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Spanish Anarchism 1900-1936

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Anarchism was prevalent in Spain during the period 1900-1936 because of its suitability to Spanish economic, cultural, and political conditions, and because Spanish anarchists were successful at organization and cultural projects. Anarchists were able to create a strong movement that addressed the concerns of the Spanish working classes. During this period the movement was resilient enough to survive repression, flexible enough to be apply itself to different tasks, and ideologically-driven enough to prevent being co-opted by the state.

It can be difficult to get a clear picture of events in such a politically-charged history, but a number of secondary sources complement each other to foster better understanding. Gerald Brenan's *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War* is a thorough study of Spanish politics as they developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It contains detailed chapters on anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, but the book has a broader focus than the anarchist movement. E.J. Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* contains a section on anarchism in the Spanish agrarian region of Andalusia. It is heavily influenced by Brenan's work. In *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*, Murray Bookchin, writing after Brenan and Hobsbawm, values Brenan's work and often refers to it, but he criticizes Brenan's

focus on Andalusia and his argument that anarchism had a mystical component. Bookchin is also critical of Hobsbawm's relegation of anarchism to an archaic era of "primitive rebels." Bookchin has personal investment in the subject. Though he remained in the United States during the Spanish Civil War, it was a formative event of his youth. In the introduction to the 1998 version, he states "I began writing *The Spanish Anarchists* in the late sixties because I wanted to reclaim for a new generation this great revolutionary, indeed insurrectionary upsurge that liberals and Stalinists had so grossly distorted."¹ Bookchin's extensive bibliography, research in Spain, and congruence with other sources makes his work a valuable compliment to understanding Spanish anarchism. Pamela Radcliff's *From Mobilization to Civil War: The Politics of Polarization in the Spanish City of Gijon, 1900-1937*, is a study of politics as they developed in Gijon, an industrial port city in Spain's northern Asturias province. Radcliff focuses on developments in Gijon, providing a useful case study of a city in which anarcho-syndicalism took hold. While she cites Brennan as the classic formulation of cultural explanations for Spanish anarchism and Hobsbawm as the articulator of the "classic Marxist teleology" on economic arguments, Radcliff suggests that the prevalence of Spanish anarchism is a complex question and focuses on its success in Gijon.²

Spain was very receptive to anarchist ideas as they were introduced during the nineteenth century. Its federalist movement was heavily influenced by the early French anarchist theoretician, Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Pi y Margall, a leading figure in the Spanish federalist movement, translated Proudhon's works and advocated the gradual dissolution of power, writing

¹ Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1998), 3.

² Pamela Beth Radcliff, *From Mobilization to Civil War: The Politics of Polarization in the Spanish City of Gijon, 1900-1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 167-171.

in 1854 that “every man who has power over another is a tyrant.”³ While later anarchists would take a more insurrectionary line, the federalist movement continued to have influence in Spain. In Gijon, federalists were intricately involved in working class politics. Radcliffe notes that many of the city’s radicals had been in the Federalist Party when they were young, and discusses the overlapping membership among Gijon Federalist Party members and the anarcho-syndicalist CNT (National Confederation of Labor).⁴

The first known proponent of Bakunin’s anarchist theories arrived in Spain in 1868. Despite severe lack of funds and a language barrier, Giuseppe Fanelli, an Italian confidant of Bakunin, proved enormously successful at mobilizing anarchist support. People who spoke with him and received his pamphlets quickly began agitating for the anarchist idea and organizing anarchist groups. The ideas spread rapidly.⁵ Clearly, Spain was fertile ground for anarchism.

Anarchism was quickly and widely adopted in Spain because its presentation addressed Spanish political, economic, and cultural conditions. Although Spain was undergoing industrialization, pervasive poverty and entrenched privilege helped make the country fertile ground for revolutionary politics. Anarchists advocated solutions to economic problems that resonated with Spanish rural and urban workers.

