

Vanishing Points in Working Class Culture

Reflections on the cultural genocide of the proletariat in connection with the presentation of the book, *Los Incontrolados de 1937, memorias militantes de Los Amigos de Durruti*

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In order to understand the impact of The Friends of Durruti in the Spanish revolutionary war we must situate it in the context of rampant counterrevolution that confronted many veteran anarchosyndicalist militants of proven merit with a radical dilemma. Either obey the leading committees of their organization, which ordered them not to respond to counterrevolutionary aggression, or openly engage the counterrevolutionary forces in battle. Based on the revolutionary resolve and the human qualities of those proletarian fighters, one can easily explain the last working class revolution, which lasted from July 19, 1936 to May 8, 1937. We have restricted the scope of our efforts to nine biographies, to which others could easily be added—those of Jaime Balius and Joaquín Pérez Navarro, which I have already published—without running out of material. The CNT and anarchism were an unparalleled source of individuals who were totally devoted to the cause of freedom and social justice—the cause of the proletariat—and who were referred to by their enemies as “incontrolados”. This insult was an involuntary homage that was rendered by the counterrevolution to those revolutionaries who were not subject to the institutional control of the bourgeoisie and the Stalinists. If history took a wrong turn, it was not their fault. All the anti-historical forces conspired to bring it about, from the fascist conglomerate to the republican cement. The bourgeoisie played all its trump cards to do everything it could to win. The publication of this modest book proves that its victory was not total.

In other times, we believed that the revelation of the truth concealed in defeats would be enough to orient revolutionary action, diverting its agents from historical dead ends. We assumed that the past contained all the necessary lessons to resolve the dilemmas of the present. Now, however, the publication of a book in a society that lives in a perpetual present is necessarily an anachronism, an untimely event. Knowledge of the truth of the past has no effect on everyday activities. It does not reinforce the values of a potentially revolutionary community, nor does it augment the critical capacities of engaged readers. In a society without any consciousness of time and without memory, the past does not exist, and only arises as the object of archeological research or as spectacular ephemera like the “eightieth anniversary of the civil war”, its usual place being the university, the museum, or the cultural supplements of the mainstream press,

contexts in which its subversive, and preservative, power, is neutralized. These biographies are intended for the heirs of the legendary Friends of Durruti—but do such heirs even exist?

Traditional societies transmitted their legacies orally from one generation to the next. Young people learned from their elders; there was no generation gap. These were static societies: the future of the young people flowed in the channels of the past and proceeded along the path that was also followed by the previous generation. Family and territorial bonds were very strong. Memory, of which the elders were the custodians, played an important role in the preservation of social customs and identity, and it was therefore of fundamental importance in the continuous reproduction of society. The rise of historical societies, based on constant change, the accumulation of knowledge, trade and the written word, introduced dissolving factors that were at first restricted to cities. These societies are dynamic societies with weakened bonds and unstable identities, in which memory plays a secondary role compared to novelty. The majority of the population, however, remained outside this nihilist dynamic, since it lived in the countryside and preserved traditional lifestyles that were not eliminated until the consolidation of capitalism in the rural areas. In fully capitalist society, young people learn on their own by adopting the universal consumerist patterns transmitted by the mass communications media, rather than learning from their elders; their future depends on a present that is separated from the experience of the previous generations that were much less affected by technology because they came of age, for the most part, outside of capitalist conditioning. Turbo-capitalist production has imposed an industrialized way of life, a new narcissistic culture with certain pragmatic and hedonistic values without any relation at all to the values that prevailed in the working class milieus prior to their conversion by the gospel of generalized consumption.

During the early stages of capitalism, by dissolving traditional ways of life, capitalism created a world apart with its own characteristics, a society within a society composed of the disinherited, the pariahs, the uprooted populations expelled from the countryside or their craft guilds; in short, the workers. The proletarian world, based on the family, whose sole connection with the industrial society that surrounded it was labor, developed communitarian features that gave it a particular, stable identity, a class identity, a specific culture. In a way, there was a working class tradition that articulated the society of labor and possessed its own permanent values: the need for association, the federative idea, the thirst for education, solidarity, the dignity of one's trade, the future of one's children, class pride, internationalism, the social revolution.... The autobiographies written by the militants of that time are perfect reflections of this mentality. We are thinking, for example, of the memoirs and autobiographical writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Gustave Lefrançaise, James Guillaume, Anselmo Lorenzo, Nestor Makhno, Emma Goldman, Victor Serge, Manuel Pérez, José Peirats, etc., precious accounts of rebel lives devoted to the service of the workers' cause.

