

Theoretical Anarchism and Anarchist Ideology

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“When reflection, feeling or whatever other form the subjective consciousness may assume, regards the present as vanity, and thinks itself to be beyond it and wiser, it finds itself in emptiness, and, as it has actuality only in the present, it is vanity throughout.”
(Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*)

Defeats are favorable for the inventory clerks with their inevitable conclusions; it is true that the owl of Minerva takes flight at night; but it is no less true that due to its injuries it does not always fly high enough to perch on the highest vantage point, and often remains at ground level, struggling among the weeds. The conditions of the defeats, the profound demoralization of defeat, the impossible hopes fostered by an exasperated survival instinct, contaminate reflection and prevent the necessary distancing from the events that would allow for judgments that reach objective conclusions and suggest a different historical conduct. Something along these lines took place in Spanish anarchism after 1939. During the 1940s, in exile or in jail, its supporters found themselves facing the same fork in the road that social democracy had faced a half century before: reform or revolution.

Some—and by no means the least numerous—claim that anarchism had always been negative, and the moment then arrived for it to engage in positive creation over the short term, however limited it might have been, and that this somehow meant a radical change of course. Activity no longer had to be directed towards a frontal attack against the ruling class but, instead, towards political and economic collaboration with its institutions, such as was the case during the revolutionary civil war and was still the case for six years afterwards in exile. The purpose of activity was no longer to capture territory from the bourgeoisie but to penetrate, and to develop our project in, its territory. According to the reformist alternative, anarchism was acceptable as an idea but not as a method, good as a “philosophy of life” but not as praxis based on the “apprehension of the present and the real”: an abstract ideal separated from prosaic everyday activity and merely accompanying it as a decorative illusion. As if ideals were “too excellent to enjoy reality or even too powerless to incorporate it” and had to limit themselves “to be compelled to be alone and not to be so effectively” (Hegel). But the problem for the revisionists was not “the idea”, but “reality”. And if, in the difficult circumstances of the postwar years, revolutionary anarchism had very few opportunities for practical engagement as long as the paramount concern

in Spain was survival, not even revisionism had enough room for maneuver, which is why it was only manifested in useless compromises with the inoperative institutions in exile or with the pretender to the throne, in the political programs it pursued, whether the bourgeois constitution of 1931, or the parliamentary monarchy, and various party projects, although there were also those who pursued this policy to its logical conclusion, and collaborated with Franco's regime. On the opposing side, it was claimed that institutional collaboration was the result of exceptional circumstances and was a complete failure, and contributed to the final disaster; it would have been so much better to stay faithful to apoliticism even at the price of remaining isolated, for if defeat was inevitable, it would have been better to fall with honor, in defense of one's ideals, rather than in defense of the State. This fraction sought to impose the restoration of the "principles, tactics and goals" of the libertarian movement in order to fight to return to "the conquests of July 19". The "purist" fraction, which was just as compromised by republican politics as its opponents, avoided going into details about the real motivations for this 180 degree reversal in its organic conduct, nor did it specify just how these conquests would be resurrected, nor did it specify how these principles were to be restored. Its supporters did not say one word about how the unitary trade unions were to function in the clandestine conditions of a totalitarian regime, or about how to implement direct action, the struggle against the State or the revolutionary insurrection against Francoism. This neo-orthodoxy was prepared for neither a critical reassessment of the political and military policies it pursued during the civil war, nor was it prepared to condescend to engage practically with the appalling reality of the dictatorship. For the "purists", action did not seem to be a problem, since no one's life was at stake and there was really nothing to gain, it was just a matter of hiding behind one's principles, which comprised an arsenal that was fully stocked with every possible justification. If one's principles are contradicted by reality, so much the worse for reality. By following this path anarchism was only expressed in rhetoric, inhibition and immobilism, or at most in some kind of insane adventurism. If the action engaged in by revisionists became more and more repellent, action evaporated altogether for the purists. In one, the idea was transformed into a backdrop for bourgeois politics; in the other, it ascends into the heaven of lost causes. For some, anarchism was just another kind of private morality with which one can somehow confront the vulgarity of everyday politics; for others, it constituted a faith with which one consoles oneself for the evils of the world, a creed to defend themselves from their Judases from the heights of their ivory tower. In both cases, it was an ideology.