Spanish land policy fostered extreme poverty in the countryside. Large landholders amassed power and agricultural laborers suffered crippling poverty and a lack of economic mobility. In 1812, the government began selling common lands to investors to help pay off the

³ Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 148-149.

⁴ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 147.

⁵ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 138-143.

national debt. In the 1830s, Church property was sold and sales of common lands continued. While conditions varied among the different agricultural regions, peasants generally either worked unsustainably small plots of land or provided cheap labor for wealthy landlords.⁶ A large class of day laborers arose, who faced exhausting work for little pay.⁷ Elite excesses encouraged a wave of peasant uprisings, which Hobsbawm describes. Anarchists presented solutions to the land problem that resonated with peasants. Anarchists taking the position of Bakunin held that land should be divided and distributed into individual holdings controlled by those who labored on them. Beginning in the 1880s, the influence of anarchist communism and anarcho-syndicalism eclipsed Bakunin's collectivist ideas, and it became more common for rural anarchists to advocate a communal system of land tenure. Either approach would put laborers in control of land, breaking the power of landlords to monopolize land and have it worked in whatever way maximized their profit.⁸ The classical peasant village spirit of solidarity, mutual aid, egalitarianism, and sociability served as a departure point for the anarchist model.⁹

Although agrarian issues were clearly important, the extent to which Spanish economic "primitiveness" fostered anarchism is unclear. While Hobsbawm regards classical anarchism as "a form of peasant movement almost incapable of effective adaptation to modern conditions,"¹⁰ other sources show that anarchist ideas were held among urban workers who were involved with anarcho-syndicalist activity. Brennan notes that the original adherents to anarchist groups inspired

⁶ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 108-110.

⁷ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 82-83.

⁸ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 86.

⁹ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 97.

¹⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 92.

by Fanelli were overwhelmingly urban artisans, with a few teachers and university students included. Workmen in general seemed “too apathetic and too uneducated” to be interested in the political goals of anarchism.¹¹ Bookchin describes Madrid as having “no industry to speak of,” only craftsmen working in small shops, at the time of Fanelli’s visit¹². He argues that the process of “proletarianization” fueled revolutionary workers’ movements. The “half-grown” quality of the early proletariat, as it transitioned into industrial labor, sparked revolution.¹³

While industrialization in Spain took place later and more slowly than industrialization in other parts of Western Europe, the demographic stability of industrial Gijon, an anarcho-syndicalist stronghold, raises the possibility that economic primitiveness and the process of proletarianization might not be essential to the prevalence of Spanish anarchism. People migrating to the city tended to stay there, many having children who lived in the city their whole lives. By 1930, 80% of the population had lived in Gijon for at least ten years.¹⁴ Gijon was a city of modern industry. A glass factory had existed since 1844 and the glass industry expanded over time. By the early twentieth century, textile factories, a ceramics factory, and a tobacco factory were examples of large industry in the city.¹⁵ In contrast to sources that stress anarchism’s rural strength, Radcliff argues that the development and expansion of public spheres in urban centers create space for major challenges to the system.

¹¹ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 141-142.

¹² Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 38.

¹³ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 281-282.

¹⁴ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 73-75.

¹⁵ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 66.

Similarly, anarchism did not necessarily morph into a distinct, more structured anarcho-syndicalism when it reached the cities. The FAI, Iberian Anarchist Federation, was formed by anarchist revolutionaries primarily to ensure the anarcho-syndicalist CNT union's adherence to anarchist principles. Every member of the FAI was expected to join a CNT syndicate to further this task, enhancing the interplay between revolutionary anarchist ideology and anarcho-syndicalist organizing. The FAI was not primarily an agricultural movement, but had its strongest base in the urban centers of Barcelona and Saragossa.¹⁶ The famous FAI man Buenaventura Durruti was a mechanic from industrial Leon.¹⁷ While agrarian issues were essential to Spanish politics, and anarchism did address them, it is clear that anarchism in Spain was broader than a peasant movement and had many adherents among the urban working classes, whether or not their proletarian nature was significantly mature.

