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Learning to Live: Anarcho-syndicalism and Utopia in Spain, 1931-1937

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Abstract: This article reassesses the debate around the meaning of 'libertarian communism' within the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement in the years prior to and during the Civil War. Drawing on recent historical and theoretical literature that argues for a non-pejorative and analytical understanding of utopia, it brings renewed attention to this aspect of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. The article focuses on the proposals for a definition of libertarian communism that were debated in the run up to and during the National Confederation of Labour's (CNT) Zaragoza Congress in May 1936. It argues that a utopian imagination was central to the movement's self-understanding and concrete achievements, and not confined to its more idealist currents.

Keywords: Utopia, anarchism, CNT, Spanish Civil War, revolution, Zaragoza Congress, libertarian communism, commune.

Resumen: Este artículo retoma el debate en torno al significado de 'comunismo libertario' dentro del movimiento anarcosindicalista español en los años previos a la guerra civil española, y durante la misma. Se apoya en trabajos históricos y teóricos recientes que abogan por una comprensión analítica y no peyorativa de la utopía, para abrir una nueva vía de análisis a este aspecto del anarcosindicalismo español. El artículo se centra en las propuestas de una definición de comunismo libertario en el período previo y durante el Congreso de Zaragoza de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) en mayo de 1936. En esta investigación, se argumenta que la imaginación utópica no quedó circunscrita a sus corrientes más idealistas, sino que fue además central para el movimiento y sus logros más concretos.

Palabras clave: Utopía, anarquismo, CNT, Guerra Civil Española, revolución, Congreso de Zaragoza, comunismo libertario, comuna.

> *Nos piden desde el principio un régimen perfecto, garantía de que las cosas se harán así y no de este otro modo, sin coscorrones, sin tanteos. Si hubiéramos de aprender a vivirlo, no terminaríamos nunca el aprendizaje. Ni el niño aprendería a andar, ni el chico montaría en bicicleta, ni sería posible adquirir un oficio o una especialización. Al contrario, en la vida se hacen al revés las cosas*.

Isaac Puente, *El Comunismo Libertario* ([1932] 1933)

[*We are asked from the outset to come up with a flawless system, to guarantee that things will work this way and not that, without mishap or error. If learning to live had to be done this way, then our apprenticeship would never end. Nor would the child ever learn to walk, nor the youngster to ride a bicycle. On the contrary, in real life things happen the other way around*.]

Isaac Puente, *Libertarian Communism* (1982)

Prior to the revolution that accompanied the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), conducted a unique experiment in collective utopian thinking. Convinced of the requirement to provide an outline of the future post-revolutionary society, the CNT placed a definition of 'libertarian communism' on the agenda of the Zaragoza Congress, held on the eve of the Civil War in May 1936, at which 649 delegates assembled representing 559,294 members (Casanova 2005: 95). Debates had taken place in union branches up and down the country to fix the positions that delegates should defend in Zaragoza. The question of libertarian communism, the goal to which the organisation had been constitutionally committed since its Madrid Congress in 1919, took centre stage. 150 union branches proposed different definitions for the consideration of the Congress. There, the proposals were synthesised by a working group in a 'dictamen', which represented the CNT's sole attempt to establish the parameters of its desired future society, a matter of weeks before it found itself at the centre of a revolutionary situation of unprecedented scale.

Despite the significance of the Zaragoza Congress, the historiography of Spanish anarchism has been marked by antipathy towards the utopian aspect of Spanish anarchist thought. Early English-language studies condescendingly linked the movement with a primitive millenarianism, destined to wither away when exposed to the harsh light of 'modernity', taken to be an inevitable condition synonymous with advanced industrial capitalism (Brenan 1960: 174-75; Hobsbawm 1974: 74-92). Scholarly studies produced during the transition to democracy in Spain paid serious attention to the different interpretations of

libertarian communism that emerged in the years of the Second Republic (1931-1939), correcting the factual errors found in earlier works while retaining their fundamental assumptions. These surveys were largely focused on contributions authored and published by leading figures in the anarchist movement, which were analysed in terms of their plausibility according to teleologies and political conventions of the period (Elorza 1973; Paniagua 1982; an alternative perspective in Mintz [1977] 2013). Despite the apparent crisis in modernist teleology in the ensuing decades, the tendency to consider the limitations of Spanish anarchism in terms of its ambivalent relationship to modernity has retained significant purchase in the historiography. According to this perspective, when confronted with modernity by force of arms during the Civil War, an insufficiently modernised CNT was bereft of the resources required to meet the demands of the situation and was thus outflanked by its more clear-eyed rivals in the Republican zone (Casanova 2005; Graham 1999; Macarro 1993; Preston 2016). In these readings, the debates around the meaning of libertarian communism, themselves symptomatic of the CNT's insufficient modernisation, were rendered irrelevant by the brutal exigencies of the war (Casanova 2005; Herrerín 2020).

