

Brennan's Spanish Labyrinth

Marie Louise Berneri

1944

Books about Spain have been written either by learned professors who write history ignoring completely working class movements and the existence of the class struggle and who therefore put fanciful interpretations on events they are unable to understand, or by journalists who feel qualified to write about Spain after spending only a few days or a few weeks in the country and without having acquired any previous knowledge of the historical background of the people. Such books sometimes contain brilliant passages, like Borkenau's Spanish Cockpit or George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia, but are also full of inaccuracies and hasty generalisations. They are also often written with a bias to suit the political fashion of the moment. Several books were written about the Spanish revolution which did not mention the work of the Anarchist movement or even its existence. On the other hand, because it is popular to boost the Communists, most of the work done during the revolution was attributed to them.

The Spanish Labyrinth* stands apart from all these books, both for the erudition which the author displays and for his objective approach to the subject. Gerald Brennan did not use any expedient method to write this book. He has taken great pains to find the truth and to be fair to all the parties he deals with, and if sometimes the book contains inaccuracies one feels that they are due to misinformation rather than to political prejudice.

Brennan's book is made interesting and penetrating by his sympathy for the subject he has treated. He loves Spain and the Spaniards and has a particular understanding of the Spanish peasants among whom he lived so long, not as a tourist but as one of them, sharing their houses* their food, their talk, their songs and dances. An historian should attempt to experience in imagination the feelings and reactions of the people he describes, and he is able to do this only if he can, so to speak, put himself in their place. Brennan is extremely gifted in that respect. He has dealt with his subject not only as a scholar but also as an artist and a psychologist. This has enabled him to understand actions which* not being a revolutionary himself, he cannot approve, such as the burning of churches, the throwing of bombs, the killing of priests, the expropriation of landlords and many other acts of revolt of the Spanish workers. He sees these facts in their right perspective and makes fun of the reactionaries who, at the slightest movement of revolt among the masses, are prepared to see the whole working class as a mob of criminals. He effectively debunks atrocity stories, a task which, unfortunately, historians are not often willing to undertake, particularly when these stories are used to discredit national or class enemies. Brennan says that already in 1873 the most infamous stories were circulated against the Anarchists. The

Carlists, who were the equivalent of the Fascists of to-day, issued two pseudo-anarchist papers to give more weight to their atrocity stories. The front page of one of them, *Los Descamisados* (The Shirtless), bore the following battle cry :

900,000 heads! Let us tear the vault of heaven as though it were a paper roof! Property is theft! Complete, utter social equality! Free Love!

After the Asturian rising of October 1934 accusations of atrocities were again circulated on a big scale against the revolutionary workers. Brennan says :

The most incredible tales were solemnly told and vouched for. The nuns at Oyiedo were said to have been raped: the eyes of twenty children of the police at Trubia were said to have been put out: priests, monks and children had been burnt alive: whilst the priest of Suma de Lagreo was declared to have been murdered and his body hung on a hook with the notice "Pig's meat sold here" suspended over it. Although the most careful search by independent journalists and Radical deputies — members that is, of the party then in power — revealed no trace of any of these horrors, and although the considerable sums raised for the twenty blinded children had to be devoted to other purposes because none of these children could be found, these and other stories continued to be repeated in the Right-wing press for months afterwards.

Of the terrorist methods used by the Anarchists at the end of the last century Brennan gives a very penetrating explanation particularly important as these acts are almost universally condemned and are still held against Anarchism :

The nineties were everywhere the period of anarchist terrorism. We have seen how the loss of its working-class adherents and the stupidity of the police repression led to this. But there were other causes as well. The reign of the bourgeoisie was now at its height. The meanness, their Philistinism, their insufferable self-righteousness weighed upon everything. They had created a world that was both dull and ugly and they were so firmly established in it that it seemed hopeless even to dream of revolution. The desire to shake by some violent action the complacency of this huge, inert and stagnant mass of middle-class opinion became irresistible. Artists and writers shared this feeling. One must put such books as Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet* and Huysman's *A Rebours*, Butler's and Wilde's epigrams and Nietzsche's savage outbursts in the same category as the bombs of the Anarchists. To shock, to infuriate, to register one's protest became the only thing that any decent or sensitive man could do.