Anarchist activity was well-suited to function in the pervasive poverty of Spain. Brennan notes the frugality of anarchist organizers and unions. With a strong mistrust in bureaucracy and a belief that workers must liberate themselves, the CNT had almost no paid staff. Organizers travelled frugally, relying on "the hospitality of more prosperous workmen."¹⁸ The CNT had very low dues, and workers in poor areas were not required to pay anything. Brennan notes the obvious advantage this gave the CNT as "Poor men joined the union which cost them least."¹⁹ Lower operating costs may have provided a critical advantage in a severely impoverished country, as the lean CNT was able to make do with less. CNT members received concrete

¹⁶ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 198-203.

¹⁷ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 182.

¹⁸ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 145-146.

¹⁹ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 172, 198.

benefits when the union put anarchist ideals of solidarity and mutual aid into practice. The CNT eventually provided assistance in securing employment, inspected working conditions and labor disputes, assisted those subject to police repression, and provided insurance against illness or death.²⁰ But the advantage of anarchism to building a movement in an impoverished country was not limited to union activity. Anarchist emphasis on direct action and belief in the complete illegitimacy of prevailing institutions provided ideological support for what anarchists called “expropriations,” more commonly described as robberies. The tendency to take money from class enemies meant that anarchists had an independent source of funding for schools, publishing, and weapons.²¹ Anarchist ideas as Bakunin and Fanelli had explained them provided ideological guidance in establishing a strong movement in a severely impoverished country.

Anarchism was well suited to Spanish culture, and anarchists were able to build on common elements of Spanish culture to craft an effective counter-culture. While an ethnic group cannot have innate thinking tendencies, prominent currents in Spanish culture could have contributed to the widespread adoption of anarchist ideas. Brennan makes frequent references to the Spanish character and how it influences decisions. Bookchin describes a fierce sense of individuality and dignity among Spaniards, as well as a strong sense of community arising from the rural *pueblo*. Bookchin cites Brennan’s depiction of peasants plowing with swords dangling from their waists and artisans treating grandees as their equals.²² Anarchists hoped to cultivate Spanish egalitarian traditions, and were often successful at doing so. In rural areas, mountain peasant culture was seen as a springboard for a new culture that would shed parochialism,

²⁰ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 229-233.

²¹ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 181.

²² Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 57.

superstition, ignorance, and authority once anarchists displaced them by cultivating preferred attributes.²³ Radcliff shows how anarchists in the industrial city of Gijon competed with republicans and socialists to define a counter-culture within the public sphere.

Brenan emphasizes what he considers a religious character to Spanish anarchist culture, but it likely that behavior exhibited by many Spanish anarchists was a rational attempt to effect a total transformation of society. The spread of the “Idea” had the appearance of a religious revival. Adherents variously abstained from meat, tobacco, alcohol, and coffee. Strikes were accompanied by a millenarian expectation there would be an immediate transformation to the age of plenty.²⁴ Brenan goes so far as to raise the idea of rural anarchism as the Spanish version of the Protestant reformation. He casts anarchists as “uncompromising moralists” who attacked the Church with “fanatical hatred” that can best be explained as “the hatred of heretics for the Church from which they have sprung.”²⁵ However, points raised in Brenan’s book suggest that whatever religious overtones rural anarchism had, there were rational explanations for their actions. Brenan describes anarchists as displaying a deep sense of solidarity for their anarchist comrades. In the extreme poverty that Brenan describes, abstention from luxuries could be a form of solidarity with poor comrades. Brenan’s discussion of Spanish Catholic politics brings up secular reasons to hate the institution. The Church’s activities were “mainly political” and its allies were primarily “from the wealthiest and most reactionary classes.” Until 1910 it was required that Catholic dogma be taught in government schools, while a significant number of students never learned to read. Spanish Catholics taught that “the state must be subject to the

²³ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 97.

²⁴ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 157.

²⁵ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 188-189.

