

Goals and Means: Anarchism, Syndicalism, and Internationalism in the Origins of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica

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Jason Garner's monograph on the origins of the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI) is an illuminating and much-welcomed addition to the inchoate body of English-language scholarship dealing specifically with pre-Civil War Spanish anarchism. Exploring the symbiotic yet tumultuous relationship between syndicalism and anarchism, and the manner in which it impacted the course of the Spanish labour movement over the three or so decades that preceded the founding of the Second Republic, the book also touches on adjacent themes like the origins of anarchism in Spain, the impact of Bolshevism on revolutionary politics in post First World War Europe, the experiences of the Spanish revolutionary diaspora, and the conflict between revolutionary fervour and 'reformist' pragmatism. The last-named is of particular import as it is the motif which runs through all of the book's eight chapters, serving to poignantly illustrate the self-conflicted nature of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism during the years leading up to its most challenging period.

Garner places his research in a broadly revisionist current of scholarship that eschews the view of Spanish anarchism as a historical curiosity, seeking instead to place it 'within the economic and sociopolitical reality' (p. 4) of Restoration and Civil War Spain. While steering clear of a lengthy review of the current academic literature, the author nonetheless minces no words in taking to task the theories of Eric Hobsbawm and the 'patronising interpretations' (p. 4) of liberal historians. Hobsbawm's controversial, if increasingly dated, views of 19th-century Andalusian anarchism as 'pre-political' millenarian banditry have of course long been a legitimate target of historians of anarchism [\(1\)](#), and it is understandable if Garner does not here forgo the opportunity to drive another nail into the coffin of 'Marxist sophistry' (p. 4). What is less understandable, at least to this reviewer, is the author's identification of liberal historiography with the Civil War reportage of Franz Borkenau and with Gerald Brenan's 1943 *Spanish Labyrinth*. Granted that such accounts betray a certain impressionistic cursoriness and romantic simplification, they are hardly representative of the contemporary English-language scholarship dealing with Spanish anarchism (pre and post-1936) from a broadly liberal (i.e. pro-Republican) perspective.

The book's first chapter traces the birth of the anarchist movement in Europe as well as the evolution of Spanish anarchism from its earliest manifestations in the 1860s to the beginning of the 20th century. Although this story is not new, it successfully sets the tone for the rest of the book by focusing on the deep

divisions which characterized the First International and its aftermath: divisions between Marxists and anarchists on the one hand, and between the main different currents of anarchism (namely communism, collectivism, and individualism) on the other. As Garner suggests, the rarefied doctrinal differences that inevitably framed these conflicts were not always insurmountable. Collectivists (whose economic outlook was somewhat less radical than that of the communists) could find common ground with apolitical trade unionists, as they did for example in the *Federación Regional Española* (FRE), the short-lived Spanish section of the First International. Likewise, individualists could agree with communists on the primacy of a spontaneous popular revolt in overturning capitalism (even as they disagreed on the means of bringing it about). The unbridgeable chasm lay rather between those who were willing to 'work within the system' to some extent (either through non-aligned trade unions or cooperation with left-wing political parties) and those who clung to an uncompromisingly pure version of revolutionary anti-statism. This chasm, along with the instability created by an uninterrupted cycle of governmental repression, was ultimately responsible for the downfall of the FRE and its successor organizations.

Despite the string of high-profile outrages perpetrated by proponents of the individualist 'propaganda by the deed' during the 1890s (culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Cánovas del Castillo in 1897), anarcho-individualism failed to make any lasting impact in Spain. Instead, a new 'collectivist-communist synthesis' (p. 45) emerged which aimed at imbuing the movement of the working-class with a distinctly libertarian ethos. As the second chapter reveals, however, this did not, by any means, usher in a new era of harmonious unity in the camp of Spanish anarchism. The creation of the French *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) in 1895 and its adoption of the Amiens Charter 11 years later marked the arrival of revolutionary syndicalism, a doctrine which, in its wedding of militant direct action and non-partisan inclusiveness, promised to finally heal the rift between the intransigents and the pragmatists. As Garner rightfully observes, however, the Amiens Charter was 'flawed from birth' (p. 50) given that its apoliticism was based more on sidetracking the union members' actual politics than on a sustained opposition to parliamentarianism. It remains debatable whether this was the product of a 'blind faith' (p. 51) in the union as sufficient in itself for the emancipation of the working class, or rather a tacit recognition of the fact that an explicitly anarchist union was unlikely to draw a significant membership. What is certain is that revolutionary syndicalism was received with a marked degree of scepticism by Spanish anarchists – a fact aptly illustrated by the 1910 congress which marked the foundation of the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT). As the leading delegates of this new syndical confederation (many of them anarchists or sympathetic to anarchism) were eager to establish, 'syndicalism was a means, not an end in itself' (p. 62).