One could make many more quotations to show that Brennan's attitude is not hampered by prejudices and that his judgments are not delivered according to a fixed code of bourgeois morality.

* * *

The *Spanish Labyrinth* is divided into three parts. The first part describes the history of the old regime, and that is to say the political regimes in Spain from 1874 to 1931. This part is mostly a chronicle of events.

The second part which, from a social point of view, is the most interesting, deals in detail with the conditions of the working classes and contains a careful analysis of : the agrarian question, the Anarchists, the Anarcho-syndicalists, the Carlists, the Socialists.

The third part deals with the events in Spain after 1931, after the fall of the monarchy and the institution of the Republic. It contains a chapter on the history of the Popular Front and a short sketch on the history of the Civil War from 1936–39.

It will be seen that the number of subjects treated justifies the sub- title of the book: “An account of the social and political background of the Civil War.” All the forces which came to clash during the revolution are analysed here from their birth and the study of this book is indispensable if one is to understand properly the Civil War itself.

Parts of the Spanish Labyrinth are of particular interest to Anar- chists and I should like to deal with them at length at the risk of giving them a prominence which they do not attain in the book itself.

The first point of interest to Anarchists is the relation between Anarchism and the communalist movement in Spain. Spain resembles Europe of the Middle Ages, when communes had a great deal of auto- nomy and when each member played an active role in the running of the communities. Unlike the communes in Mediaeval Germany, France and Italy, which flourished mostly in the towns and were composed of artisans and merchants, the communes in Spain existed mostly in the countryside and were composed of peasants, herdsmen, shepherds. There were also communes of fishermen on the coast. Provincial and municipal feeling was therefore very strong and every town was the centre of an intense social life. This autonomy of the towns and villages allowed the full development of the people’s initiative and rendered them for more individualistic than other nations, though at the same time developing the instinct of mutual aid which has elsewhere been atrophied by the growth of the state.

It is difficult to understand Spain if one has not read Mutual Aid, and, indeed, some of the pages of the Spanish Labyrinth would form a valuable supplement to Kropotkin’s work. Spanish communalist insti- tutions would have offered Kropotkin a tremendous amount of material to illustrate his theory of Mutual Aid, but it is probable that the material was not available to him at the time. Brenan’s book has filled the gap to a great extent by giving examples of agricultural and fisherman’s communities which have survived through centuries, independent of the central authority of the government. While communes in the rest of Europe were gradually absorbed by the state and had lost most of their liberties and privileges by the middle of the XHith century they survived much longer in Spain.

There is of course nothing very remarkable about this communal system of cultivating the land. It was once general— in Rusfeia (the mir\ in Germany (the flurzwang), in England (the open-field system). What is, remarkable is that in Spain the villiage communities spontaneously developed on this basis an extensive system of municipal services, to the point of their sometimes reaching an advanced stage of communism ... One may ask what there is in the Spanish character or in the economic circum- stances of the country that has led to this surprising development. It is clear that the peculiar agrarian conditions of the Peninsula, the great isolation of the many villages and the delay in the growth of even an elementary capitalist system have all played their part. But they have not been the only factors at work. When one considers the number of guilds or confraternities that till recently owned land and

worked it in common to provide old age and sickness insurance for their members: or such popular institutions as the Cort de la Seo at Valencia which regulated on a purely voluntary basis a complicated system of irrigation: or else the surprising development in recent years of productive co-operative societies in which peasants and fishermen acquired the instruments of their labour, the land they needed, the necessary installations and began to produce and sell in common: one has to recognise that the Spanish working-classes show a spontaneous talent for co-operation that exceeds anything that can be found to-day in other European countries.

When one takes into account the fertile growth of communistic institutions, the mutual aid displayed among peasants, fishermen and artisans, the spirit of independence in the towns and villages, it is not difficult to understand why anarchist ideas found such a propitious soil in Spain.

The theories of the Anarchists, and of Bakunin and Kropotkin in particular, are based on the belief that men are bound together by the instinct of mutual aid, that they can live happily and peacefully in a free society. Bakunin through his natural sympathy for the peasants, Kropotkin through his study of the life of animals, of the primitive societies and the Middle-Ages, had both reached the conclusion that men are able to live happily and show their social and creative abilities in a society free from any central and authoritarian government.

