The Collectives in Revolutionary Spain

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The Spanish Revolution began in the aftermath of a failed fascist coup by General Franco on the 18 July 1936. The coup, which was sponsored by conservative sections of big capital and the Church, failed in most of Spain in the face of armed resistance by workers and peasants, which was organised primarily by the giant revolutionary Anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the National Confederation of Labour (C.N.T.). "Within hours of the Franco assault, anarchist workers and peasants seized direct control over rural land, cities, factories, and social service and transport networks" (Breitbart 1979a: 60; also Geurin 1970: 130-1). This outcome was the direct result of the strength of a mass Anarcho-syndicalist worker and peasant movement (Amsden 1979; Breitbart 1979a), amongst whom, a German observer noted, "the problem of the social revolution was continuously and systematically discussed in their trade-union and group meetings, in their papers, their pamphlets and their books" (cited in Geurin 1970: 121). The C.N.T., which arguably commanded the support of a majority of workers and peasants, defined its goal as "libertarian communism", a programme which it defined in great detail in its Saragossa Programme of May 1936 . Reasons of space prevent a discussion of this and other C.N.T. documents, but suffice it to say that the C.N.T. stood squarely within the tradition of anarcho-communism outlined above (for discussions of these programme, see Geurin 1970: 121-6; Guillen 1992: 8-11).

At least two thousand self-managed rural collectives were formed, over fifteen million acres of land expropriated between July 1936 and January 1938, and between seven and eight million people were directly or indirectly affected by collectivisation in the nearly 60 percent of Spain's land area affected by this process (Breitbart 1979a: 60). Collectivisation was voluntary, and usually followed a village meeting at which a decision was taken to pool peasant plots and instruments of production, and land seized from the estate-holders into a single production unit . Artisans, barbers and other non-agricultural workers were also grouped into collectives (Geurin 1970). Within this unit, the land was divided between work teams (brigada) of ten to fifteen people on a technical basis. Within the brigada, less pleasant tasks were rotated and shared, and each person encouraged to perform those task (s) for which s/he had special competence (Breitbart 1979b; Geurin 1970). Management committees with regularly rotating memberships were elected to oversee the economic and social activities on each collective, and monthly general assemblies of both working and non-working members were held to review production plans, evaluate progress and redesign stages of production (Breitbart 1979b; Geurin 1970). Overall, no tasks were given status over others, no did any collective members get paid for doing administra-

tive work: in most collectives, payment was done according to need: all collective members were assured of food, clothing and shelter (Breitbart 1979b). These goods were made available through elected committees of consumers who organised the supply and distribution of goods through "co-operative warehouses", many of which were situated in old churches. Churches, convents and old army barracks, and mansions were usually turned into schools, cinemas, libraries, garages, old people's homes or hospitals (none of which had previously been common in the countryside) (Breitbart 1979b). Education was free, and compulsory for all children under 14 (Geurin 1970).

Most collective villages were able to improve the living standards of their members, and strenuous efforts were made in most cases to increase production (Breitbart 1979b). This was often done quite successfully, as formerly vacant land was brought under cultivation, herds increased, conservation measures introduced (such as crop rotation and planting to trees to prevent soil erosion), and, with the help of technicians and agronomists, new or better farming techniques applied (for example, irrigation was greatly expanded, selective cattle breeding developed, and tree nurseries established) (Breitbart 1979b). In some cases, harvests were increased by up to five times their pre-Revolution level (Breitbart 1979b: 89). New industries -such as food processing, paper production, and soap manufacture- were also introduced or expanded in the rural areas in order to increase their self-sufficiency (Breitbart 1979b).

Production was planned, and special attention was paid to such factors as the needs of the urban workers and the workers militia (which was holding the front against the Franco's troops) (Breitbart 1979b). In contrast to the notion that the collectives were isolated from, and in competition with, one another, several large regional federations of collectives composed of villages, districts and provinces, were formed between July 1936 and June 1937: these included the Regional Federation of peasants of Levant, the Regional Federation of Peasants of Castile, and the Council of Aragon (Breitbart 1979b; Geurin 1970). These federations helped facilitate the transfer of goods within and between the collectivised districts, and between the rural collectives and the cities. Delegates from each collective submitted records of imports and exports to a record keeper for the region, which allowed the synchronisation of production and distribution within the collectivised zones; within the local district, surplus goods were transferred between villages or used for trade within the larger region (a form of equalisation fund); the federation as a whole helped organise the co-ordination of production between the collectives, and transfers of rural products to the urban areas in return for products such as machinery; the federal structures also enabled the supply of health services to poorer districts and the organisation of research teams to advise collectives on new agricultural techniques (Breitbart 1979b). Backward and forward linkages were established between collectives, the transport system was correspondingly revamped, whilst the railway lines were themselves placed under the control of the C.N.T. National Union of Railways (see below for discussion of workers' control in industry) (Breitbart 1979b).