Church as the body to the soul, as the temporal to the eternal.” Liberalism was a sin.²⁶

Anarchism’s spread in the countryside might have looked like religious proselytizing simply because both were effective ways for people enthusiastic about an idea to spread it across the countryside. Short-sightedness and poor planning could be the result of isolation from outside events skewing views on the chances of revolution.

Hobsbawm raises the point that what appeared to be mystical millenarianism might instead be an expression of the primitive economic conditions in which peasants lived. Without broader organization, peasants could not hope to change the outside world. All they could do was take over the village, and if the outside world did not accept the revolution then the revolution would fail. The struggle was viewed not as long-term campaign but as a means to the immediate end of a bad world.²⁷ However, Bookchin argues that anarchist movements had long-term strategies. Eventually peasant movements were better organized, and agricultural workers joined the CNT. Hobsbawm’s Marxist view of classical anarchism relegates it to peasant backwardness, short-sightedness, and localism. However, anarchism held appeal across a broader segment of the public, as discussed above.

Pamela Radcliff’s study of social movements in Gijon provides a useful lens for understanding anarchist culture. She describes how political movements sought to organize a mobilized populace “around specific hegemonic projects.”²⁸ Part of this project included the endeavor to “construct a proletarian public sphere, in which workers would participate in a range of educational and leisure activities that reinforced their political class identity and prepared

²⁶ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 51-52.

²⁷ Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 89-90.

²⁸ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 309.

them for a future seizure of power.”²⁹ While parliamentary conflicts were taking place within official government channels, “competing systems of power fought for legitimization” in the public sphere of daily association.³⁰ Republicans and radicals both attempted to subvert the dominant public sphere of the old order to create a specific culture of opposition. The use of everything from street festivals to funerals promoted a specific political tendency. Anarchist culture was one of several cultures of opposition competing for power in Gijon. It is likely that anarchists understood their cultural choices as taking personal initiative against the dominant culture of capitalism, Catholicism, and submission to authority.

Murray Bookchin’s characterization of anarchist culture as a “counter-society” reflects Radcliff’s perspective of hegemonic cultural struggle, and shows how anarchist cultural efforts strengthened their movement. The counter society was not only a space for moral regeneration of the proletariat, but also “a terrain in which to remake themselves into revolutionaries.”

Anarchists established workers’ centers which functioned as union halls as well as spaces for literature, education, and discussion. Anarchist culture created space to experiment with different lifestyles, generally with the goal of the health and dignity of the individual.³¹ Anarchism filled a “cultural, religious, political, and economic vacuum” left by the unresponsiveness of church, government, and wealthy to the concerns of the poor.³² Since the anarchists of the sierra “could command no resources other than a respect earned by the exemplary nature of their behavior and the relevancy of their ideas,” their lifestyle meant holding themselves to a high standard to

²⁹ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 311.

³⁰ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 195.

³¹ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 48-50.

³² Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 57.

inspire others.³³ Austerity also signified personal discipline, which could be useful in creating a powerful movement relying on the initiative of individual members more than the obedience to party orders. If a religious model must be used in understanding anarchism, then anarchist culture replaced the social, not the mystical elements of religion. Bakunin's militant atheism appealed to the anti-clerical feeling that was sweeping Spain.³⁴ If religion could not be a motivating factor in bettering oneself and treating others properly, then a secular Idea of human relations would take over the social role of the defeated religion.

Education was an essential element in the development of cultural challenges to the status quo in Spain. Brennan describes the dismal state of Spanish education, owing in large part to the influence of a power-hungry Church. Radcliff shows that education was an essential element of all progressive challenges to the Spanish system. Republicans who hoped to "create a nation of people who thought like citizens, not subjects" founded schools to foster these goals. The process of education ended up radicalizing more workers, especially after republican power failed to deliver noticeable improvement to the working classes and republican cultural institutions were infiltrated or challenged by radical workers.³⁵ In addition to educational efforts undertaken at working class cultural centers, anarchists were involved in schools that directly challenged the Church's hold on education and the methods used by the Church. A prominent example is the Modern School movement, founded by "philosophical anarchist" Francisco Ferrer to be a "school of emancipation." Many members of the anarchist movement supported Ferrer and involved themselves in teaching and publishing. Modern School pamphlets provided many

³³ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 81.