These anarchist theories correspond to the experiences of the Spanish people. Wherever they were free to organise themselves independently they had improved their lot, but when the central government of Madrid through the landlords, the petty bureaucrats, the police and the army, interfered with their lives, it always brought them oppression and poverty. The Socialist party with its distrust of the social instincts of men, with its belief in a central, all-wise authority, went against the age-long experience of the Spanish workers and peasants. It demanded from them the surrender of the liberties they had fought hard to preserve through centuries and for that reason never acquired the influence which the Anarchist Movement attained.

Another cause for the rapid and extensive growth of the Anarchist Movement in Spain was, according to Brennan, the intense religious feelings of the people, particularly the peasants. This may at first seem paradoxical. The Anarchists in Spain, perhaps more than in any other country, bitterly attacked religion and the Church. They issued hundreds of books and pamphlets denouncing the fallacy of religion and the corruption of the Church; they even went as far as burning churches and killing priests.

Brenan does not ignore this, but he distinguishes between the Christian beliefs of the Spanish masses and their intense dislike of the Church, and one must admit that his interpretation of the relation between religion and Anarchism is very convincing.

He describes the Spaniards, and in particular the peasants, as a very religious people. By religion he does not mean, of course, belief in and submission to the Church but a faith in spiritual values, in the need for men to reform themselves, in the fraternity which should exist among all men.

At the beginning of the XIXth century a general decay of religious faith took place, but religion had meant so much to the poor that they were left with the hunger for something to replace it and this could only be one of the political doctrines, Anarchism or Socialism. Anarchism by its insistence on brotherhood between men, on the necessity for a moral regeneration of mankind, on the need for faith, came nearer to the Christian ideas of the Spanish peasant than the dry, soulless, materialistic theories of the Marxists. The Spanish peasants took literally the frequent

allusions in the Scriptures to the wickedness of the rich; the Church of course could not admit this. The Spanish people in their turn could not forgive the Church for having abandoned the teachings of Christ nor could the Church forgive them for interpreting to the letter the teachings of the gospels. Brennan suggests that the anger of the Spanish Anarchists against the Church is the anger of an intensely religious people who feel that they have been deserted and deceived.

Brenan foresaw that his interpretation would give rise to many criticisms (from the Anarchists and even more from religious people), and he says :

It may be thought that I have stressed too much the religious element because Spanish Anarchism is after all a political doctrine. But the aims of the Anarchists were always much wider and their teachings more personal than anything which can be included under the word politics. To individuals they offered a way of life: Anarchism had to be lived as well as worked for.

This is a very important point. The Anarchists do not aim only at changing the government or the system; they aim also at changing the people's mode of thinking and living, which has been warped by years of oppression.

Whatever the cause of this attitude, whether religious or otherwise, it is important to stress it. Anarchists are always accused of having a negative creed, but critics overlook that Anarchism through its attempts to render men better even under the present system is in fact doing some positive and very useful work.

Brenan has seen this very clearly and he refuses to judge the Anarchists through their material achievements alone. He does not consider merely the number of strikes they have carried out, the rises in wages they have obtained or the part they have played in the administration of the country. Their role, he says, should be judged not in political terms but in moral ones, a fact which is almost universally ignored.

For example, the role of Anarchists in educating the Spanish masses is often overlooked. While the Socialists thought that education was a matter for the state to deal with, the Anarchists believed in starting work immediately. As early as the middle of the last century Anarchists formed small circles in towns and villages which started night schools where many learned to read.

At the beginning of this century Anarchist propaganda spread rapidly through the countryside and it was always accompanied with efforts to educate the masses. The Anarchist press not only published books by Kropotkin, Bakunin and the Spanish Anarchist newspapers were avidly read. The Anarchist movement had several dailies, but more important perhaps was the great number of provincial papers. In a relatively small province like Andalusia by the end of 1918 more than 50 towns had libertarian newspapers of their own. The work of editing these newspapers must have provided the members of the movement with a good deal of education and experience. The work of F. Ferrer in setting up free schools, the first outside the control of the Church, is well known.