The end remained yet to be formulated given that anarchists, although heavily involved in the CNT, refused to take up leading positions within the Confederation or to adopt the entryist strategy that Communists would later become infamous for. The coming of the First World War did not really help clarify the issue but in bringing about a massive economic expansion in neutral Spain, it also gave the CNT a new lease of life and by 1916 its membership had already risen to 50,000. It continued to rise spectacularly, temporarily outnumbering that of the older, better-established and Socialist-aligned *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT). This seemingly unstoppable progress was not to last, however. After a massive and surprisingly successful strike in Barcelona, the Catalan Employers' Federation declared war on the unions in 1919 by imposing a lockout which, coupled with intensified governmental repression, had the desired effect of starving the workers into submission and demoralizing the unions. A period of so-called *pistolerismo* followed during which gunmen of the 'yellow' unions known as *sindicatos libres* began unleashing a campaign of terror against militant trade unionists, in particular those of the CNT. Garner's description of this violence as 'Chicago-style gang warfare' (p. 91) seems somewhat flippant given that, as he himself puts it, 'many [...] leading figures' (p. 92) of the CNT lost their lives as a consequence. *Pistolerismo* had of course nothing to do with territorial skirmishing or knee-jerk vendettas and everything to do with a full-scale, extra-legal onslaught on the unions by state-supported mercenaries acting with impunity. As Manuel Buenacasa, a prominent anarchist within the CNT, put it at the time, 'The best of our cadres are faced with this dilemma: to kill or be killed'.⁽²⁾

The other existential dilemma which the Confederation faced at the time was that which had been

occasioned by the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia. Initial reactions were overwhelmingly favourable and even anarchists like Buenacasa declared their qualified support for Lenin's lesser, state-based form of socialism. As Garner points out, this was, to a significant extent, the consequence of a paucity of reliable information on events in Russia and of a vicarious fervour for what seemed like the 'first phase of a revolutionary process that would have a domino effect' (p. 86) throughout Europe. The syndicalists' response was largely of the same nature although it seems somewhat more polarized. There was enthusiastic support from some in the militant wing, most notably Andreu Nin and Joaquin Maurin (both of whom would later transition into Communist politics), and ambivalence, followed by outright hostility, from the more moderate wing represented by individuals like Ángel Pestaña and Salvador Quemades (who later drifted towards the parliamentary Left). The CNT did join the Third International in 1920, but a year later, when the inaugural congress of the Profintern (the Comintern-controlled international of trade unions) took place in Moscow, the unsteady compromise between Bolshevism and revolutionary syndicalism finally broke down. The Spanish delegation (headed by Nin and Maurin) signed on to the notion that the Profintern should be essentially subordinate to the needs of the Comintern but back in Spain this decision created a storm of controversy out of which the anti-Bolsheviks ultimately emerged victorious. By 1922 the CNT had left the Profintern and was now in search of a new international, one that would embody the principles of pre-war syndicalism.

Garner rightfully deplores the 'almost complete dearth of in-depth research' (p. 114) on the syndicalist International Working Men's Association (IWMA) founded in 1923 and for this reason his chapter on the topic is an illuminating and welcome contribution. The CNT was of course not the only syndicalist organisation to reject Communist control, although at this stage it was arguably the most important. The *Unione Sindicale Italiana* (USI) retained some prominence thanks to its leading role in the *biennio rosso*, but was now about to come under fire from Mussolini's blackshirts (and would eventually be driven underground in 1925). The French CGT, which had supported the *Union sacrée* government during the First World War, was now a reformist union completely lost to revolutionary syndicalism except for a minority, which, its own minority of refuseniks notwithstanding, decided to side with Moscow in the end. The German and Dutch syndicalists were likewise either losing momentum or undergoing internal splits. In this context it is remarkable that the syndicalist congress in Berlin took place at all, but that it did between December 1922 and January 1923, drawing delegates from several Western European countries as well as from Argentina. It sought to correct past mistakes by replacing the naive apoliticism of the pre-war period with a 'more clearly antipolitical' (p. 121) and anti-statist stance. In that sense the new revolutionary syndicalism was markedly more pro-anarchist than that which preceded it although membership in the IWMA remained open only to trade unions.