Anarchism therefore ceased to be the intellectual expression of the most advanced sector of the workers movement on the peninsula, a product of the class struggle and a theory of this struggle. It forfeited this status because its content was no longer reality—at that time, the reality of defeat, of retreat and the annihilation of the workers movement. It no longer needed to understand reality in its bitter condition of regression, in order to discover the correct way to act within it and thus to transform it according to the goals of anarchism by applying the specific methods of anarchism. Anarchism disappeared as a material force in order to become a label, a catechism, and a ghetto. A creature that was half church, half party. It was no longer an idea based on a practice which it developed rather than contradicted, a social critique rooted in the material conditions of existence of the proletariat, and became instead something trivial, accidental, contingent, and consequently unreal. A utopia, a dream, and an illusion; something that cannot serve the general interests of the class. The main difference between theoretical anarchism—reflection within anarchism—and the anarchist ideology, lies in the separation of ideas and practice, ends and means, consciousness and action. Ideology is simultaneously the separate power of ideas

and the ideas of separate power. In the Spanish case, ideas were “principles” or “circumstances”, depending on how you looked at it, and the separate power was the Organization, its Plenums, and a complex bureaucratic routine. The latter is rooted in the confusion of the part with the whole, of the moment with the process, of tactical questions with strategic considerations, as has been demonstrated, for example, by the municipalist, primitivist and insurrectionist ideologies. The concept of ideology derives from the concept of religion, the criticism of which the Young Hegelians pronounced to be “the prerequisite of all criticism”. Religion, like ideology in general, is the inverted consciousness of the world. The world of ideology is a world seen upside down, and you have to turn your head upside down to understand it. Reality, the truth of this world, must be discovered in concrete material life, in transformative human activity; in the concrete, and in labor, not outside of it. The young Marx called everything that was not a productive force, everything that took place outside of the economy and did not have an economic origin, ideology. Ideology was formed of fantasies with which human beings, in a society that was insufficiently developed, explained their essential forces, and their potential. It was born of the dissatisfaction with a limited praxis, due to the fact that techno-economic progress had not yet affected all aspects of life. According to the Marxist point of view, ideology will tend to disappear with the full development of the productive forces, that is, with the development of the greatest productive force, the proletariat, whose objective living conditions will impose the realism that will liquidate the phantoms that stand between the workers and their real lives. The dissolution of ideological prejudices was for the worker an exigency of his immediate reality. Carrying this reasoning one step further, some of Marx’s disciples (Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg, Maurin) characterized anarchism as the ideology typical of an insufficiently developed proletariat. It is very easy to recognize the simple-mindedness that informs such reasoning, because it is more correct to say that the generalization of the proletarian condition goes hand in hand with the supreme development of ideology. The world of the commodity and automated technology is the world turned completely upside down. The experience of the workers movement is sufficient to prove the persistence of ideology, the veil of false representations that the bureaucrats easily cast over proletarianized life. The critique of ideology may be complemented thanks to psychoanalysis, which successfully connected it with various forms of degradation of the personality, such as character neurosis, schizophrenia and false consciousness in general, explaining ideological phenomena like racism, authoritarianism or militantism. At certain moments or during certain eras, when there were living proofs of emancipatory thought, a reflection so to speak, to use the words of Proudhon, that originates in action and returns to action, in other words, when there were revolutionaries, Marxism and anarchism supplied the proletariat with an adequate knowledge of society and kept it outside bourgeois politics, thus allowing it to make history. On the other hand, the revolutionary creations of the workers, the factory committees, the unitary trade unions and the workers councils, were places where abstract ideas and concrete practice converged, places where these theories became really working class theories and the workers became theoreticians. At other moments and during other eras, when anarchism as well as socialism had become ideologies serving spurious ends, ends fitting for a parasitic bureaucracy or evasive or submissive behavior, they were responsible for the eclipse of the workers’ class consciousness and for the dead ends of the workers’ practice. Thus, the critique of ideology, the secularized religion, is still the prerequisite of all critique. At the high point of Fordist capitalism, reflection on the current validity of the lessons of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Reclus or Malatesta did not make much sense. None of them could have foreseen just how closely related the development of

