

Civil War & Civil Peace: Libertarian Aragon 1936-37

Graham Kelsey

On 12 April 1931 the people of Spain went to the polls. The political upheaval which followed constituted the Spanish bourgeois revolution. The inability of the victors to translate it into social and economic terms alienated their working class support completely. In this failure to effect genuine social and economic reform lay the seeds of the resulting civil war. That conflict, however, was to offer those who did have the necessary energy and courage the opportunity of promoting real change. In the region of Aragon, in particular, village trade unionists succeeded in laying the foundations of a new truly democratic society, creating civil peace even in the midst of civil war.

The national elections to the Cortes, held at the start of 1936, had constituted for liberal-republicans and their socialist political allies an opportunity to put the clock back some five years when the Spanish Second Republic had been created upon a wave of widespread support and popular enthusiasm. Certainly the aspirations and expectations first aroused at the Republic's birth in April 1931 were in large part reborn with the Popular front's victory in the February 1936 elections. Now, however, the Republicans' room for manoeuvre was considerably smaller, far too small in fact as events were to show. Already by May opposition to the new government from among its working class supporters, beginning to appreciate as Vicente Ballester had insisted in Zaragoza in January that they could expect nothing from such politicians, (1) had begun to develop quite markedly. Moreover, working class awareness and thus demands for social and economic improvement, which had in 1931 been primarily urban in context, was in 1936 increasingly rural as well. This reflected firstly, the degree to which the political polarisation effected by the February elections had awoken Spain's rural populace, and secondly, in the particular case of Aragon at least, the

Spain: Aragon.

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The Anarchist Encyclopædia

Anarchism is a concrete political and social philosophy with its own history, indeed, its own precise geography, with a defined outlook that has influenced a great many other political theories, with its adherents, past and present, ranging from those known by virtue of their anarchist ideas to those famous in other fields because of their contribution to science, art, literature, industrial organisation or militancy.

It has attracted a great many thinkers and philosophers, those who have accepted it and those who have dismissed it. Its influence on the working class, though nowadays less than it once was, has always provided a hard clear cut alternative to marxism, state socialism and parliamentary democracy, and still provides a vigorous attack as an unquashable minority.

Though authoritarian ideas have triumphed generally in economic matters, and centralism has dominated political thinking, the anti-authoritarian, anti-centralist ideas of anarchism have come to the fore in social life and are

becomingly increasingly influential - albeit distorted in a meritocratic way by being subordinated to authoritarian capitalist systems - in organisation theory, co-operative ventures, industrial project teams, teamwork in social services, educational theory, and indeed, most ironically, in military units such as the SAS.

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The Anarchist Encyclopaedia (ISSN 0267-6141)

Monograph 1:

Civil War & Civil Peace: Libertarian Aragon 1936-37, Graham Kelsey.

Cambridge, November 1985, 80pp. (Individual copy £2.00, inc. p+p)

(General Editor: Stuart Christie)

The Anarchist Encyclopaedia

Cambridge Free Press

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Self Management

Frank Mintz

Since the 1960s the term 'self-management' has been used to describe workers' attempts at self-emancipation. In this essay Frank Mintz, author of 'Self-management in the Spanish Revolution', traces the history of the idea, examines its various interpretations within differing social-economic systems and ideologies. He also looks briefly at the social-economic conditions in which self-management has been partially and, on occasion, fully realised.

Parents educate their children in order that they may learn how to live. Society moulds its citizens so that they may be obedient and work, but it does not train or prepare them to administer the institutions of society. The ruling classes rule in their own interests. Hence the recurrent scandals involving bribery and corruption, including countries with a democratic tradition. In the 1970s the Lockheed affair uncovered a series of ministerial bribery cases involving highly placed leaders in nearly every one of the big industrial nations. The French State lurches from scandal to scandal: an erstwhile president of the republic (a right-winger) involved in diamond smuggling, a fraud involving several million dollars featuring the 'sniffer aircraft' farce is covered up by the incumbent socialist president. In Germany, the Flick Corporation provides a