Among more sympathetic specialists of Spanish anarchism, an alternative trend has emerged. Taking issue with the association of anarcho-syndicalism and utopia, it has emphasised the movement's rationality, popularity in industrial centres and adaptation to modernity (Kaplan 1977; Vadillo Muñoz 2019).[i] Emphasising the CNT's pragmatism, this tendency does not challenge the association of utopianism with the unrealisable and the archaic, but rather suggests that these features were marginal to Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. The apparent triumph of the movement's 'utopianism' at Zaragoza can thus only be explained by the CNT being under the control of an unrepresentative minority, or else by considering its significance solely in relation to the movement's future ideal, secondary to its immediate concerns (respectively: Herrerín 2020: 239-40; Vadillo Muñoz 2019: 222-23).[ii]

The present work differs from the above interpretations in several respects. Departing from understandings of utopia that stress its pejorative, idealist associations, it argues that the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement's collective undertaking to imagine libertarian communism should be taken seriously by historians, both on its own terms and in relation to the subsequent struggles and debates that took place within the Spanish revolution. To make this case, it first presents an overview of utopia in relation to anarchism which allows for a more positive interpretation of the term; then provides an outline of the key debates and defining features of efforts to define libertarian communism in Spain; and finally points out

specific ways in which this debate influenced attempts by anarchist activists to shape and make sense of the Spanish revolution during the Civil War.

Anarchism and Utopia

In anarchism's engagement with utopia there is a tension between utopian planning and a lived, utopian praxis that remains unresolved. Ruth Kinna sums up this tension as follows:

> While anarchistic ideas have gained some purchase in utopian studies, there is a strong anti-utopian trend in modern anarchism. What is puzzling about this paradox is that both positions seem to be shaped by a common set of concerns. The anarchistic aspect of modern utopianism is marked by an engagement with an imaginative and open-ended exploration of alternative ways of being […] The anti-utopian bent of modern anarchism is shaped by a worry that utopianism threatens precisely these kinds of practice. (2009: 221)

The threat to 'open-ended exploration', through which the drive towards liberation becomes its antithesis and leads to new forms of domination has been identified as fundamental to utopian thought, an assumption that has driven the association of utopianism with totalitarianism (Adams 2020: 1094-97). Theorists such as Miguel Abensour have sought to nuance this negative judgment of utopia by suggesting that it occupies a position of undecidability between the impulse for freedom and its oppressive reversal, what he calls the dialectic of emancipation in utopia (Abensour 2008: 415).[iii]

Some Spanish anarchists were ready to confront these challenges with regard to envisioning and realising the goals of libertarian communism. In 1932 Isaac Puente (1896-1936) published the influential pamphlet *El Comunismo Libertario* [Libertarian Communism], from which the epigraph to this article is taken. Puente explicitly rejected the temptation to provide a utopian blueprint, instead suggesting that the process of social transformation should unfold through a prefigurative practice of living and being otherwise. Puente's cautious avowal of utopia would later be echoed by the anarchist writer-activist Marie Louise Berneri in *Journey Through Utopia* (1950), which examined utopian literature ranging from Plato's *Republic* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Berneri's investigation suggested that utopia and anarchism were compatible only when 'utopia points to an ideal life without becoming a plan,

that is, a lifeless machine applied to living matter' (Berneri [1950] 2019: 8; see also Levitas 1990).

However, the repressive potential of a blueprint for the future was not the only reason for the anarchist reluctance to call libertarian communism a utopia. Of more immediate political consequence was the polemical equation of the utopian with the unrealisable and fantastical. The Spanish anarchist journalist José Bonet affirmed:

> no es ni puede ser Comunismo Libertario una utopía cuando centenares de hombres y mujeres dan la vida por él […] es una utopía para sus detractores, precisamente porque su inminente realidad pone en peligro la plácida existencia de los que viven de la política o de la explotación del trabajo ajeno.
> [libertarian communism is not, nor could it be a utopia when hundreds of men and women give up their lives for it (…) it is only a utopia for its detractors, precisely because its imminent realization endangers the placid existence of those who make their living from politics or the labour of others.] (All translations from Spanish are the authors' unless otherwise stated). (1934: 2)

Given that Bonet was the author of a pamphlet that provided a maximalist vision of the coming libertarian society, his rejection of the term corresponds to what Abensour has described as 'a movement of suspicion of utopia within utopian culture' (2008: 415; Bonet n.d.).

