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Living Anarchism. José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement

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BOOK REVIEW


Anarchism is probably one of the most difficult topics for historians. Other ideologies, such as communism and fascism, had provoked tremendous cataclysms during the European twentieth century. In the popular mind liberalism had not provoked such tremendous radical transformations. But precisely because this ideology did not carry these radical connotations, it has been relatively easy for social scientists to depict the historical process by which liberalism had been considered as the ‘less dangerous’ of all western ideologies. By contrast, anarchism is not an ideology fascinated with power, such as communism and fascism. Nor has anarchism been described as a non-conflict society, such as liberalism. The main reason why it is not easy to write about anarchism is because its footprint on earth is not as easy to track down as liberalism, communism and fascism. Anarchism, as Ealham makes us understand implicitly through all this book, is more related with the soul of the people.

‘Living Anarchism’ tells the life story of José Peirats, a revolutionary activist and leader of the libertarian union ‘National Confederation of Labour’ (CNT). During the book, Ealham does not conceal his admiration for the person of Peirats. However, at the beginning of the manuscript, he states very clearly why this should not be an obstacle to make a challenging portray of Peirats: “Behind the claim of objectivity, those who criticise the history of the disposed as ‘militant history’ merrily ignore their own ideological baggage and positionality”. For the author, the most important element in the personality of Peirats is his “sincerity and commitment to the truth, even if it was, inevitable, his truth”. This book is marked by the date of 1939, when a period of darkness begun for all anti-fascist activists like Peirats who had struggled during the three years of civil war, and were forced to abandon their country with a strong sense of defeat. This book also tries to amend a tendency in Spanish historiography where biographies of political activists were written in order to flatter his/her life story. In ‘Living Anarchism’ the reader understands why the person of Peirats does not only symbolise a concrete political period (the war and the dictatorship), but more
importantly, the radical commitment to change the social and economic structures of society until the end of his lifetime.

Peirats was born during the first decade of the twentieth century in a rural and poor town close to Valencia within a family of Catalan speakers. His parents were not able to speak in Spanish. In order to escape from poverty, the family moved to Barcelona, where Peirats lived in Poble Sec, a town with a “illiteracy rate over 50%”. Peirats grew up in a country like Spain which was losing at the beginning of the twentieth century its last colonies. In this context, Barcelona was the European capital of the anarcho-syndicalist movement. However, the Spanish establishment made no difference between anarchist and communist movements. For the economic and political elites (most of the time very close to each other) the most challenging threat of the radical left (or the ‘Red Subversion’ as they called it) was their ‘anti-patriotic’ values. Despite Spain’s non-intervention in World War I, the hardships of the working-class families increased at the beginning of 1914. By the end of the war, Peirats was just 9 years old, but, in the middle of a deep political crisis of the Spanish monarchy, he “witnessed the police retreat in the face of working-class women. (…) Those ‘skirted battalions’, who sacked food shops and stores and then distributed their haul”. Peirats, who worked sometimes as a brickmaker and experienced his first contact with ‘anarchist’ politics in atheneums where ‘culture’, in its wider expression of the word, served him to understand that there was nothing wrong in his working-class condition.

Being ‘in the shoes of the other’ is probably the best attribute of an historian. Ealham is with Julián Casanova, probably the greatest historian on Spanish anarchism of the Civil War period. The 1930s represented the ‘golden age’ of Spanish (and indeed European) anarchism. However, the life story format of ‘Living Anarchism’ makes the reader understand that this social movement could not be reduced to a utopia as some thousands of activists tried to do in Cataluña during this decade. Rather, the life of Peirats, who died in 1989 at the age of 81 years old in a context where Spain was trying to leave aside the harmful consequences of the Franco’s dictatorship, makes the reader understand how the heritage of anarchism in Spanish today is wider that we can imagine.
This influence is because the human condition of Spanish activists like Peirats is to ‘help the other’, whether he is a Christian, a Muslim or any other person who believes in love and solidarity over anything else. When he was ten, Peirats family moved to the neighbourhood of Collblanc, a “marginal slum” part of the Catalan town of Hospitalet de Llobregat. It is interesting how the life in this neighbourhood which was in the “margins of Catalan civilization” made Peirats felt part of a “second’s class of Barcelonians”. In these years Peirats witnessed the strong solidarity networks between the neighbours but also how the “rough justice” fell upon those who behaved in the opposite way.

It was precisely in Collblanc where CNT made the immigrant labour to be part of a “community of resistance in the struggle to ameliorate the manifold inequalities of everyday life”. During these Spanish 1920s, in the ‘Barrio Chino’ (Chinatown) of Barcelona, Peirats lost his virginity with a prostitute. In this period, witnessing how some of his friends got venereal diseases, Peirats realized his “limited knowledge” on the subject, confessing how he “wanted to know the history of humanity”. During the whole book, Ealham describes how Peirats constantly tried to escape from ‘scientific socialism’, embracing anarchism derived from education and culture.

This ‘humanism’ that characterized the whole life of Peirats arrived at its peak during the most intense historical period in modern Spain, the 1930s. The Second Republic was proclaimed at a moment when Peirats felt that the anarchist family had become his “real family”. It was also in this period where the different political factions within the CNT fought to set a clear program to start the anarchist revolution. ‘Living Anarchism’ collects, in a very concise format, all the debates that took place at CNT. However, for the general reader, the value of this book is how it explains anarchism in the 1930s not as a mere dispute between dogmatic activists. This data shows perfectly the strength of this social movement (which cannot be categorized just as an ideology) in the Spanish 1930s: “The Barcelona CNT’s announced that it encadred 58% percent of the city workers”.

The main concern of Peirats with respect to the anarchist movement during this period was the necessity to “combine cultural awareness and revolutionary strikes instead as opposed of simply firing pistols, like the radicals appeared to believe”. The civil war for
the anarchists symbolised the ‘years of the revolution’. In this sense many ‘ordinary people’, who, in normal circumstances, never thought of using violence against anyone, were force to assume that in some situations they might not be able to defend their selves non-violently. “My mother could not open my drawers without shrieking at finding a grenade or a couple of pistols”.

This confession of Peirats did not prevent him from being, at the beginning of the war, an ‘organic intellectual’. During the whole book Ealham contrasts the figure of a ‘worker intellectual’ like Peirats, with ‘middle class intellectuals’ like the anarchist and ex minister of the Republican government Federica Montseny.

Beginning with a ‘revolution from below’ and ending up explaining how the ‘revolution was devoured by the war’, the life story of Peirats is a living example of the exploration of the past while experiencing a disenchantment with the present. The defeat of the antifascist forces in 1939 and the subsequent loss of influent by the anarchists in Spanish politics, made Peirats to think about the movement in these terms: “The CNT in exile is a madhouse of senile idiots and incurable lunatics”. This same feeling of disenchantment with modern politics made Peirats live within the Spanish democracy of the 1980s with a strong disappointment with “professional historians”. “Lack of imagination” or “forgetting the importance of memory” were some expressions used by this revolutionary anarchist. He arrived at the end of his life in Barcelona in the 1980s where its citizens were more interested in consumerism than in making the revolution. Peirats represented, in the best sense of the word, a ‘man of his time’. Probably there is no way to define him better than the statement of the famous anarchist thinker Enrico Malatesta: “My homeland is the world; humanity is my family”.

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