good example of parliamentary bribery with international ramifications. Those countries allegedly under 'Workers' governments do not have anything very different to offer. After nearly 70 years of marxist-leninism the Bolshevik press (Pravda and Literaturnaya Gazeta) is replete with exposes of bribery and embezzlement by communist leaders. In China neither Mao nor the current leaders have been able to out paid to instances of exploitation and bribery. Under every system the citizenry is on the outside of crucial political and economic decision-making, bereft of any real control. For that reason bribery and corruption will be with us for a long time yet, and are even presented as normal practices: "A certain measure of corruption seems inevitable in the public life of every country, but it is in all of our interests that here in

in Spain that measure should be as low as possible" (Cambio 16, 15 October 1984). The same sentiment could appear in print in any country.

We have no wish to go on like this and we struggle for the emancipation of the workers by their own endeavours. But this notion has been and still is obscured by theoretical sophistries and disquisitions, not to mention historical misrepresentation and, finally, by the absence of a shared and clear vocabulary. Just as every government proclaims itself to be in favour of freedom, and interprets and applies this in a supremely contradictory fashion, so the self-emancipation of the workers is also interpreted in different ways.

Three great arguments predominate. Denial of the feasibility of the people's emancipation is the pasture of the ruling class, backed up by pseudo-scientific arguments

Frank Mintz
Social Theory
Abolition y acción social.
Atalens editores, Cochabamba 7,
Madrid 16, España.
Socialismo y participación.
Apartado 11701, Lima 11, Perú.
The Anarchist Encyclopaedia.
Monograph 2, February 1986

ISSN 0267-6141
The Anarchist Encyclopaedia
c/o Cambridge Free Press
Unit 6
25 Gwydir Street
Cambridge CB1 2EG

(innate inequality of intelligence), philosophical ones (from Plato's Republic to Nietzsche) and historical ones (the constancy of leadership... from Jesus to Hitler). Denial of the short-term capabilities of the workers in the absence of training and tutelage by a superior caste is the position held by socialists and marxist leninists, who base themselves on scientific arguments (behaviourism and social conditioning), philosophical ones (Marx, Lenin) and historical ones (the revolution in the USSR).

The final position is the libertarian one which contends that the workers themselves are equipped and capable of directing and reorganising society: this they base on scientific arguments (sociability and the stimulus of revolution), philosophical considerations (the persistence of the repudiation of authority from the Greeks - Carpocrates, Zeno - through La Boetie, up to our own day) and historical evidence (the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution).

We line up in the last category, a broad-based communion in which we find Christians (like Jacques Ellul), marxists (like Pannekoek, and to some extent, Rosa Luxemburg), situationists (like Vaneigem) and individuals like Noam Chomsky, Polish trade unionists, alongside classical anarchists ranging from Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin to Abad de Santillan and Bookchin.

The term currently accepted as a description of the workers' attempts at self-emancipation is "self-management". Previously the terms favoured were Bakuninism, anarcho-communism, libertarian communism, direct management. Since 1968 the term self-management has been the most convenient, albeit one full of ambiguities. If we are to clarify the problem, we need

to focus on three aspects: a) the history of the notion, b) the various implications, and c) the socio-economic stages of application and these we shall look at briefly.

a) Though the humble and the exploited have persistently revolted from the time of Spartacus through to our own day, it was during the French revolution that the theoretical groundwork was laid down. In 1792 the bourgeois republicans denounced the 'anarchists' of Paris who wanted deputies and workers alike to receive the same wage and who said that there were two classes 'the class of those who have and that of the have-nots, the sansculottes and the propertied.' And in the Manifesto of the Equals of the Babouvist conspirators, we read: 'Gone at last, the hateful distinctions between rich and poor, great and small, masters and servants, governors and governed.' In 1794 Varlet wrote: 'For anyone capable of reason, Government and Revolution are incompatible.'