Foreshadowing Berneri and the above-cited passage by Kinna, both Bonet and Puente were at pains to situate their 'utopia' in the realm of experience, the former attesting to its immanence in the struggle of men and women, the latter likening libertarian communism to a period of 'aprendizaje', of learning to live. In *Communal Luxury*, a study of the utopian, anarchistic currents of the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross echoes the attitude of Bonet, arguing that 'the thought of a movement is generated only with and after it […] Actions produce dreams and ideas, and not the reverse' (2015: 7). Furthermore, her discussion of the encounter between two Communards, who compared their activity to pages in a picture book and approaching a new shore, foregrounds in terms close to Puente's the connection between activity and aspiration (2015: 12-13). Ross's book has provided inspiration to this article, insofar as it links the Commune both to its imaginative and experiential afterlives, and to the pre-revolutionary ideas debated in the clubs of Paris (Lynd and Ignatiev 2020). It can be thought of as part of a constellation of recent works that have attended to the hopes of past societies, a dimension of history we wish to recuperate here (Stainforth 2021). Thus, in foregrounding utopia in the

context of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, we are suggesting a frame of analysis that asserts the movement's imaginative energies as integral to its practice.

Libertarian Communism and Anarchist Experience Under the Second Republic

The example of libertarian communism provides a useful case study of the thought of a movement, to paraphrase Ross. Although recognised as the goal of the CNT from 1919, the task of theorising libertarian communism was only pushed to the forefront of the anarchist agenda by the unexpected escalation of a local strike in the mining district of Alt Llobregat in 1932 (Giráldez Macía 2009). Nine months after the proclamation of the Second Republic in April 1931, the failure of the new state to address unchanged conditions in the region's labour colonies led to an impatience that took on insurrectionary features, confirmed by the hoisting of the red and black flag of the CNT over the town hall of Figols on 18 January. The revolutionary general strike, characterised by the peaceful takeover of towns and villages, spread through the mining district before it was crushed, within a week, by the Spanish army. Where villages had been taken over, the revolutionaries declared the arrival of 'libertarian communism' (Borderias and Vilanova 1982).

Arbitrary and widespread repression swiftly followed, and in the midst of a factional dispute between the moderate and radical wings of the CNT, it is possible that the revolt took on a significance that was out of proportion to its scale and duration (Herrerín 2020: 252). Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the courageous efforts of poorly armed workers to enact the ideal of the anarcho-syndicalist movement brought an urgency to the propagation of libertarian communism on the part of the movement's activists. On 15 February 1932, *La Revista Blanca* [The White Journal], run by the veteran anarchist Federico Urales (1864-1942) and his family, which had at the outset of the Republic admitted that the goal of anarchy remained some way off, affirmed on its front page that: 'Decimos futura por costumbre. Quizá mejor fuera llamarla próxima y desde este momento nosotros próxima la llamaremos […] La caída de la sociedad burguesa está muy próxima; es cosa descontada'. [It has been our custom to use the word future. Perhaps it would have been better to say near future and that is the term we will use from now on (…) The downfall of bourgeois society is at hand']. (La Redacción 1932: 543; Elorza 1973: 450-51).

The extent to which insurrectionary activity organised by anarchist activists might hasten the advent of this 'near future' was a bone of contention in the split that divided the CNT in 1932-33 (Buenacasa 1933: 58; Peirats 1964: 87-88). In these years, leading figures in

the more moderate wing withdrew or were forced out of the organisation along with their supporters (Vega 1980; contrasting interpretations in Herrerín 2020: 55-92; Vadillo Muñoz 2019: 192-206). However, the assumption that the split in the CNT amounted to a divide between 'anarchists' who believed in the imminence of revolution and 'anarcho-syndicalists' who did not is untenable, and not only because of the porousness of these categories. Even the leaders of the moderate current of anarcho-syndicalism asserted in their founding document, the so-called 'Manifiesto de los treinta' [Manifesto of the Thirty] that 'España se halla en un momento de intensa propensión revolucionaria' [Spain finds itself in a moment of intense propensity towards revolution] (1931). Such sentiments were echoed by other critics of insurrectionism and, indeed, in the aftermath of the Great Depression, the perception that global capitalism had entered a terminal crisis was widespread within and beyond the borders of Spain (Evans 2016: 246). In this context, the requirement to sketch out the possible outcomes of the revolutionary period was taken up by all sides of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism.

Further insurrections took place over the course of the Second Republic. Those that book-ended the year 1933 were localised and bloodily suppressed, as was the most dramatic uprising of the pre-war Republic, in Asturias in October 1934, in which both anarchists and Socialists participated. Despite the failure of these risings, they led to sympathetic accounts of the temporary experiments enacted by revolutionary workers intended to nurture the desire among activists for libertarian communism. The anarchist Macario Royo published a report on the uprising of December 1933, which left over a hundred people dead in scattered fighting across the Spanish territory. It concluded:

> A lot has been written about the feasibility or otherwise of introducing libertarian communism. It is nonsense to deny the possibility of that arrangement's being put in place. In every one of the revolts since the installation of the petite bourgeoisie's republic, the villages involved have introduced libertarian communism. So all that is needed is determination and coordination in the revolts. (Mintz 2013: 208)

These experiences heralded a debate as to the meaning of libertarian communism, the scale of which would be revealed in the period leading up to the CNT's Zaragoza Congress of May 1936. Thousands of people read, or had read to them, the pamphlets and newspapers in which these ideas were discussed. Insofar as they took up the task of learning to live otherwise, attempting to outline the shape of alternative future societies in their work, we consider the

Spanish anarcho-syndicalists to have been thinkers of utopia. In focusing on their visions, we hope to highlight the close dialogue between political movements, their utopian energies, and the struggle involved in translating hopes for a better world into reality.