the productive forces, the colonization of everyday life and the counterrevolution would prove to be. The anarchist theoreticians must be considered as merely so many contributors to the long line of precursors, founders and continuators of revolutionary socialist thought, just like Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Reich, Benjamin and Fourier, to name just a few. One aspect of the old anarchism that is especially susceptible to criticism is its excessive confidence in the insurrectionary spontaneity of the proletarian and peasant masses, its oscillations between ultra-legalist tactics and propaganda of the deed or expropriations, its inability to forge alliances with other working class sectors, its perpetual temptation to engage in politics, its lack of a clear strategy, its organizational confusionism, etc. Any attempt to reestablish an anarchist doctrine—a system—with fragments of ideas taken out of context would only be a reactionary utopia. Certain aspects of anarchism, however, still preserve their subversive efficacy and negativity, which could still find an application even though social conditions have changed and circumstances are different. Such are the critiques of the State and of parliamentarism, of parties and science, not to forget its love of freedom and its contributions to educational theory, public health and sexology. It reached its highest point of practical realization during the Spanish Revolution, but defeat transformed its practical theoretical postulates into ideologies. During the 1960s no sincere revolutionary could avoid criticizing anarchist ideology and its representatives. The reconstruction of radical thought and revolutionary action occurred by way of a break with the world of anarchism. I have referred to this as the anarchist critique of real anarchism, although it would have been better to call it ‘unreal’, that is, ‘ideological’ anarchism, since only the rational is properly real. This critique was eminently negative, first of all, and was also applied to the Revolution of 1936. For the sixties witnessed a surge of a disrespectful anarchism that immediately clashed with not just the traditional left but also with the guardians of the temple of anarchy. This critique had to confront new problems deriving from the living conditions of late capitalism, problems which could not be clarified by an exclusive study of the classical texts: anti-colonial struggles, Maoism, the Hungarian Revolt, self-management, art in everyday life, mass culture, nuclear weapons, the pollution and destruction of the natural environment, concentrated urbanism, the role of technology and automation, the automobile, consumer society, sexual repression, women’s liberation, the question of violence, etc. The immensity of the task of critique made its debut with attempts to reconcile Marx and Bakunin, that is, to utilize Marxist analysis from anti-authoritarian positions, a somewhat simplistic formulation, which could easily end up in a libertarian Marxist ideology of the kind articulated by Guérin and Rubel. What was needed was contemporary relevance with regard to subversion and a new critique of politics, and therefore, with regard to many other factors—in the field of sociology, philosophy, historiography, art, etc.—but, above all, there was a need for learning to live intensely. First, there was an attempt to reaffirm the class struggle, by denouncing the police function of the trade unions and parties that had mobilized against the new forms of action (absenteeism, wildcat strikes, sabotage, theft) and organization (committees, assemblies, picket lines, coordinating committees, councils). Second, by extending the range of action of these new forms of action to the terrain of everyday life (neighborhood struggles, rejection of work, of the family, of religion and military service, the expropriation of photocopying machines, food or books, counterculture, rock, marijuana, subjectivity, adventures, squatters, communes). The theoretical labor of the Situationist International was the first (and only) generalized modern critique of class society, and was soon confirmed by a series of revolts, that is, the Dutch *Provos*, the *Zengakuren*, the revolt of the American blacks, the French May, the abortive revolution of the workers and soldiers in Portugal and