Revolutionary experience and revolutionary practice dictated the notions which Proudhon and Bakunin later elaborated upon, adding to these the constant revocability of delegates by the rank and file workers and citizens, and the rotation of offices so as to forestall imbalance or the emergence some new ruling caste (this was already anticipated in Aristotle's Politics), and the federation of collectives. Thus in 1864 the First International equipped itself with statutes - drawn up by Karl Marx under the watchful eye of the other delegates - with the watchword 'The emancipation of the workers shall be the task of the workers themselves.' In 1865 Bakunin anticipated a further statute for a revolutionary society.. 'any organising should proceed from the bottom

upwards, from the commune to the central unit of the country, to the State, along federal lines.'

b) To determine the several meanings of self-management, we need to look at the goal, how it is to be achieved and the practical essays on this. 'Strictly speaking, talk of a self-managerial or associative socialism is a tautology, for, without self-management, there is no socialism.' This opinion, expressed by the Yugoslav Branko Horvat, is one which can be shared by all socialists in that they look forward to the disappearance of the State at some point in history. In greater detail, socialism would then be: "the notion of council, self-management and direct democracy: the leaving behind of private ownership of the means of production, as well as of the ruling political level, which might reproduce capitalist relations in an even worse form: the notion of the free disposition of one's labour, with the social relations that flow from this: hence the necessity of freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and the freedom to argue." (Predrag Vranicki).

The advocates of self-management can be broken down into those who advocate revolutionary violence and pacifists. The former comprise, partly, the anarchists who take the line that the revolutionary organisation should encourage the workers, basing itself on freely co-ordinated collectives without staking claim to a position of leadership; and they differ greatly in their views from the marxist-leninists. 'Unless we are anarchists, we have to accept the necessity of the State, which is to say of coercion, in the passage from capitalism to socialism. The form of coercion is determined

by the measure of development of the corresponding revolutionary class, by special circumstances - such as, say, the inheritance from a protracted revolutionary war - and by the forms assumed by the resistance from the bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie. Thus there exists absolutely no contradiction in principle between soviet democracy (which is to say socialist democracy) and the principle of dictatorial powers vested in certain individuals.' So wrote Lenin in April 1918, some months after the creation of the secret police - by Lenin himself. Pacifists anticipate that example and the power of persuasion - the spread of hippy-style communes or Cabatian-style ones, reminiscent of the anarcho-Tolstoyan view, will lead on to a system without privileges. Tolstoy at the beginning of the century, indefining religious faith as belief in a Value, in a society which pursues an ongoing peaceful struggle against hierarchy and authority, managed to attract tens of thousands of followers and sympathisers. But Tsarist repression and then Bolshevik repression dismantled the movement which was characterised by everyday struggle: refusal to pay any taxes, rejection of all State schooling, condemnation of work outside of the countryside.

In concrete terms, the term 'self-management' embraces co-operatives and workers' participation in the running of their firms. For this reason and for upwards of a century, anarchists and socialists have generally been opposed to such experiments. 'Co-operation, in the majority of instances, will be crushed by the omnipotent might of big capitalist and large landed property: in the few instances in which, for

example, this or that production company, which will be more or less self-contained, manages to hold out against or to overcome that power, that success will have no result other than the spawning of a new privileged class of happy cooperators amid the miserable mass of proletarians. Thus, in the current conditions of social economy, cooperation cannot deliver the emancipation of the labouring masses. Nonetheless, it has this advantage - that, even today, it familiarises the workers with coming together and organising themselves and administering their own affairs for themselves.' This last point by Bakunin in 1873 is important, though it is true that in the majority of cases worker participation is a cover for class collaboration and a sweetener for capitalist exploitation.