³⁴ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 26.

³⁵ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 201.

Spaniards their first exposure to science.³⁶ Rural anarchists were often the area's only voices of science and modernism, and the only people who taught villagers to read and write.³⁷ While liberals placed a high value on education, they didn't reach the rural poor, and had trouble appealing to the urban poor to whom they held opposing interests. The task of educating the Spanish poor was taken up in large part by anarchists, and this likely won anarchists more support as people saw them as generous sources of the knowledge that the ruling classes had kept from them. Anarchists filled a necessary role in Spanish public life as advocates of progress and science who were intent on humanizing the industrial revolution and enhancing the dignity of the worker.

In addition to its economic and cultural suitability to Spanish conditions, anarchism was well-suited to Spanish political conditions. Its methods were particularly useful against a brutal, corrupt, and unstable state. The widening polarization between the Spanish right and left strengthened the anarchist position, and polarization was in turn encouraged by the anarchist movement.

Bookchin explains that federalism and direct action, both of which held wide appeal in Spain, figured heavily into Bakunin's formulation of anarchism.³⁸ Anarchist federalism, in which local grassroots organizations would affiliate with each other based on region and adapt policy based on local conditions, instead of creating a centralized authority to direct lower echelons, had parallels in earlier Spanish federalism. Spain was politically fragmented with numerous geographical distinctions and thus unlikely to be conducive to centralized rule. Radical revolts

³⁶ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 118.

³⁷ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 82.

³⁸ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 26.

had often taken on a local character. Direct action, when individuals redress grievances by using their own devices instead of by appealing to authority, had wide precedence in Spain. Peasant uprisings discussed by Hobsbawm, consumer protests and anti-tax riots described by Radcliff, and the 1909 Catalan insurrection all involved direct action by masses of Spaniards not under the command of a particular political party. Brennan writes that when “the Spanish people rose against Napoleon, there was no king and no government to direct them.”³⁹ In contrast to anarchists, socialists often disdained direct action and advocated acting through government, which the Spanish working class often saw as futile.

The notably repressive character of Spanish political and economic relations fueled greater polarization, which strengthened the anarchist position. Instead of making conciliatory reforms, the entrenched interests of landowners, business elites, and reactionary aristocrats relied on harsh repression to keep working class in line. Republican politicians failed to make material changes in the lives of the working class. Society became increasingly polarized and radical ideas gained adherents. In response to radical actions, the state resorted to widespread and brutal crackdowns. *Pistoleros*, gun-toting assassins, were involved in labor movements as well as hired by government and business organizations. The Civil Guard, an internal police force, was notoriously trigger-happy and heavy-handed. A telling example of Spanish government brutality is described by Murray Bookchin. In 1896 a bomb was thrown into Barcelona’s Corpus Christi Day celebration. Suspiciously, the bomb was thrown into the rear of the procession where ordinary people marched, not at its head where elites marched. In response over 400 people, anarchists, labor leaders, republicans and anti-clericals, were thrown into dungeons. Descriptions of tortures they endured, which included genitals twisted with rope and burned, removal of

³⁹ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 42.

fingernails and toenails, and severe beatings, shocked public opinion but the system did not acknowledge wrongdoing. In response an Italian anarchist assassinated the Spanish premier, and the attempted assassin of one of the officers presiding over the tortures was released because no judge would convict him.⁴⁰ Anarchist organizations, with a less formal structure relying on bottom-up individual initiative, were perhaps better adapted for cycles of repression and subsequent explosive growth than socialist organizations were. During times when anarchists were targeted by the state and socialists were not, ideological workers would see socialist activity as cooperation with a violent enemy.