Communes and Unions

As noted above, the intensity with which libertarian communism was debated in the Spanish libertarian movement during the Second Republic corresponded to, on the one hand, a perception that Spain had entered a pre-revolutionary period and, on the other, that aspirations articulated from below by workers in isolated uprisings had to be given concrete meaning. The desire to define the collective goal of the movement cut across the temperamental and strategic lines that divided the CNT during these years. Manuel Buenacasa, one of the few prominent anarchists to signal the likely impossibility of a libertarian revolution surviving in an isolated territory surrounded by hostile powers, nevertheless considered the CNT in 1933 to be under an obligation to outline its vision of the future (1933: 65).

Inevitably, the ensuing debate reflected the extant divisions in the anarcho-syndicalist movement, and revolved primarily around the centrality afforded either the union or the municipality / commune (a confusion of terminology discussed below) in the administration of the future society. Those who emphasised the role of unions considered that the significant presence of the CNT in urban Spain would allow for the working-class takeover of industry, with the directly democratic functioning of the organisation serving as a safeguard against authoritarian degeneration. Those who privileged the role of the municipality / commune envisioned a federation of assemblies whose local character (organised at the level of the village or neighbourhood) would guard against centralisation and allow for a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy. Although not mutually exclusive, generally speaking, the preference for either ‘municipality’ or ‘commune’ indicated, respectively, a consideration that the future society would revive traditional but now latent, locally-rooted, democratic procedures, or else a desire to locate the administration of the future in the insurgent tradition of the Paris Commune of 1871 (see Myrtille 2022: 41–52).

Diego Abad de Santillán (1897-1983) was by 1934 a leading figure in the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) in Spain, and was convinced that libertarian communism would only be possible in an industrial society, in which a degree of centralisation would be necessary in order to coordinate the different parts of the economy (Paniagua 1982: 250-51; Baer 2015). In

his writings from this period, compiled in the pamphlet *El Organismo Económico de la Revolución* [The Economic Organisation of the Revolution] (1936), Santillán advocated total union control of post-revolutionary society, emphasising the greater efficiency this would bring to the productive process. By contrast, Federico Urales, in articles in *La Revista Blanca* and in the pamphlet *Los Municipios Libres* [The Free Municipalities] (1932), presented an idealisation of the rural and the archaic, conceiving of the municipality as an ancient institution whose revival would obviate 'el funcionarismo que requiere la organización de la sociedad futura a base de grandes sindicatos' [the bureaucracy required by a future society organised on the basis of large trade unions] (1933: 295). Although both Santillán and Urales occupied influential positions in the movement, the tendency in the historiography to reduce this wide-ranging debate to its most well-known proponents has emphasised what were in reality its most polarised expressions. Puente, for example, considered that the union could provide the democratic means of running the economy, while the municipality, an assembly of the inhabitants in villages and towns, would present a counterweight to total union power.

The combination of municipality / commune and union in administering a post-revolutionary society emerged as the majority position within the CNT as the debate reached its culmination at the Zaragoza Congress in May 1936. Puente and Santillán contributed to this debate through their respective unions, both of which were minoritarian compared to the CNT's factory-based sections (the young activist Diego Camacho, by virtue of working at a newspaper kiosk, became a member of Artes Gráficas [Graphic Arts], Santillán's section. His friend Pedro Conejero remarked that he brought the total number of the branch to three) (Paz 1994: 200). The possibility of shifting the debate around the definition of libertarian communism from the pages of pamphlets and reviews to the more concrete arena of union policy was a contributing factor to the excitement and energy that characterised branch-level debates in the run up to the Congress. As Camacho remembered:

> Por todos los lugares había explosión de alegría. Mítines y asambleas sindicales se realizaban con numerosa asistencia en cines y teatros. El entusiasmo era general. Y todo tendía a pensar que se había entrado en un proceso irreversible de cambio general de la sociedad.
>
> [Everywhere there was an explosion of joy. Rallies and union meetings took place at cinemas and theatres with massive attendances. Enthusiasm was widespread, and everything gave the impression that an irreversible process of generalised social change had begun.] (Paz 1994: 191)