Proletarian society was in a state of permanent conflict with bourgeois society, which is why the experience of the struggles of the past was so important, and why those who led these struggles played such a major role in that society. It was a society based on status. The future of the class was based on the memory of the battles of the past and also on the memory of those who played outstanding roles in those battles, who were popular and enjoyed a great deal of moral authority. For it was through written works that working class culture was constituted, a typically historical culture of resistance, that is, a culture that found its meaning and its existence in history, since its final victory was inscribed in its innermost being, but was also at the same time a traditional culture, firmly based on certain deeply-rooted collective values, resistant to the ef-

fects of the passage of time. The children of the workers imitated their parents even with respect to clothing styles, succeeding them in a stable social scenario. Paradoxically, their meaning and their existence also depended on the invariable customs rooted in the class. The history of the workers, which is the history of their struggles, although a history of a collective, is also a history of individuals. These individuals were people who embodied the conduct and the values that were most representative of the class, which is why individual contributions were not relevant and were forgotten with the passage of time. A few examples in the context of the Spanish situation: Salvador Seguí, Francisco Maroto and Buenaventura Durruti, the last legendary figures of the proletariat (legendary in a sense quite different from the Sorelian concept of “myth”). These individuals embodied the reaffirmation of working class identity and an attempt to protect the latter from the corrosive effect of a historical process determined by capitalism.

The current of the proletarian and peasant movement of Spain that was influenced by anarchism stressed the customary or traditional aspect, since it was fighting not against a highly-developed capitalism, but against the very existence of capitalism itself, which was still in a very under-developed state in Spain at that time. Faith in progress had only a very superficial effect on it, in the form of scientific optimism, a bourgeois influence that it was incapable of repudiating. Franz Borkenau, in *The Spanish Cockpit*, written during the Spanish civil war, pointed out that, “the rebellion of the Spanish masses was not a fight for better conditions inside a progressive capitalist system which they would admire; it was a fight against the first advances of capitalism itself, which they hated.... And this, in my opinion, is the explanation of the preponderance of anarchism in Spain”. The ideas of private profit, quantity, success, mechanization, utilitarianism, etc., which were characteristic of an industrial civilization, had scarcely established a small foothold in a social environment that was self-governed by principles like solidarity, fraternity, friendship and a desire for education.

In the most advanced stages of capitalism—in which one defeat after another followed hard on the heels of incessant and profound changes, technological for the most part, that exploded working class society, integrating it into the world of the commodity—the proletarian present broke with its past, it split from it, it ceased to identify with it. With the working class family reduced to its minimal nuclear expression, sitting in front of the television, the worker subsists as an individual consumer, rather than as a member of the proletarian collective. He does not derive his norms from the past, which has been usurped by trade union and political bureaucrats, but from the present, transmitted by television, reproducing the erratic and consumerist pattern of conduct of his contemporary models in the middle class, loyal to the directives of the spectacle. Working class culture has been dissolved into an inter-classist, homogenized culture created in the image of capitalism. A veritable cultural genocide has taken place, an eradication of proletarian values. The generation gap has special consequences in a working class in decline, since the latter ends up disarticulated, an empty shell of its former self. It is incapable of resisting even the slightest blow, much less of assimilating all the changes without harm to itself. It is a class on the surface, but inside it is de-structured, liquefied, colonized. Eventually, the older proletarians were no longer capable of transmitting knowledge and values with which the new, constantly changing situation could be confronted, and this circumstance was only aggravated if they allowed themselves to be swayed by the “lesser of two evils” tactic and allowed false friends to represent their interests. Their old-fashioned, frugal, pedestrian, austere and moralistic lifestyle is not valid in a utilitarian, anxious, constantly busy, completely motorized, commodified world of mass consumption. The rules appropriate for poverty are not the same

rules that apply to an abundance of commodities and spectacles: that which is effective against hunger is of no use against boredom. A class culture is at a great disadvantage in its competition not with a bourgeois culture, but with a culture industry and omnipresent trade union and political stage-managed theater. Thus, working class culture dies with the institutionalization of its organizations and the generalization of mass culture.

The past is extinguished with the disappearance of an entire generation of defeated individuals, because older workers cannot offer practical models of conduct; they have to construct them based on a different, extremely mercurial reality, without any moorings. The conditions of the young wage workers of our time are radically different from those of previous generations. The children of the workers are educated by public institutions, not by their parents, and these institutions transmit a different set of rules disconnected from past experience and in consonance with the reproductive needs of capital determined by the new technologies. The disconnection from the past impels a search for reference points of conduct in a present that is colonized by the commodity, a search that must take place in conditions of extreme isolation. A retired worker is like an alien from another planet to a young member of the labor force, and neither takes the other seriously, and sometimes they view each other with mutual distrust. The older worker does not tell the whole truth, which, in the real absence of community, only exacerbates the generation gap, the loss of memory and, consequently, the loss of identity. Without either memory or past, class consciousness cannot survive. The conflict between generations, the clash of mentalities, prevents its resurgence. The abstract and voluntaristic reaffirmation of the old concepts of working class culture, now transformed into so many clichés, not only fails to resolve the problem, but renders those concepts ridiculous.