This education was not limited to book knowledge alone. Anarchists were expected to give a good example by their private lives. Solidaridad Obrera, the Anarchist daily, in an article published in 1922, says that the Anarchist should set out to have a moral ascendancy over others. He should obtain prestige in the eyes of the workers by his conduct in the street, in the workshop, in his home and during strikes.

They were equally anxious to bring honesty in the matter of sex. Brenan says;

Anarchists, it is true, believe in free love — everything, even love, must be free — but they do not believe in libertinage. So in Malaga they sent missions to the prostitutes. In Barcelona they cleaned up the cabarets and brothels with a thoroughness that the Spanish Church (which frowns on open vice, such as wearing a bathing dress without a skirt and sleeves, but shuts its eyes to ‘safety valves’) would never approve of.

The Anarchists tried to live up to their ideals within the movement itself. They had no paid bureaucracy like the other parties. In a country like Spain, where there is the greatest distrust for money and those who seek it, the attitude of the Anarchists brought them the sympathy of the masses. Brenan points out several times that the Anarchist leaders were never paid and that in 1918, when their trade union, the C.N.T., contained over a million members, it had only one paid secretary.

Brenan’s book carries an encouraging message for the Anarchists. Though he himself considers Anarchism impracticable, he gives abundant proofs that it is deeply rooted in Spain. Unlike Fascism and Communism, it would not have to rely on foreign influences to come into being.

The practice of mutual aid which maintained itself in the village and town communes, the aspiration of the Spanish people towards liberty, justice and the brotherhood of all men, their love of independence which gave rise to federalist aspirations, all point to the conclusion that only an anarchist system of society will be possible in Spain.

Here I must say, however, a few words of disagreement with Brenan’s conclusions. Though he admits that the arbiters of Spain’s destiny must be the worker and the peasant, he believes that a government (of the right kind of course) must control Spain. He does not say where a good government can be found. He declares that a government in Spain should not depend on the church, the army or the landlords; as on the other hand he does not seem to believe in the dictatorship of the proletariat (which he rightly condemns in Russia) it is difficult to see why he rejects so firmly the Anarchist solution.

He also advocates strongly the collectivisation of the land, but seems to expect that a “sensible government” could carry it out, when history shows that no government in Spain was ever prepared to go against the interests of the landlords.

I think that Brenan has emphasised too much the agrarian nature of Anarchism. This is probably due to the fact that he lived in Andalusia, a completely agricultural region. Incidentally, he was criticised on this point by H. N. Brainsford who reviewed his book in the *New Statesman*, and who said :

I witnessed their (the Anarchists’) astonishing success during the civil war in running factories with high principles as their chief equipment, and I was deeply moved by the schools they established for the sorely tried children of Madrid.

Brenan also attaches, in my opinion, too much importance to the rivalry between Madrid and Barcelona. In his opinion all Castilians are authoritarians and all Catalans are independent and lovers of freedom. To maintain his thesis he makes certain errors of facts which it is not worth while to discuss here. He is again far from the truth when he attributes practically all the burning of churches to Anarchists; in fact the burning of churches occurred everywhere spontaneously, and took place sometimes in villages and towns where there were no Anarchists.

However, these are mostly details, and do not prevent the book from being a very serious contribution to the history of revolutionary movements. Brennan, who lived so long in Spain, seems to have been influenced by its communal institutions, and has written his book in the spirit of the craftsman of the Middle Ages. Like them he has produced his chef-d'oeuvre which is the test of his love for his art and his respect for his fellow men for whom the book is written. The Spanish Labyrinth has been created with that painstaking and disinterested love which characterises all lasting works.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Marie Louise Berneri
Brennan's Spanish Labyrinth
1944

Retrieved on 26th August 2021 from libcom.org

MARIE LOUISE BERNERI was an editor of *War Commentary* and later *Freedom*, until her death at the age of 31 in 1949. She was the author of *Journey Through Utopia* (Routledge) and *Neither East Nor West* (Freedom Press). Her article was originally written for *Now* in 1944 as a review of the original edition of Brennan's book. Published in *Anarchy* #005.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net