An imperfect picture of the content of the 150 position papers submitted to the Congress can be gleaned from an analysis of the final paper ('dictamen') elaborated by a working group at Zaragoza (a synthesis of the submitted proposals), and by examination of the eleven proposals published beforehand in the Catalan CNT's newspaper, *Solidaridad Obrera* [Workers' Solidarity]. These proposals were a combination of positions approved at general assemblies, proposals submitted for the consideration of union sections, and papers co-written by working groups nominated at assemblies of the union branches. The proposals, several of which were heavily censored before going to print, were published in connection with the following union sections: Artes Gráficas, Obras-Puerto [Dock Works], Transporte [Transport], Espectáculos Públicos [Public Entertainments], la Piel [Leather], Construcción [Construction], Fábril y Textil [Manufacturing and Textiles], Madera [Woodwork], Alimentación [Food Supply], Productos Químicos [Chemical Products] (all explicitly stated to be or presumed to be from Barcelona), and Profesiones Varias [Various Trades] from Alcalá de Guadira (Sevilla).[iv] Despite the evident shortcomings of this sample, it provides a window into a debate that remains unique in the history of the labour movement and which demonstrates what was exceptional about Spanish anarcho-syndicalism in this context: attaining mass membership for a revolutionary project, it then facilitated widespread participation in a discussion as to the outcome of a revolution. To emphasise this point is not to romanticise the democratic procedures of the CNT. Certainly, membership of the organisation did not necessarily imply participation in union assemblies, and it seems likely that more experienced, confident, and literate activists would be prominent in debates around the definition of libertarian communism (Monjo Omedes 2019: 267-98). Yet even if the debate only served to energise the more active and enthusiastic of the CNT's middle-ranking activists, the number of position papers submitted means that a conservative estimate would still acknowledge the participation of thousands of union members up and down the country.

Central to their discussion was the relative post-revolutionary role of the unions and the municipality or commune. Of the proposals published in *Solidaridad Obrera*, two entrusted the unions with full responsibility for the administration of society (Artes Gráficas in a proposal co-signed by Santillán, and Obras-Puerto); two accorded full responsibility to the municipality / commune with no role for the union (Espectáculos Públicos and La Piel); four advocated a combination of the two *a la* Puente (Construcción, Fabril y Textil, Madera and Alimentación); while three were ambiguous (Productos Químicos affirmed a transitional role for the unions, Transporte considered that they would be converted into 'agrupaciones de productores libres'

[associations of free producers] [Transporte 1936: 4], while the level of censorship makes the precise nature of the Profesiones Varias proposal in this regard difficult to discern).

The contribution of Transporte is notable for drawing attention to the confusion between the municipality and the commune. Considering the former to be too easily assimilable to the politics of pre-revolutionary society, and 'existiendo en nuestros medios conceptos más claros' [clearer concepts being available within our movement], the union's proposal called for the creation of communes in each locality, formed by delegates elected by assemblies in 'todas las ramas de la vida' [all areas of life] who would work in conjunction with factory councils and committees, elected in workplace assemblies – both of which suggestions were included in the final dictamen approved at Zaragoza (Transporte 1936: 4).[v] Although it has been noted that the Zaragoza dictamen on libertarian communism corresponded largely to that sketched out by Puente (Vadillo Muñoz 2021: 179-80; Herrerín 2020: 236), this does not mean that its outcome was a foregone conclusion, and the former's replacement of the municipality with the commune is one discernible example of the pre-Congress debate affecting the final position paper.

Eighteen union delegations were nominated to the working group to synthesise the position papers on libertarian communism submitted to the Zaragoza Congress, which approved a motion to broaden the initial group with three delegates who were representatives of the peasantry (CNT 1978: 114-15). Their paper was presented to the assembled delegates in the afternoon on the ninth day of proceedings. The delegates proceeded to read the document in an atmosphere of studious silence that lasted fifty minutes (CNT 1978: 200). Certain assumptions common to both the widely-circulated pamphlets and the proposals published in *Solidaridad Obrera* were retained in the final dictamen: capitalism had entered its final crisis, the tools for the reorganisation of society already existed, the rational organisation of the economy could lead to the self-sufficiency of Spain, there should be equality of the sexes in terms of participation in and responsibility to the collective society, complete blueprints of the future should be resisted, and experimentation encouraged (CNT 1978: 226-42). The dictamen was condemned at the time by Santillán, while José Peirats, a delegate at the Congress, later referred to it as 'science fiction' (Ealham 2015: 85). At the Congress, which approved it unanimously pending its ratification by the unions, the debate on the dictamen centred less on the question of its plausibility than on the continuing controversy as to the post-revolutionary role of the commune and the union (CNT 1978: 200-07).