A typical characteristic of contemporary social movements is the scarcity of adults and, conversely, the predominance of adolescents. This is the most glaring example of the disconnection with previous social struggles, even with relatively recent ones, but it also exemplifies the overwhelming degree of submission and scepticism of people who have had some experience of life. These social movements are tolerated ghettos that usually remain within the boundaries assigned to them. The same is true of those movements that suddenly arise from out of nowhere and succumb to the usual crude maneuvers, since by their very nature they lack the historical experience and knowledge to recognize how they are being manipulated. They are beaten in advance, and moreover their potential for protest is often channeled directly towards new efforts to reinforce the dominant system, for when they abandon their usual niches and enter the public arena they only do so in order to adopt the point of view of the bovine majority and to almost automatically reproduce its values, thereby modernizing its outward appearances. Regressive social changes have their cultural reflections, and the lessons learned by the dissident youth are the products of the moment and are only relevant on a day-to-day basis. Most of these young people neither read nor do they seek to inform themselves. They neither learn anything, nor do they attempt to rid themselves of the effects of their mainstream education: they act without thinking. In the late stage of capitalism, mass culture has become so unstable that not even the present is capable of offering tolerably lasting models for conduct. Changes succeed one another so rapidly that even a single generation is internally divided and split in this way. Today's young people grow old in a few years, which is how long it takes them to change their convictions. Their histories soon become uninteresting to those who follow them, and rapidly become obsolete like changing fashions. Ten years are an unbridgeable chasm. Past, present and future are concentrated in a single instant. From this point on, the problem is not that experience can-

not be transmitted, but that there is no experience. There is neither a rupture properly speaking (every generation constitutes such a rupture), nor is there a future, there are only short-term objectives. Conduct therefore becomes conformist and politics becomes institutional; after being shown the door, it returns through the window. In this kind of world the only utopia is the capitalist utopia.

Consumer society has created an increasingly more alien and hostile environment for the older generations; for the younger generations, however, this is their environment and they feel comfortable in it. It seems more like their epoch than that of their parents. It is not that the preceding generations no longer serve as guides, but that, insofar as the past is incommunicable, guides cannot exist. Not only do the different generations abide by different codes and literally speak different languages, but the different strata of a single generation are divided in the same way. The newcomers do not know more than the others, but what the latter know is of no interest to them, because this knowledge does not respond as expected to their scarce questions. Experience is of no use, since it was acquired in very different circumstances, before the absolute reign of the commodity and the complete establishment of its cultural norms. The question then arises: what good is memory? This has its consequences, however: such historical amnesia implies the disappearance of the concept of truth. Disconnected from history, truth becomes relative; it is not based in any solid cause nor is it determined by an iron historical necessity, but depends exclusively on contingent, arbitrary and variable opinion, which is in turn dependent on the immediate conditions of the individual who expresses it. This marks the end of the ideologies that legitimized great collective causes, and the advent of the absolute rule of pragmatic individualism, private life and ephemeral commitments. And, paradoxically, it also implies the reunification of the various generations within neurotic isolation and complacent ignorance. Young people are old without wanting to be old; older people are driven to behave like young people. Curiously, this gives rise to a reversal of perspective: young people serve as models for the adults, who are not as skilled in dealing with change. This situation has no historical precedent; it is entirely new. Some have called it "liquid modernity" and others, "post-modernity". In a postmodern context, thought has no moorings; instead, it accumulates along the side of the road of life that is paved by technology. It is a decorative accompaniment, it explains nothing, it is self-referential and stands above everything, without influencing anything. More than just liquid, reflection is becoming gaseous, like the tremendously fluid reality to which it is yoked. Its function is not rooted in its power to grasp the epoch, in its capacity for truth, but rather in its ability to render both unintelligible.

An eternal present not only depreciates the value of the struggles of the past, but also entails the volatility of social groups, which are easily reducible to masses of aggregated individuals, whose sole nexus is the image. Much the same is true of community feeling, which is replaced by a hive-mentality composed of desperate identities, truly pathological to various degrees, incapable of mounting any other kind of resistance to the general sensation of uprootedness. However, the system can only overcome its contradictions by plunging into other, more profound contradictions. With the suppression of memory and the derangement of the ego, society is not made stronger, but becomes increasingly more unpredictable. Conflict is constantly reproduced in new forms, thus even making possible the formation of communities of struggle, still fragile, but, at a certain critical moment, it is possible that they will be reinforced by the need to survive, and thus rendered capable of re-encountering history and forging a radically egalitarian and just project for society. This will involve neither a return to the past, nor a recreation of the past, but

a reestablishment of contact with the past and learning from it. It is therefore not a nostalgic revolt oriented towards the recreation of lost traditions, but an impulse towards the formation of a new tradition of struggle—a new culture—by way of a non-doctrinaire re-appropriation of the past and resistance to the demented pace of the changes introduced by economic development. It is in this sense that books like the one we are presenting here can be instructive because they can make a contribution to the creation of such a culture. If this happens, then The Friends of Durruti might finally have some heirs.

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