Spanish corruption made political change seem less hopeful, which closed off alternatives to revolutionary activity and made the state appear a hopeless institution to many. Elections were brazenly rigged. Government posts were given based on political patronage and deals were made with industrialists who guaranteed well paid jobs for politicians and their families.⁴¹ Rural political machines were run by men called caciques. A cacique was generally a large landowner who “in exchange for certain unwritten privileges organizes the district politically on the Government’s behalf.”⁴² Even the rural bandit, who had traditionally been a Robin Hood type figure, was subverted by the caciques, who relied on bandits to protect property and control elections.⁴³ Gangster politics persisted well into the 1930s. Bookchin notes that the celebrated 1936 Popular Front electoral victory had to overcome street mobs, *pistoleros*, drive-by shootings,

⁴⁰ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 109-100.

⁴¹ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 5-6, 20.

⁴² Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 7.

⁴³ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 156.

and intimidation by landlords, police, and caciques.⁴⁴ Brennan writes that “wherever the cacique is found he promotes a-politicism and anarchism.”⁴⁵ Hobsbawm describes rural anarchists as the peasants only hope for liberation after bandits became gangsters employed by caciques and the Church abandoned them for the rich. A total break with the system became more attractive as reactionaries continued to put obstacles in the way of reform.

The increasing separation between the Spanish right and left strengthened the anarchist movement, which in turn encouraged further polarization. Radcliff describes how anarchists, with their radical views, benefitted from polarization while socialists could not find their niche in heavily polarized Gijon.⁴⁶ But polarization was a process driven not only by reactionary extremists but also by social revolutionaries. Even the moderate wing of the anarchist movement, represented by the CNT leadership, opposed reformist proposals. While funds were set up to aid prisoners and schools, the CNT deliberately went without a strike fund to encourage its members to act in a revolutionary manner.⁴⁷ Anarchist militants detonated bombs and attacked politicians and thugs. Though their attacks were often in response to the violence of their enemies, militants held a deliberate policy of “destabilizing capitalism.”⁴⁸ The polarization of Spanish society strengthened the anarchist movement, which then used its strength to foster greater polarization.

The brutality of the Spanish state was perhaps a way to compensate for its fundamental inability to maintain a stable political system. This instability strengthened anarchists. Brennan

⁴⁴ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 260.

⁴⁵ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 94.

⁴⁶ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 50.

⁴⁷ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 145.

⁴⁸ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 170, 185.

describes a history of conflict and disunity. Unable to integrate a broad array of political demands, national governments were frequently threatened by competing allegiances when they weren't toppled altogether. The government was rarely able to arrest revolutionary momentum in any way besides employing overwhelming force. Even after the Republic was proclaimed in 1930, its heavy-handedness toward uprisings shocked the public and undermined support.

Spanish economic, cultural, and political factors assisted in the growth of the anarchist movement, and the movement that resulted was able to further exploit and develop its environment due to the effective organization of the Spanish anarchist movement. Radcliff makes the case that ideologies of class struggle explained, informed, or co-opted popular discontent and mobilization at least as much as they created political mobilization. Anarchists utilized a number of organizational structures, including unionism as exemplified by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, Bakunin-inspired secretive societies of agitation, and affinity groups of trusted militants. They effectively integrated the urban and rural populations of Spain.

Spanish anarchism showed effective organization from the beginning. Revolutionary Anarchism came to Spain as an affiliate of the International Workingmen's Association. Adherents corresponded through Bakunin-inspired secretive societies. They played a major role in organizing a workers' congress, which first met in June of 1870 with about a hundred delegates representing 150 workers' societies. Anarchists at the conference were largely successful at guiding it away from reformism.⁴⁹

Anarchist influence on labor organizing continued. In October 1910, the CNT was formed. While anarchists paid a great deal of attention to creating the organizational structure of

⁴⁹ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 43-44.

the CNT and guided its program, the ranks of the union were open to the working class in general. Many joined because the union for its power, and thus were brought into the anarchist struggle.⁵⁰ In Gijon, the union's influence was so strong that the local labor movement became identified with anarcho-syndicalism, and belonging to the socialist UGT entailed social marginalization.⁵¹