Innumerable examples could be cited: the union-capitalist co-management in West Germany, the limited cooperation confined to a few firms, the most extravagant being the penitentiaries of Terre Haute and Leavenworth in the USA, where prisoners' councils handle the budget along with the gaolers: thus, supposedly, the inmates are given responsibility and rehabilitated. Another red herring is to depict the Catholic church as the pioneer of self-management, as if a handful of militant proletarian Catholics in the 19th century could sweeten the reactionary pill. Since the 1960s the Vatican has adopted a new strategy. The Mondragon cooperative in Spain, with its 10,000 members is customarily cited as an instance of Catholic achievement. However, it is no explanation for it is the only example created in Francoist Spain and does not explain how in February 1971 it was possible for the members of

the cooperative to go on strike. 'Of course, the strikers did not down tools "against themselves", so their action must have been directed against the management,' noted Oakeshott in an anthology edited by Vahek, from which the above paragraph is drawn.

Another face of self management is the official encouragement which it can receive under military or single party regimes. From Yugoslavia to Algeria, Peru, Chile, Rumania, etc., self-management sprouts up as a pillar of the regime, a useful means of mobilising the workers behind the economy, or for the purpose of ensuring a fleeting political harmony. This tactic also embraces the Israeli kibbutzim which came to represent 6% of the total population in the 1930s only to retreat by 1970 to 3.6% whenever the State had an experienced army at its disposal.

Whatever the origin of self-managerial experiments may be - recuperation, religion, capitalism, politics, individualists banding together, etc. - practice has shown that the workers end up feeling that they can and should achieve more, because they feel a sense of maturity, they feel trained and heartened. The very idea of self-management spells danger for the ruling classes, despite their experience in demagogy and corruption. And in the marxist-leninist countries, each clash between the workers and their red bosses was accompanied by memories of the Paris Commune, and of the organisational and creative capabilities of the workers.

c) Self-management was realised partially and, on many occasions, entirely, during the Russian revolution, especially in the Ukraine; also during the Spanish civil war and during the months of May-June 1968 in

France. (For further information on these instances, see the other entries in the Encyclopedia.) But let us see if self-management is always feasible. Karl Marx imagined that historical evolution passed through set stages, but whenever he came to study the Russian case he changed his mind. In the foreword to the 1882 Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto he wrote: 'Might the Russian rural community - a form certainly far removed from primitive common ownership of the land - pass on directly to the higher form of collective ownership, to the communist form, or will it have to go, instead, through the same process of disintegration which constitutes the historical development of the West?' His answer was that the solution might lie in timing the Russian revolution to coincide exactly with the proletarian revolution in the West.

Thus did Marx adopt the stance of Bakunin from 1873 who analysed traditional collective ownership, the mir, thus: it boasts three advantages; "...all land belongs to the people", the mir "...distributes the land, on a temporary basis, among the commune members", it enjoys "almost absolute autonomy" and at the same time "community self-management". (1) There are also three drawbacks: "patriarchy" - the crushing of the individual by the mir, - and confidence in the tsar.

It is obvious that the situationists' personal, everyday self-management, with its exotic overtones falls far short of being espoused by many who sympathise with collective ownership. Just as it is vital that self-management should emanate from among the workers themselves if it is to be able to overthrow exploitation in any lasting way, it is doubtful that self-management is instantaneously a model

satisfying bookish prescriptions. But self-management strikes us as an adequate formula in terms of an anti-capitalist model in the Third World or in the industrialised countries.

Several thinkers, Gonz, Bookchin, etc., imagine that today's workers aspire first of all to do away with wage-slavery, with work, the result of which would be to render social theories invalid. This is only one part of the task, for leisure and personal well-being lead on to creation and to the performance of actions. Several capitalist firms have shown that by rearrangement, work can be made attractive (by letting the worker put together the machine in its entirety, by setting up quality control circles, etc.) The likelihood is that socially indispensable tasks may assume a different aspect in a new society. Nowadays we have a dual relationship with work, it dominates us but we dominate the practice of it. As one councillor anarchist observed back in 1920, "The ascendancy which the machine has over the worker is immeasurable: it gives him the tangible feeling that the machine upon which he spends the bulk of his existence and to which he is indissolubly bound, can and should belong to him." Consequently, as long as machines are around, there will be the desire for self-management and as long as exploitation exists, so too self-management will stir.