The CNT's entrance into the new International did not however heal the rift between anarchists and the Confederation's cautious leaders (chief amongst them Pestaña, Salvador Seguí, and Juan Peiró) whose syndicalism was now 'more evolutionary than revolutionary' (p. 134). It is in fact debatable whether the ideology espoused by the moderates (who otherwise claimed to be apolitical) merited the name revolutionary syndicalism at all given that shortly before the Berlin congress, the national committee of the CNT was still seriously considering making peace with Moscow. Evidence of the Bolshevik suppression of anarchism and of independent trade unionism in Russia was by now impossible to deny for all but the converted and it seems somewhat generous to reduce this backtracking solely to a fear of isolation (p. 136). Whatever the explanation, the anarchist fears of 'an ideological vacuum at the head of the confederation' (p. 136) would only be exacerbated by the coming military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

As Garner shows in chapters five and six, the dictatorship, even more so than Bolshevism, had the overall effect of accelerating internal divisions within the CNT. The moderate leadership, which as early as 1920 had been talking of 'possibilist syndicalism' (in reference to the reformism, or 'possibilism,' of social democrats) and rubbing shoulders with the parliamentary Left (pp. 149–50), was, after 1923, calling for a 'popular front' strategy against the dictatorship on the one hand (p. 166) while attempting to peacefully 'regain legal status' (p. 170) for the now banned Confederation on the other. Within the rank and file, Garner argues, it is 'helpful to simplify the situation as one between syndicalists (the moderate wing of the CNT)

and anarchists (the radicals), with the anarcho-syndicalists caught in the middle' (p. 141). These positions were more tactical than uncompromisingly ideological, and both syndicalists and anarchists were ultimately committed to some form of anarchist (or libertarian) communism. However, in an atmosphere of increasing suspiciousness, mutual recriminations, and increased governmental repression, a minority of more intransigent 'radical' anarchists favoured going on the attack. Small groups of anarchist vigilantes (whom Garner problematically labels 'anarcho-Bolsheviks') began fighting back against the terror of the state-appointed *pistoleros*, arguing at the same time in favour of a new, insurrectionist, form of militancy spearheaded by a 'workers' army' (pp. 144–5). The 1923 National Anarchist Congress in Madrid ultimately rejected this position and shortly thereafter most of the leading 'anarcho-Bolsheviks,' including such future Civil War icons as Durruti, Ascaso and Garcia Oliver, were silenced or forced into exile after the de Rivera regime began a new crackdown on militant trade unionists (which, given the collaborationist stance of the UGT leadership, had a disproportionate impact on the CNT).

Those 'radical' anarchists who did not support small-scale insurrectionary tactics nonetheless remained deeply critical of the rightward drift of leading syndicalists and of the ideological vagueness of syndicalism itself. They grouped themselves around the so-called *Movimiento Obrero Anarquista* (MOA) which found particular support in Catalonia, where the CNT was banned in 1924 (p. 165). The Confederation ultimately 'ceased to exist as an effective national organisation' following its outlawing in those 'areas where [it] had been strongest' (p. 172) and for the remainder of the 1920s its militancy was effectively reduced to a war of words between syndicalists and supporters of the MOA and to involvement in a couple of failed coups against the dictatorship (which resulted in more state repression). The MOA, which favoured the ideological predominance of anarchism within the CNT as the only antidote to the syndicalist 'vacuum,' ultimately failed to find a wide audience for its ideas as prominent anarchists within Spain, as well as many in the sizeable French diaspora, turned against it (preferring a more moderate, anarcho-syndicalist approach).