the Italian movement of 1977. We cannot say that it was complete, because it was not the result of all the preceding theoretical efforts and therefore did not contain the principles of all of them, since it overlooked some fundamental themes like the critique of instrumental reason or the ecological question, not to speak of its superficial critique of anarchism, but it was the most highly developed and concrete critique of its time. Everywhere, the same anti-authoritarian spirit was expressed, the same profound demand for freedom, the same project of the passionate reconstruction of everyday life that the S.I. expressed better than anyone else. And capitalism rapidly began to remake itself from head to foot, often utilizing the arguments and weapons of its enemies. In the countries where remnants of working class anarchist traditions survived, anarchism burst forth as a spontaneous and largely emotional response to the new servitudes imposed by capitalism, and it came face to face with the walls of ideology and the rage of its defenders. It was not a generational conflict; it was a reflection of the renewed class struggle. Under the prevailing conditions of modernity, the ideological ghetto and its old customs had become part of capitalism, and played the role of inoffensive ruins: it had to die so that the new revolutionary generations could live. The anarchist ghetto had more in common with the prevailing values than it did with the new rebels, which is why it was so indistinguishable from the political milieu and was so easily accommodated there. The role performed by the anarchists with respect to “the defense of freedom” or the consolidation of “democracy” has often been irreverently pointed out. The irony of history shows us a few old libertarians satisfied with closing ranks with the bourgeoisie. In Spain, where this tradition was more important than anywhere else and where the repression imposed by the dictatorship kept the contradictions of ideology crystallized, the fight between the old and the new—and between orthodox and revisionist—reached the level of a pitched battle. The “relaunching” of the CNT took place in 1976 outside of the workplaces, that is, at the margin of the workers movement. It was therefore not an expression of the renascent class struggle, but the product of a series of meetings between heterogeneous groups that were not involved with the assemblies of strikers but which did have a common denominator: the desire to build a trade union federation that could contend with the Workers Commissions for preeminence in separate class representation. The presence of organizations like “*Solidaridad*” and the admission of the “*cincopuntistas*”¹, and other riff-raff involved with the vertical trade unions clearly indicated that the kind of syndicalism the CNT had in mind was not very different from the other choices on offer. In conformance with these plans, those who reestablished the CNT did not concern themselves with the crucial dilemmas of the workers assembly movement; instead, they wanted to set up their recruiting booth, that is, a sufficient bureaucratic structure (the regional and national committees, the permanent secretary, union cards, plenums) and they sought an alliance with the UGT² and the USO³ in order to get a piece of the pie that the Workers Commissions had tried to keep for themselves: the control of the labor market. The demands for “trade union freedom” and for the dismantling of the CNS⁴, along with the debate over legalization, were the highlights of the first period of the reconstructed CNT. The latter not

¹ A faction of the CNT that precipitated a split in the confederation in 1966 after its members began to participate in the Francoist “vertical unions” together with the Communists and the progressive Catholics—translator’s note

² *Unión General de Trabajadores*, the Socialist trade union confederation—translator’s note

³ *Unión Sindical Obrera*, the “Workers Trade Unionist Confederation”, a Catholic-Socialist trade union founded in 1960—translator’s note

⁴ *Centrales Nacional-Sindicalistas*, “National-Syndicalist Trade Union Federations”, Francoist corporatist-collaborationist trade union federations—translator’s note

only ignored the revolutionary possibilities of the moment, possibilities that would dissipate due to a lack of progress with regard to clarification and action, but also helped deliver the coup de grâce to the assembly movement by way of its adherence, *de jure* or *de facto*, to the COS⁵ call for a general strike on November 12, which marked the culminating point of the autonomous mobilizations and the beginning of the all-out trade union counteroffensive. However, the failure of the workers' efforts at self-organization—the aborted transformation of the assemblies into workers councils—attracted many fighters to the CNT who did not accept the bureaucratic and pusillanimous trade unionism that was in store for them, in the vain hope of finding horizontal structures of mutual aid and an anti-authoritarian spirit that would allow them to carry on the fight. They overlaid the image of what the CNT had been at one time on its impoverished reality. The CNT also attracted many young people who had no interest in labor conflicts, who did not want a trade union but an “integral” organization, that is, a “general” organization devoted to addressing all social questions and fighting on all possible fronts against capitalism. Finally, in 1977, a whole series of “pro-autonomy” workerist groupuscules that emerged from the heat of the assemblies or parallel to them entered the CNT, all too confused and incapable of maintaining their own organizational identity, and therefore inclined to lay their eggs in someone else's nest. They saw the still virgin syndicalism of the CNT as the “seed” of “workers autonomy”, a crypto-Leninist ideology of Italian origin; so true is it that the enemies of proletarian autonomy disguise themselves as its friends in order to more effectively combat it.