The dictamen has subsequently been criticised by historians for its attention to 'exotic' matters rather than the urgent issues of armed conflict and war-time production that the

movement would, in a matter of months, be confronted with (Bernecker 1982: 86-91; Casanova 2005: 95; Herrerín 2020: 235-37). Yet, as discussed below, many of the principles outlined in the dictamen would be significant for the social revolution that erupted alongside the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936. Furthermore, from the available evidence, far from representing an unalloyed triumph for 'retrograde communal conceptualisations' (Casanova 2005: 95) proposed by a minority of purists, the advocacy of commune *and* union administration appears to have reflected majority opinion within the CNT's industrial unions, with no clear mandate to dispose of either.

Utopian Traces in Tragic Times: Revolution and Civil War

The reluctance of Spanish anarcho-syndicalists to create a pre-revolutionary blueprint that would preclude innovation and spontaneous creation was vindicated by the events of the Civil War, when the revolutionary transformation that affected much of Republican Spain arose from an initially defensive response to an attempted military coup and was subsequently compromised, both by the exigencies of the war and the unforeseen persistence of the Republican state. Indeed, the experimental and dynamic evolution of revolutionary phenomena, repeatedly built into the pre-war proposals around libertarian communism on all sides of the debate, have been identified as a characteristic largely overlooked in historiographical studies of the revolution (Castillo Cañiz 2016). Nevertheless, the scale and profundity of the transformation, particularly in the first months of the war, has been established beyond reasonable doubt (from differing perspectives: Bernecker 1982; Bolloten 2015; Casanova 2005: 102; Ealham 2010: 173; Pozo González 2012).

It is beyond the scope of the present article to provide an exhaustive survey of the ways in which revolutionary phenomena did or did not correspond to the pre-war proposals around libertarian communism. Areas of central importance to that debate, including relations between city and country (Masjuan Bracons 2000), education (Giacomoni 2016), and gender equality (Ackelsberg 2005; Cleminson 2011), would all make fruitful starting points for such a discussion. Instead, in what follows we focus on questions of power and administration, and suggest that the anarcho-syndicalist imaginary of libertarian communism did not dissipate under the pressure of the war but continued to provide resources through which anarchists understood their activity.

The CNT's armed activists – grouped in some areas in defence committees – were prominent in the suppression of the military coup in several of Spain's major cities. In the days

that followed, they became known as milicianos and began to recruit and coordinate a workers' militia (Guillamón 2020). The milicianos had a two-fold mission: to purge a given area of the coup's armed supporters and guard against their resurgence, and to recover territories overrun by the military. The creation and activity of the militias in Barcelona corresponded to the reorganisation of the defence committees spearheaded by the famous CNT activist and 'man of action' Juan García Oliver in the months prior (Guillamón 2020: 12-22; 33-40). Nevertheless, they fell somewhat short of the 'ejército revolucionario' [revolutionary army] he had envisaged and argued for in the proposal submitted to Zaragoza by the Fabril y Textil union of Barcelona (1936: 6). With the exception of the specialist force advocated by that union, the trope of 'el pueblo armado' [the people armed] was recurrent in the debates that preceded the Congress, enshrined in the final dictamen as 'la mayor garantía contra todo intento de restauración del regimen destruido' [the greatest guarantee against any attempt to restore the vanquished regime] (CNT 1978: 241), and evoked in anarchist propaganda in the first days of the Civil War (CNT-FAI Información y Propaganda 1936; Mujeres Libres 1936). That the inverse of this statement was also true was demonstrated by the gradual and geographically uneven reduction of the armed worker as a factor in the Republican war effort. By the spring of 1937 the militias had been converted into a regular army and, following the May days in Barcelona, the Republican state recovered a monopoly on the use of legitimate violence through the traditional forces of order, a necessary precursor to the subordination of other revolutionary phenomena (Evans 2020: 108-10; Vega, Monjo and Vilanova 1990). While the revolutionary situation persisted, however, workers with rifles were both the agents and symbols of the altered physiognomy of cities and the most striking indication of a revolutionary rupture to both participants and onlookers (Ealham 2005: 115). The prevalence of armed workers in the revolutionary situation represented a continuation and extension of the CNT's pre-war theory and practice.

Absent the armed guarantee of property and order, factory bosses were likewise missing when workers returned to centres of production following the street fighting. This fact has led some historians to emphasise the spontaneous and unplanned nature of the takeover of workplaces that followed, attributing a kind of negative protagonism to bosses whose disappearance facilitated worker self-management (discussed in Monjo Omedes 2019: 422). However, the absence of the bosses was not a coincidence but a symptom of the breakdown of capitalist order that the prevalence of armed workers made clear. As with 'el pueblo armado', this decomposition of the old order was understood in the debates around libertarian communism as a necessary precondition for revolutionary transformation (CNT 1978: 228-29).