Towards the end of his life Marx embraced the hypothesis of a society with an agrarian collectivist tradition moving directly on to revolution. But the majority of marxists shy away from this, especially Anton Pannekoek in Workers' Councils; for him the peasants have 'a separate mentality and outlook, remote from the ideas and aims of the working class.'

So, even though the Russian revolution furnished the example of the workers' soviets (Russian for 'councils'), the majority of the population could not 'perform the task of the moment'. 'Also, to forestall the eventuality of the working class's tendencies being overwhelmed by the trend towards small proprietorship, emanating from the countryside, what was needed was a strong, centralised government capable of countering those peasant inclinations.' From which is deduced the notion that, Russia being an agricultural country, the revolution was impossible.

Another marxist, Rudolf Bahro expresses the same notion, brutally. 'Without the rule imposed by the Bolsheviks, Russia, today, would still be a peasants' State which would, without much question, have opted for the capitalist road.' Hence the conclusion which many councillors share, though they do not dare to put it in writing: 'the anti-statist and anti-authoritarian ideology of many leftist intellectuals who live in the West is historically justified in the already industrialised countries, wherein the material conditions for the withering-away of the State are ripening. As for those people who are only in the throes of industrialisation, they cannot dispense with such an instrument, and their State can only be bureaucratic at the outset' (French edition of Seguire mi camino).

The foundations of this analysis are based in the always negative role of the peasantry and the always positive one of the workers, plus a phase of capitalism's maturing. Aside from the historical instances cited elsewhere which expose such an attack as ridiculous, it is possible to comment briefly upon the role of the working class which, with its classical

and experienced marxist organisations, was remarkably passive against Hitler in the Germany of the 1930s, timid in the France of 1936, limited in the Chile of 1973 against the military - before and after the coup. As for the necessary development of capitalism, it is strikingly apparent that Japan is the economic trail-blazer which the other countries are aping and that before maturity is achieved in every country (the end of the telematic era) it is very likely that we may be in the year 2500.

Having said that, it is nonetheless true that there is a grey area where socialist ideas do not thrive, as in those countries under traditional religious rule and where insurrection is an unknown experience (the Amazonian Indians, certain portions of the Indian sub-continent).

Historical analysis, then, seems a sure means of monitoring the ideological evolution of the concept of self managerial revolution, as well as of the level of 'consciencisation' of society and of social strata.

Two last observations to close. The first is that allegation to the effect that the anarchists are bourgeois (according to the marxist-leninists) or tied to the bourgeoisie [Pannekoek]). Through historical examples we will also perceive the truth or falsehood of such assertions, but it is as well to point out that from Lenin to Castro, few marxist leaders have been workers, whereas from Makhno to Durruti, many anarchists have been peasant or workers' leaders.

Finally, among the great tendencies into which self-management is divided: self-management from above, with participation under capitalism (in an endless variety of

forms), or with a single party in power (as in Yugoslavia and some other countries), or self-management from below, with councillors on the one hand and anarchists on the other, in an almost constant and automatic way, no tendency as much as acknowledges the existence of the rest. The councillors Pannekoek and Mattick, and the anarchists Rocker and Besnard, are typical of this mental blindspot. Only over the past 20 years or so, following the example set by the situationists, has the occasional attempt at objectivity been made. It can be emphasised that, pacifists or otherwise, the advocates of self-management are fighting to break down the fear of authority, the delegation of power, the anxiety in the face of change which Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s and Stanley Milgram in the 1970s exposed with clarity.

Note (1)

In Russian and Serbo-Croat, the word samoupravleniye, used colloquially, means 'local management' or 'autonomy', a definition which falls far short of the meaning of 'self-management'. In the 1873 text of Bakunin's it seems to us that his obstinnee samoupravleniye can be translated as 'community self-management.'

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The Anarchist Encyclopaedia.
Monograph 2, February 1986

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ISSN 0267-6141

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