Thus, "[c]ommunal proprietorship of the land and the elimination of class in anarchist areas after July 1936, replaced private land ownership and capitalist or feudal power hierarchies" with a highly efficient, integrated system of self-management and co-operative production" (Breitbart 1979b: 93). The revolution was not, however, confined to the rural areas: urban workers implemented "one of the lengthiest and most extensive experiments in complete workers production of industrial production" in history, restructuring economic and social life around their trade unions (Amsden 1979: 99) . Some sense of the extent of collectivisation is provided by a contemporary observation that "railways, tramcars and buses, taxicabs and shipping,electric light and power companies, gasworks and waterworks, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines and

cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries were confiscated or controlled by workmen's committees, either term possessing for the owners almost equal significance" (Bolloten cited in Conlon 1986: 20-1). He continues: "motion picture theatres and legitimate theatres, newspapers and printing, shops, department stores and hotels, de-lux restaurants and bars were likewise sequestered" (ibid.). Many of these industries were vast in size: for example, nearly the entire Spanish textile industry, with nearly a quarter of a million workers scattered over several cities, was placed under self-management (Flood et al 1997: 201). According to some estimates, at least 3,000 enterprises were collectivised in the massive industrial city of Barcelona (Conlon 1986: 19) .

In one sense, however, the urban collectivisations were less comprehensive than those that took place in the countryside. Some were entirely taken over and run by the workers, whilst in others, workers restricted themselves to the establishment of "control committees" with a veto power over capitalist management's (Amsden 1979; Conlon 1986). Generally speaking, the more self-managed units tended to be those where the majority trade union was part of the C.N.T.; the units based on "control committees" were often strongholds of the General Union of Labour (U.G.T.), a social-democratic trade union , or subsidiaries of foreign-owned firms. In the self-managed factories (it was held in the latter case that full collectivisation would entail a disruption of vital linkages with the parent company). Within the self-managed firms, the basic unit of decision-making was the workers' assembly, which in turn elected a committee of delegates from each section of the plant to oversee the day-to-day running of the firm (Flood et al 1997; Geurin 1970). The workers' committees often included a number of technical experts as well. The functions of these committees included dealing with issues of finances, the collection of statistics, correspondence, and liaison with other plants and the community (Flood et al 1997).

Again, as was the case in agriculture, self-management was associated with remarkable improvements in both workers conditions, and productivity and efficiency. Thus, the Catalan workers were successful in restoring services in water, power, and transport through workers committees before the street battles against the Francoists had even ended (Amsden 1979: 104). The tramways had been partly damaged by the fighting in Barcelona, and there was thus more of a delay in this area. Nonetheless, the Transport Syndicate of the C.N.T. (the majority union amongst tramworkers) immediately appointed a commission to inspect the tracks and draw up a plan for repair (Conlon 1986). "Five days after the of the fighting stopped, 700 tramcars, instead of the usual 600, all painted in the red and black colours of the C.N.T., were operating on the streets of Barcelona" (Conlon 1986: 20).The number of accidents were reduced in subsequent months, whilst fares were lowered and the number of passengers carried increased: in 1936 the trams had carried 183,543,516 passengers; in 1937, an additional 50,000,000 people were carried (Conlon 1986: 20). Wages for workers were increased and equalised, free medical care was provided, and the tramway workers also began to produce rockets and howitzers for the war effort. Similarly, the workers at the Hispano-Suiza factory for luxury cars turned the lines over to war production, with fifteen armoured cars produced for the front within seven days of the start of restructuring (Amsden 1979). Similar examples of restructuring under workers' control in other sectors abound (Amsden 1979; Conlon 1986; Flood et al 1997; Guillen 1992).