For all these reasons, the CNT's growth after January 1977 was unstoppable, vast crowds attended all its meetings and rallies, numerous publications of a libertarian character appeared, and the CNT's bureaucrats were exultant. In less than two years its membership had risen from a few thousand to 129,000. It would surpass 250,000 in 1978. The party of order (the employers association, the other trade unions and the State) was seriously concerned, since, on the eve of the signing of the Moncloa Accords, the September National Plenum of the CNT had proclaimed that the assembly was the only sovereign decision making body. According to the CNT report on the question, the trade union must limit its activities to support for and solidarity with strikes, rather than mediating them.

The CNT was not supposed to interpose itself between the employer and the workers, but to dissolve itself into the assemblies. The leaders of the established order, however, were soon able to breathe easy again, for the victory of the assembly movement was a Pyrrhic victory, since it was immediately followed by the counterattack of the orthodox trade union factions in the CNT—who subscribed to the ideological forms current during the Republic—unleashing a struggle for power that, beginning with the secretariat, affected all levels of the Organization, from the various committees to the highest directive bodies of the trade unions.

The Moncloa Accords prioritized a kind of “harmonizing” trade unionism that excluded all direct action and prohibited all generalization of struggles, which were among the few points concerning which almost all the CNT members were in agreement. As a result, the CNT denounced the Moncloa Accords and boycotted the trade union elections, although many of its members were elected as “independent” candidates.

In any event, there was a considerable rate of abstention, but the UGT and the Workers Commissions needed only a little more than 10% of the eligible voters in order to represent the workers

⁵ *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sindicale*, “Coordinating Committee of Trade Union Organizations”, a federation formed in 1976 by the Workers Commissions, the USO and the UGT—translator's note

before the employers association and the government. The CNT was hoping that its marginalization from the enterprise committees and the labor contract negotiations would be compensated for by the mass mobilization of the workers. But with stakes this high—in January 1978—the workers assembly movement was on the defensive and the mixed formulas of representative assembly-trade union committees, or trade union committees subject to assembly referendums, replaced the previous forms of direct democracy.

The CNT could no longer count on the initiative of the workers, which had been exhausted; furthermore, despite its growing membership, it had not yet led an important strike—it had not yet been tested. On the other hand, its power of attraction was no longer as strong as it was during the Libertarian surge; only ten thousand people attended the demonstration against the Moncloa Accords in Barcelona, despite the fact that the number of CNT members in that city had quadrupled. On that same day (January 15, 1978), the police provocation at the Scala nightclub took place. New confrontations were added to the current disputes over assemblies and integral organization, this time with regard to the trade union elections, the violent actions of minorities and the presence of armed groups that jeopardized the Organization. The power struggles between the various tendencies and personalities became so intense that the permanent secretariat had to be transferred from Madrid to Barcelona (April 1978).

From that point on, it was a constant feature of the CNT for the secretaries to utilize their positions to consolidate the power of their own factions and to reduce that of their competitors. Repeating a trend characteristic of counterrevolutionary periods, the most important positions were occupied by the worst people. Meanwhile, the assembly-based strikes came to an end and the influence of the assemblyists and the “integralists” within the organization declined, and the advocates of moderate syndicalism and electoral participation, most of whom were former “autonomists” who had since embraced an anti-anarchist revisionism, became more confident. Thanks to the Plenum system wherein only the organization’s officials participated without being responsible to either the assemblies of the militants or the numbers of members represented by each official, the orthodox, christened the “FAI in Exile” or “the Founders” by their enemies, dominated the Organization. Even so, 150,000 copies of the journal *Ajoblanco* were printed at this time, an indication of the existence of widespread libertarian sympathies, although quite watered down, but membership was in precipitous decline. The petrol strike was the first, and last, strike led by the CNT, and it committed Hara-Kiri during this strike. Neither direct action, nor hard-nosed syndicalism; just governmental mediation and employers victory.