Prior to the war, the union of La Piel in Barcelona submitted a proposal to the debate on libertarian communism in which it suggested certain transformative measures that might act as a guide to militate against chaos and confusion in the post-revolutionary period (La Piel 1936). When that period arrived only months later, it proceeded to the socialisation of the leather industry in Barcelona. In publicising this act, the union made the connection between aspiration and activity clear:

> Ya no es cuestión de engañarnos, camaradas, sabemos dónde vamos, solo hace falta decirlo con sinceridad y nobleza. Resolvamos de una vez este asunto que ya está resuelto en nuestras asambleas y Plenos Regionales, y en la práctica por nuestros Comités de control. Así es que hay necesidad de socializar rápidamente la producción y consumo, para ir de lleno a otras cuestiones, a otros problemas de coordinación para la nueva economía.
> [It is not the time to kid ourselves, comrades. We know where we are going, it only remains to say so with sincerity and nobility. Let us settle this question, which has already been resolved in our assemblies and Regional Plenums, and in practice by our Control Committees. We must proceed rapidly to the socialisation of production and consumption so that we can turn to other questions, to other problems of coordinating the new economy.] (Cited in Monjo Omedes 2019: 425)

Although the extent to which industries were transformed by self-management in the first months of the war varied considerably, the committees founded to co-ordinate worker control drew on the vocabulary formulated during the pre-war debates. For example, the pre-war proposal of Fabril y Textil (1936) advocated for ‘comisiones’ and ‘comités técnicas’ (union bodies entrusted with planning and coordinating the economy), which were created by union delegates in Barcelona in the first days of revolutionary transformation (Monjo Omedes 2019: 424 and 426).

The tendency in the historiography to reduce the CNT to its most visible leaders partly accounts for the downplaying of such revolutionary continuity across the spring and summer of 1936. Undoubtedly, the movement was divided in its attitude to the potential of the moment. Horacio M. Prieto, National Secretary of the CNT at the time, later remembered that when he received a report from a Barcelona delegation in the opening weeks of the conflict he responded by saying ‘me parece imposible; habéis ido demasiado lejos y vamos a pagarlo muy caro’ [it

is impossible; you have gone too far and we are going to pay for it dearly] (Prieto 1946: 5). Consequently, advocates of taking the revolution as far as possible had to confront, not only the forbidding circumstances in which social transformation unfolded, but also the opposition of influential comrades, whose ongoing reference to libertarian communism was confined to a marker of what the CNT had renounced in order to collaborate with other anti-fascist forces (discussions of the CNT's collaboration in Calero Delso 2011; Marín 2005).

Outside of the major cities, further away from governmental power and the CNT leadership, collectives were established that more closely approximated the communal life sketched out in the Zaragoza dictamen. In some areas, money was abolished and replaced with labour vouchers and the distribution and planning of work took place at assemblies of the inhabitants (Diez Torre 2009: 39-69). Paniagua notes the occasional continued reference to the commune in anarchist propaganda directed at the peasantry during the war and concludes, somewhat dismissively, that these attitudes 'condicionarían sin duda varias de las medidas colectivizadoras que se hicieron en núcleos agrícolas, generalmente atrasados económica y culturalmente, de Aragón o Castilla' [doubtless impacted several of the collectivising measures taken in agricultural areas, generally those that were economically and culturally backward, in Aragon and Castille] (Paniagua 1982: 268).

To note these correspondences between pre-war projections and wartime practice is not to deny the abrupt and brutal impact of the war and the alteration of priorities and precepts that it implied for many activists. However, just as historians have perceived a continuity between the CNT's 'pragmatic' approach to alliances under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and that adopted during the Civil War (Vadillo Muñoz 2021: 198), so we can perceive a continuity in the way in which mid-level activists continued to understand both the limits and potential of their wartime activity in the terms of libertarian communism.

During the CNT's socialisation campaign, which lasted from December 1936 until May 1937, familiar terminology was drawn upon to critique the limitations of collectivisation and to justify pushing ahead with revolutionary experiments (Castells Duran 1996; Evans 2020: 75-84; Monjo and Vega 1986). Assemblies were held in factories to debate socialisation, a mass assembly approved the municipalisation of housing in Lleida, and the Regional Federation of Agrarian Collectives was established in Caspe (Evans 2020: 75-80). The municipality / commune reappeared in organisational communiqués and articles in the anarchist press (Vadillo Muñoz 2021: 195). In a bold attempt to revive the terms and precepts of libertarian communism as organisational practice, steps were taken to socialise the entire economy of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in January 1937. In terminology evocative of the pre-

war debates, the body set up to oversee this arrangement was called the Consejo General de la Economía [General Council of the Economy]. Its functioning was explained in an article in *Ideas*, the movement newspaper in the town, which concluded with the hope that it would facilitate 'la creación del Consejo General de la Economía Comarcal, base para llevar a feliz término la comuna libre, dentro de la Federación de Pueblos Libres de Iberia' [the creation of the General Council of the Regional Economy, the basis for bringing about the free commune within the Federation of Free Peoples of Iberia] (Abella 1937; see also Evans 2020: 78).