The affinity groups that anarchist militants and purists organized themselves into were effectively organized for the tasks they set out to do. Affinity groups were rarely larger than a dozen people. Their small size encouraged intimate trust between members and the individual initiative of each member. They were drawn together by common social principles and personal attributes, functioning almost as an extended family. In July 1927, large numbers of affinity groups affiliated themselves into a larger organization, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI). The FAI was organized into a structure of federations and committees, which despite a tendency toward centralism and hierarchy gave affinity groups wide discretion. One of the primary goals of the FAI was to assure the CNT's commitment to anarchist principles, which shows the interplay of affinity groups and militants with the broader labor movement.⁵²

The interaction between country and city anarchists allowed anarchism to have a broad base of support. While there were tensions between urban and rural priorities, anarchism fostered a decentralized movement in which urban and rural workers could participate. The interaction of rural and urban populations influenced the growth of the movement. Brennan and Bookchin both describe the radicalizing effect that the destitute rural poor had on working class movements in

⁵⁰ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 145, 193.

⁵¹ Radcliff, *From Mobilization*, 170.

⁵² (Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 196-197.

cities they migrated to. But urban anarchists also influenced rural movements. The first Spaniards to identify as anarchists were urban artisans and intellectuals. It was up to them to spread the idea, which they did with vigor. In the 1870s Internationalist propaganda “rolled from the presses” and upheaval spread from the city to the countryside.⁵³ Later, the pamphlets of the Modern School movement represented a link between urban anarchists and the peasants they helped bring education to. The interaction of rural and urban radicals enabled Anarchism to appeal to broad segments of the public.

It is difficult to determine the effect of Spain’s neutrality in the First World War on Spanish anarchist organizing. The First World War was a watershed moment in labor relations, as states reorganizing society for total war sought to include and placate labor leaders to eliminate industrial disruption.⁵⁴ Because Spain did not go to war its labor movement was not divided and disrupted, and the government could not use the war effort to crack down on radicalism. However, Spanish socialists did end up collaborating with the government during the Dictatorship of the temperamental Primo de Rivera in the 1920s. Rivera hoped that the success of the socialist UGT would encourage workers to abandon the hostile CNT. Largo Caballero, secretary of the UGT, hoped that his involvement would strengthen the proletariat and edge out his rivals, the CNT.⁵⁵ UGT administrators would be involved in arbitration boards in which government, employer, and labor representatives resolved wage disputes.⁵⁶ Rivera’s regime also made available government medical services and cheap housing. UGT membership modestly

⁵³ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 91.

⁵⁴ Clifford Rosenberg, Work and Welfare in Modern Europe graduate lecture, The City College of New York, Nov 17 2010.

⁵⁵ Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 81, 223-224.

⁵⁶ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 190.

increased during the Dictatorship, showing that collaboration could find support among the Spanish working classes.⁵⁷ However, Rivera depended on reactionaries in the army and the landlord class for support, and was unable to rectify the fundamental agrarian issues.⁵⁸ The CNT remained strong despite suppression. Collaboration with the government only went so far. The Spanish state recognized the value in co-opting labor despite its neutrality in the First World War. While it found eager collaborators it was ultimately unable to placate labor in a number of serious issues. It is possible that the instability of the Spanish state would have led to its collapse if it had become involved in the First World War. But in the actual events, the Spanish state brought socialist union leaders into its apparatus, while anarchist groups retained enough strength to effectively compete for influence among the working classes.

The prevalence of anarchism in Spain during the years 1900-1936 was due to the suitability of anarchist ideas to Spanish conditions as well as the ability of anarchists to make the most out of Spanish conditions. Spanish anarchism was not simply a primitive or superstitious curiosity. It was a dynamic movement that had a profound impact on a country undergoing economic modernization.

⁵⁷ Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, 190.

⁵⁸ Brennan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, 81-82.

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