The Spanish exiles of the 1920s were, as Garner shows, an important guiding force in the anarchist-syndicalist debates, and his (seventh) chapter on this little-explored topic makes for a captivating read. Its conclusion, however, is somewhat predictable, and is best summed up by a 1930 manifesto of the French-based Committee of Anarchist Relations that deplored 'the sad and lamentable spectacle that our disintegrated, sterile, and impotent organisation offers due to its lack of cohesion' (p. 200). The confused and divided state of the anarchist community (in Spain and in France) was only partially redressed when in 1927 Portuguese and Spanish anarchists finally came together to found the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, although the FAI quickly changed into an 'effectively [...] Spanish anarchist organisation' (p. 214) due in part to the wave of repression unleashed in Portugal by the recently instated military dictatorship. As Garner stresses, early *faísmo* was (in contrast to its Civil War incarnation) essentially a moderate and defensive strategy on the part of anarchists, one that was best embodied in the policy of *trabazón* (lit. connection) which sought, somewhat ambiguously, to 'link together kindred organisations in order to carry out activities and resolve problems of common interests to both' anarchists and syndicalists within the CNT (p. 224). In practice, however, the ideal goal for many anarchists continued to remain the MOA (p. 225) and for that reason the *trabazón* did not ultimately translate into much even after the fall of the de Rivera dictatorship and the establishment of the Second Republic. The Confederation's ever-cautious and moderate national committee was eager to give the republican government a chance, going so far as calling off a planned general strike (aimed at obtaining the release of all political prisoners) 'in order to help the new regime establish itself' (p. 243). As a consequence, a 'full-scale civil war broke out within the CNT' (p. 244), leading to the expulsion of leading syndicalists like Pestaña and Peiró. Added to that was the endemic economic and political instability of the inchoate republic, as well as the rise of fascism – all of which further radicalized the radicals and entrenched the moderates. As Garner poignantly concludes, 'a decade of ideological infighting and government repression had succeeded only in creating an environment of mutual mistrust' (p. 246).

Overall, this is an engagingly-written account of a neglected yet important topic in the history of the Spanish labour movement. The author's extensive use of archival periodicals (some previously overlooked) deserves nothing but praise, as does his engagement with recent Spanish-language scholarship that remains largely

untranslated into English. Besides the minor issues already mentioned above, there are however certain areas which invite some degree of (it is hoped constructive) criticism. First of all, a history-from-below approach may very well be impracticable in this case given 'the scarcity of material available [...] for the pre-Republican era' (p. 13) but focusing almost exclusively on 'leading militants' (p. 13) is not without its problems. As Helen Graham has argued, during the 1920s and 1930s, 'ordinary [Spanish] workers [did not] necessarily see parliamentary and direct action strategies as mutually exclusive' (3) which begs the question of how the grass roots of the CNT (as distinct from any national or regional committees) interpreted the significance of the anarchist-syndicalist debates of the 1920s. To this end, a greater degree of engagement with accounts by non-leading militants (scarce though they may be) would have added a new and interesting dimension to the book's subject.

Secondly, the anarchism depicted here seems almost exclusively concerned with political matters. Granted that the argument over the nature and purpose of the unions may have been an essentially political one, a short exposition of the way in which cultural and social issues shaped the worldview of many prominent anarchists (especially those who went on to found the FAI) would have added some valuable nuance to the arguments advanced throughout. As Jerome Mintz has shown (4), social anarchism was not the exclusive preserve of 'irresponsible middle-class' intellectuals like Federico Urales (p. 244); it was, as much as any struggle for economic and political rights, part and parcel of the life of many anonymous *campesinos*. Thirdly, although a history of early 20th-century politics (even radical politics) is bound to be dominated by men, the complete absence of all female voices is neither inevitable nor easily defensible. Such luminaries as Teresa Claramunt Creus, Lucía Sánchez Saornil, and Federica Montseny may not have been central to the anarchist-syndicalist debates but their experiences are nonetheless significant (Creus was, after all, at the forefront of the CNT's early drive for membership) and deserve at least a more-than-cursory mention.

Finally, although Garner's sympathetic take on anarcho-syndicalism adds to the spirited and engaging tone of the book, his occasional tendency to inveigh against heretical currents (Marxism, individualism, parliamentary socialism, 'radical' anarchism) is at best distracting and at worst simplistic. To give but one example (which is all that space allows for here), the term 'anarcho-bolsheviks' as applied to the Spanish context (p. 144) is both gratingly disingenuous and historically meaningless. If any one group can be said to embody an attempt to syncretise anarchism and Bolshevism during this period it is surely the Franco-Russian 'platformists' (pp. 203–6) not the *Justicieros*, *Solidarios* or any of the anarchist 'gangs' of the *pistolero* years (whose *modus operandi* arguably owed more to the illegalism of fin-de-siècle individualists).

Notes

1. See Temma Kaplan, *Anarchists of Andalusia, 1868–1903* (Princeton, NJ, 1977).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Buenacasa, quoted in Juan Gómez Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: The History of the F.A.I.* (Montreal, 1986), p. 60.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War 1936–1939* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 46.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Jerome Mintz, *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas* (Chicago, IL, 1982).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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