Clearly, the collectivisation process in revolutionary Spain indicates that the goals of classlesness, workers' self-management, distribution according to need, and democratic economic planning were both realisable and quite compatible with economic efficiency, innovation,

increased output, and even ecological concerns. This is not to claim that mistakes were not made. Firstly, economic co-ordination between collectives was unevenly applied. This was especially evident in industry where there were initially few attempts to co-ordinate beyond the workplace, and a number of firms began to sell goods on the market in a manner strongly reminiscent of Proudhonian mutualism (Flood et al 1997; Geurin 1970). Several solutions were applied: one was for collectives to continue operating within the market, but under the guidance of the trade union in that industry, which would seek to minimise the ill-effects of this situation; another approach was to unify whole industries through the aegis of trade unions, which would provide an organised structure to link the workers' committees together in a democratic process of planning (Flood et al 1997). This latter option was similar to the process of regional federation in the countryside. However, none of these solutions was entirely satisfactory: the first failed to transcend the market form, and instead turned into a form of "worker capitalism" (as many militants pointed out); in the second model, co-ordination took place, at best, at the level of industry, or rural region, and did not thus provide an adequate vehicle for comprehensive planning, and, hence, the full realisation of libertarian socialism.

Thus, the collectives' ultimate failure was a lack of unity at the national level; the financial system, in particular, was not socialised, whilst the (non-Francoist) State itself continued to exist. The capitalist State and the organs of worker-peasant self-management soon came into conflict. A series of decrees designed to bring the collectives under ever closer State supervision were paralleled by attempts to sabotage their functioning which included deliberate disruptions of urban-rural exchanges, and the systematic denial of working capital and raw materials to many collectives (Amsden 1979; Breitbart 1979a, 1979b; Geurin 1970). In May 1937, street battles broke out as troops moved against urban collectives such as the C.N.T.- controlled telephone exchange in Barcelona (Breitbart 1979a, 1979b; Conlon 1986; Geurin 1970). In August 1937, Aragon was militarily invaded, completely destroying thirty percent of the collectives and forcibly disbanding the Council of Aragon; similar attacks were later launched in the Levant, in Castile and in the provinces of Huesac and Terule (Breitbart 1979a, 1979b; Conlon 1986; Geurin 1970). In August 1938, all war-related industries were placed under full government control (Geurin 1970). In all cases where the collectives were undermined, there were substantial drops in both productivity and morale: a factor which surely contributed to the final defeat of the Spanish Republic by the Francoist forces in 1939 (Breitbart 1979b; Conlon 1986; Geurin 1970).

It should just, however, be noted in conclusion that the failure of the Anarcho-syndicalists to institute libertarian socialism at a national level did not reflect an inability or unwillingness to organise at a national level ("ambivalence to the terrifying enigma of state power") or a desire to return to a "barter economy" (‼) as Amsden (1979: 100, 102) asserts. On the contrary, the Saragossa Programme of the C.N.T. called for both the national level federation of the worker and peasant associations, as well as a national-level worker-controlled Defence Council to co-ordinate the military defence of the revolution (Guillen 1992; Wetzel 1987). Their failure to institute full libertarian socialism was not thus the product of lacunae and confusion in the Anarcho-syndicalists' programme, but, rather, the logical consequence of an attempt by the Anarcho-syndicalists to co-operate with the Republican government against the apparently more pressing threat of Franco - a tactical decision which contradicted all Anarcho-syndicalist principles (Conlon 1986; Geurin 1970; Guillen 1992). Nonetheless, the self-limitations accepted by the Anarcho-syndicalists as a means to make this unholy tactical alliance possible did not, as we have seen, prevent the Republican government from moving against the Anarcho-syndicalists as soon as the opportunity

presented itself. Guillen summarises the lessons of this experience as follows: ”the libertarian social revolution suffers one dilemma : either it is carried out immediately and totally, above and below, or it is lost to the power of the State and to its bureaucratic and bourgeois supporters .. libertarian social power must substitute and destroy the exploitative and opressive state” (1992: 25-6).

IN CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to examine whether a future for socialism exists. The effect of the twin crisis of social-democracy and Leninism has been to delegitimise the socialist project in the eyes of many. It is against this background that I have sought to restate the case against the market, arguing that it is an indefensible system of exploitation and domination. The next step in my argument was to critically examine the various ”socialism's” currently or previously on offer as alternatives. Here I have argued that neither social-democracy, Leninism nor ”market socialism” provide feasible alternatives to capitalism. The State does not provide an alternative to capitalism, nor capitalism an alternative to the State. Both of these structures of social organisation are integrally linked to, and complement, each other. Given that neither structure is, as I have argued, desirable, the question becomes: is there a third way? My discussion of Anarcho-syndicalism - stateless socialism - has sought to demonstrate the intellectually coherence, feasibility and desirability of just such an alternative. The issue facing socialists should not therefore be :”is this the end of history?”. Rather, the challenge is to rediscover and learn from an important part of socialist history, the rich and historically vindicated tradition of Anarcho-syndicalism.

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