In the months that followed, the anarcho-syndicalist movement attempted to recover the sense of revolutionary momentum that had been lost after the first months of the Civil War. When this momentum resulted in a showdown with the Republican state during the so-called May days in Barcelona, the most fundamental questions of whether and how to achieve its aims were again debated (Guillamón 2017; Rüdiger 1940). Although the movement's leadership forced a withdrawal from the barricades in May, the socialisation campaign had demonstrated that, for a significant section of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, libertarian communism and its associated values and terminology retained their appeal and relevance in the context of war, not only as concrete achievement, but as aspiration and critique.

Conclusions

In line with a recent historical turn to the utopian, which aims to take seriously the untimely aspirations of past societies, this article has returned to the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist utopia, to assess its significance to the thought and action of the movement. It has demonstrated that the various ways in which the movement understood libertarian communism, its key features and administrative institutions, developed in relation to the brief essays in worker power experienced in isolated uprisings during the Republic. The debate that sought to crystallise these experiences in an open-ended 'definition' of libertarian communism was not confined to intellectuals at one remove from the broader movement, but was in fact central to the proposals put forward by major industrial unions prior to the Zaragoza Congress in May 1936. These proposals became resources which were drawn upon by activists in the reshaping of their societies during the war.

Writing at the same time as the generation of Spanish historians who first surveyed the anarcho-syndicalist utopia from the standpoint of triumphant modernity, the American activist-scholar Murray Bookchin approached the subject from a different temporal perspective. He

suggested that, in the context of ecological crisis, the Zaragoza dictamen's attendance to non-industrial society was anything but retrograde, claiming that 'the liberatory spirit of these lines seems almost prophetic' (1977: 294). In what could serve as a riposte to his contemporaries writing in Spain, he reflected that 'Today, it is impossible for an urbane and modernistic generation to realize how far these Anarchosyndicalist workingmen and workingwomen were in advance of their time' (Bookchin 1977: 295).

While it could be argued that, in the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship, 'modernity' carried with it connotations of freedom that made it a justifiable yardstick for judging the efficacy of historical ideologies, its application to anarcho-syndicalism led not only to the peremptory dismissal of its aspirations, but to the flattening and partial erasure of the movement that had shaped them. Following the war, anarcho-syndicalists mourned the defeat of their revolutionary hope.[vi] What they had lost represented more than the fragile modernity promised by the Republican state. In the aptly titled documentary *Vivir la utopía* [Living Utopia], made for Spanish television in the 1990s, the moving reflections of the participants convey the gains and losses of the revolution: of solidarity and collective intensity of feeling, of living in 'el comunismo más comunista' [the most communist communism] and beyond the daily cares occasioned by the need for money (Gamero 1997). These were what marked, for them, the parameters of the Spanish experience.

In this article we have established that libertarian communism is not reducible to its most famous proponents; rather, it should be seen as collective project which provided resources for thinking and living otherwise in pre- and post-revolutionary times. As such, libertarian communism cannot be disassociated from the Spanish revolution and the anarcho-syndicalist movement that formed its most dynamic element. As the revolution was a phenomenon with few historical parallels, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ideas that inspired it appear in some ways remote from our own time, many decades after its violent defeat. Their renewed historical consideration, however, brings us closer to understanding how the anarcho-syndicalist movement expanded the imaginations of its adherents, and in so doing, altered the limits of the possible during their lifetimes.

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[i] For a nuanced discussion of anarchism's combination of 'modern' and 'pre-modern' methods, see (Ealham 2010: 36-43).

[ii] The latter position appears to have been modified in (Vadillo Muñoz 2021: 183).

[iii] Abensour's formulation is based on the model of the dialectic of Enlightenment proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer ([1944] 1997).

[iv] See *Solidaridad Obrera*: 17 April 1936, 2; 19 April, 6; 21 April, 2; 24 April, 2; 26 April, 4-5; 28 April, 4; 29 April, 2; 1 May, 8.

[v] Two years previously, in 1934, the celebrated activist Valeriano Orobón Fernández (1901-1936) had proposed the post-revolutionary creation of workers' councils inspired by the Bavarian revolution (Gutiérrez Molina 2002). While Orobón's position was, in other ways, more strategically elaborated than the proposals submitted to Zaragoza, the insistence on the commune, similarly inspired by concern for working-class democracy, had the advantage of immediate acceptance among anarchists while also referencing a broader socialist tradition.

[vi] For an account of post-war anarchist memory that takes this observation as its starting point, but which arrives at opposite conclusions, see (Martín Nieto 2013).