get their hands dirty confronting the practical issues of the working man’s struggle, the Secretary of the CNT was in favour of going down in history as someone who had stood up to fascism, which is ‘our number-one enemy at the moment’.<sup>22</sup>

In the canonical account of Spanish anarchism, which discredited Vazquez in order to blame those who had promoted collabora-

---

Propaganda, 2 April 1938 [Documentary Archive of the CNT-FAI/Archivo Documental de la CNT-FAI (IISH)].

<sup>21</sup> Letter from the Secretary of the CNT to the head of the Office of Foreign Propaganda, 29 April 1938 [Documentary Archive of the CNT-FAI/Archivo Documental de la CNT-FAI (IISH)].

<sup>22</sup> *Presente y futuro, Conferencia dada en el Sindicato de Distribution y Administration el 4 de septiembre de 1938* (Barcelona 1938), 31.

tion with other anti-fascist forces for their defeat, it is significant that many of the terms used to smear him – his ignorance, inconsistency, inability to theorize, corruptibility – can be ultimately traced back to his ‘Gypsiness’.<sup>23</sup> For Garda-Oliver, Vazquez ‘was not to be trusted’ and ‘there was something unmistakably Gypsy about him’, as a result of which the political changes attributed to the Secretary of the CNT were described as ‘gitanenas’ (gypsy chicanery). Prejudice against ‘Gypsies’ also existed in the labour movement and left-wing ideologies and led to suspicions about the origins of Marianet, who ‘was not known to have any kind of family. Somewhat odd. In Catalonia, anarchists were almost always from well-known families’.<sup>24</sup>

This same genealogical prejudice about being a Gitano, which affected the way Vazquez was remembered within anarchism was also conjured up, but exorcised, by Gomez. Being a ‘Gypsy’ may be acceptable, profitable even, if one is an artist, especially in a country like Spain, which has assimilated ‘Gypsiness’ into its representation of national identity. For majority society, a ‘Gypsy’ artist is tolerable, of interest even; it is a cliché that makes it easier to allow the subaltern (who would be denied permission in other areas of life) to play a leading role. In this context, the fact that Gomez was a Gitano is recorded as an associated detail of his art. Using the racial language of the time, a press report from 1932 presented him as an ‘artist of the proletariat’ and, recalling his youth in Berlin, described him as a ‘little Triana gypsy lad whose Andalusian roots’ would cause him to react in risky political situations with the ‘bull-fighting streak in his blood coming out’. Likewise, in the 1936 interview already mentioned, Gitano and artist are linked together quite naturally: his photographic portrait, in military dress, com-

---

<sup>23</sup> Isaac Martin Nieto, ‘Gitano, ignorante y traidor. Mariano R. Vazquez en la literatura historica militante libertaria’, in *No es pat's para jovenes* (Vitoria 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Gomez Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, 524 and 469, respectively.

plete with war wounds, bears the title ‘The famous Gypsy illustrator and revolutionary artist Helios Gomez’.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that Gomez himself chose to work harder on his selfpresentation as a Gitano after the Civil War ended and dictatorship was imposed by Franco. In 1936, he had already made a spirited defence of the capabilities of the Romani people in the fight against fascism, but it was during the long years he spent in Franco’s prisons that his painting and growing literary activity focused on creative representations of Gitanos. When forced to paint the chapel of the Model Prison in Barcelona, he endowed it with suffering figures and angels of such workmanship that it became known from then on as the ‘Capilla Gitana’ (‘Gypsy Chapel’). Apart from that, his graphic novel project, *Gabrielillo Vargas, gitano rojo* (Gabrielillo Vargas, the Red Gypsy), his *Historia de los gitanos* (History of the Gypsies), an essay on Romani art, and dozens of poems on the Andalusian ‘Gypsy’ theme all show that Gomez attached new importance to this facet of his personality. It has been suggested that the motive was the search for a space for self-assertion and to create a link with those deprived of their rights under the Franco dictatorship, a regime willing to use ‘Gypsiness’ as an ornament but certainly not to tolerate any militant syndicalist initiative.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that Gomez discovered at the end of his life that his identity as a Gitano brought him much more work and gave him a greater sense of belonging than the political or class identities he had fought for in interwar Europe.

---

<sup>25</sup> *El Sol*, 3 May 1932; *Cronica*, 18 October 1936.

<sup>26</sup> For his activity, Gabriel Gomez and Caroline Mignot, ‘Seis naranjas y tres granadas: vida y sueno de un artista comprometido’, in *Helios Gomez. Dibujos*, 14–21. For opinion about his motives, see Pedro G. Romero, ‘Helios Gomez, un artista lumpen’, in *Helios Gomez. Dibujos*, 24–39.