In 1979, resignations, expulsions, and dissolutions of trade unions continued without interruption; the factional struggles could not conceal the fact that the pendulum was swinging towards elections and open bureaucratic mediation. Cases like that of FIGA⁶ (vanguardist adventurism), *Askatasuna*⁷ (populist-nationalism) and the “Parallels” (trade unionist opportunism), highlighted the extent of the decomposition, especially among the latter tendency. In a climate of defeat the only kind of trade unionism that can function is bureaucratic trade unionism. For the “Parallels”—and for the electoralists in general—it was necessary to incorporate the CNT into the dominant trade union dynamic and to play the game of the UGT and the Workers Commissions or else become marginalized and sidelined not just with respect to the agreements with the employers

⁶ *Federación Ibérica de Grupos Anarquistas*, “Iberian Federation of Anarchist Groups”—translator’s note

⁷ “Freedom” in Euskara, the language of the Basque Country, a Basque political party founded in 1998 and outlawed in 2009—translator’s note

and the government, but also with respect to official subsidies and financial assistance. This was the crux of the issue that was deliberated at the self-proclaimed Fifth Congress, held in December 1979 by an emaciated CNT that represented no more than thirty thousand members. The archaic ideology emerged victorious and the reformist minorities were sent packing, some towards the “majoritarian” trade unions and the others towards the reconstruction of a second workerist CNT of the same ilk. And over time, except for small circles that remained faithful to the classical ideology, which maintained the ownership of the acronyms and carried out a very limited activity under their shelter, the mass of militants either retired into private life, or returned to the fold of bureaucratic trade unionism, impotent and supine, which they had once supposedly sworn to oppose. If the adventures of ideology were tragic in the past, during the period of the “Transition” they acquired the characteristics of genuine farce. On this occasion anarchism and anarchosindicalism did not reappear as the thought and the practice of the revolutionary movement of the working class prior to Francoism, but as an elementary mystification, an often comical display whose function was of course not to engage in a reevaluation of the lessons of past struggles, but to collaborate, after having dabbled on the *wild side*⁸, in capitalist modernization. The contrast between the practice of the working class until 1977 and an almost absent revolutionary theory, or a “general expression, and nothing more, of the real historical movement” that was barely sketched in its general outlines, favored the development of ideology and bureaucracy. Both derived their power from the image of a revolutionary past with its contradictions so well concealed, like the alienating conditions of existence of the working classes. As a bulwark of the dominant lie they fostered a chatterbox syndicalism and a ridiculous fashion of contestation. The remnants of the radical proletariat were defeated a second time where they thought they could safely regroup.

The CNT fulfilled this second glorious role that history conceded to it, but it did not get its thirty pieces of silver. The cycle of workers bureaucracy ended with the defeat of the assemblyist proletariat and the filling of the ranks of spectacular representation with professional yellow trade unionists. The framework agreements and the Labor Law prohibited solidarity and assemblies, eliminating even the possibility of a semi-autonomous action concealed behind the enterprise committees, an incipient and imperfect form of trade union bureaucracy.

From that point forward there was only room for the neo-vertical trade unionism of the “co-cos”⁹ and the UGT. The extremely rare transgressions of the rules that would take place would not modify the deplorable panorama of resignation and submission.

As a consequence of this tremendous debacle, ideology in all its variants is once again open to challenge; memory was erased and both theoretical reflection as well as its praxis must traverse a vast desert—a kind of second exile—in order to once again connect with reality and history.

⁸ italicized words are in English in original—translator’s note

⁹ CCOOs, *Comisiones Obreras*, “Workers Commissions”, founded by Communist Party members and Catholic trade unionists during the 1960s—translator’s note

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