

CHAPTER 8

The Spanish Background

The Iberian peninsula has problems but no solutions, a state of affairs which is common or even normal in the 'third world', but extremely rare in Europe. For better or worse most states on our continent have a stable and potentially permanent economic and social structure, an established line of development. The problems of almost all of Europe, serious and even fundamental though they may be, arise out of the solution of earlier ones. In western and northern Europe they arose mainly on the basis of successful capitalist development, in eastern Europe (much of which was in a situation analogous to Spain until 1945) on the basis of a soviet-type socialism. In neither case do the basic economic and social patterns look provisional, as, for instance, the patterns of national relations within and between states still so often appear to be. Belgian capitalism or Yugoslav socialism may well change, perhaps fundamentally; but both are obviously far less likely to collapse at slight provocation than the complex *ad hoc* administrative formulae for ensuring the coexistence of Flemings and Walloons, or of various mutually suspicious Balkan nationalities.

Spain is different. Capitalism has persistently failed in that country and so has social revolution, in spite of its constant imminence and occasional eruption. The problems of Spain arise out of the failures, not the successes, of the past. Its political structure is nothing if not provisional. Even Franco's regime, which has lasted longer than any other since 1808 (it has beaten the record of the Canovas era 1875-97), is patently temporary. Its future is so undetermined that even the restoration of hereditary monarchy can be seriously considered as a political prospect. Spain's problems have been obvious to every intelligent observer since the eighteenth century. A variety of solutions have been proposed and occasionally applied. The point is that all of them have failed. Spain has not by any means stood still. By its own standards the economic and social changes of the nineteenth century were substantial, and anyone who has watched the country's evolution in the past fifteen years knows how unrealistic it is to think of it as essentially the same as in 1936. (An Aragonese *pueblo* demonstrates this very clearly, if only in the increase of local tractors from two to thirty-two, of motor vehicles from three to sixty-eight, of bank branches from nought to six.) Nevertheless the fundamental economic and social problems of the country remain unresolved, and the gap between it and more developed (or more fundamentally transformed) European states remains.

Raymond Carr, whose remarkable book probably supersedes all other histories of nineteenth -- and twentieth-century Spain for the time being,¹ formulates the problem as that of the failure of Spanish liberalism; that is to say of an essentially capitalist economic development, a bourgeois-parliamentary political system, and a culture and intellectual development of the familiar western kind. It might be equally well, and perhaps more profitably, formulated as that of the failure of Spanish social revolution. For if, as Carr admits, liberalism never had serious chances of success, social revolution was, perhaps for this reason, a much more serious prospect. Whatever we may think of the upheavals of the Napoleonic period, the 1830s (which Carr analyzes with particular brilliance), of 1854-6 or 1868-74, there can be no denying that social revolution actually broke out in 1931-6, that it did so without any significant assistance from the international situation, and that the case is practically unique in western Europe since 1848.

Yet it failed; and not only, or even primarily because of the foreign aid given to its enemies. One would not wish to underestimate the importance of Italian and German aid or Anglo-French 'non-intervention' in the Civil War, the greater single-mindedness of Axis than of Soviet support, or the remarkable military achievements of the Republic, which Carr rightly recognizes. It is quite conceivable that, given a different international configuration, the Republic could have won. But it is equally undeniable that the Civil War was a double struggle against armed counter-revolution and the gigantic, and in the last analysis fatal, internal weaknesses of revolution. Successful revolutions, from the French Jacobins to the Vietnamese, have shown a capacity to win against equally long or even longer odds. The Spanish Republic did not.

There is no great mystery about the failure of Spanish liberalism, though so much of the nineteenth-century history of the country and of its basic social and economic situation is too little known for excessively confident analysis. 'The changes in the classic agricultural structure of Spain between 1750 and 1850 were achieved by a rearrangement of the traditional economy, by its expansion in space, not by any fundamental change' (p. 29). (Carr's explanation that poverty of soil and capital resources made this inevitable, is not entirely convincing.) What it amounted to was that Spain maintained a rapidly growing population, not by industrial and agricultural revolution, but by a vast increase in the extensive cultivation of cereals, which in time exhausted the soil and turned inland Spain into an even more impoverished semi-desert than it already was. Logically, the politics of agricultural inefficiency gave way to those of peasant revolution. 'In the nineties politicians were bullied by the powerfully organized wheat interest; in the twentieth century they were alarmed by the threat of revolution on the great estates.' The alternative, intensive cash crops for export (e.g. oranges) was not generally applicable without prohibitively costly investment, perhaps not even with it; though Carr seems ultra-sceptical of the possibilities of irrigation, though less so of afforestation. Spanish industry was a marginal phenomenon, uncompetitive on the world market, and therefore dependent on the feeble domestic market and (notably in the case of Catalonia) the relics of the empire. It was liberal Barcelona which resisted Cuban independence most ferociously, since 60 per cent of its exports went there. The Catalan and Basque bourgeoisie were not an adequate basis for Spanish capitalism. As Vilar has shown, the Catalan businessmen failed to capture the direction of the national economic policy, and therefore retreated into the defensive posture of autonomism, which the Republic eventually conceded to them and the Basques.

Under these circumstances the economic and social basis of liberalism and its political striking-force, were feeble. As in so many underdeveloped countries, there were two active forces in politics: the urban petty-bourgeoisie, standing in the shadow of the urban plebs, and the army, an institution for furthering the careers of energetic members of the same stratum, and a militant trade union for the most powerfully organized sector of the white-collar unemployed, who had to look to the state because the economy could not employ them. The 'pronunciamento', a curious Iberian invention whose rituals became highly traditional, replaced liberal politics in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second half it became 'a speculative business enterprise for generals' and in the twentieth century it ceased to have any connection with liberalism.

Revolutions began with a pronunciamento or with what Carr calls the 'primitive provincial revolution' -- plebeian risings spreading from town to town by contagion -- or both. The fighting poor were essential, but perilous. Local notables, not to mention national ones, retreated from the ever-present danger of social revolution into the 'committee stage', when local power passed to juntas of notables with an optional representative or two of the people, while the national government collapsed. 'The final stage was the reimposition, by a ministry that "represented" the revolution, of central government control.' Kiernan's monograph on 1854 describes and explains this process in full detail. Of course in the nineteenth century a proletariat barely existed outside Barcelona, which consequently became the classical revolutionary city of western Europe. The peasantry long remained politically ineffective, or Carlist, i.e. attached to ultra-reactionary politicians and hostile on principle to the towns.

Spanish liberalism was thus squeezed into the narrow space of manoeuvre between the 'primitive revolution', without which nothing would change, and the need to damp it down almost immediately. It was not surprising that a vehicle obliged to brake almost as soon as the foot hit the accelerator, could not get very far. The best hope of the bourgeois moderates was to put some regime in power which would allow the forces of capitalist development to develop; but they never developed enough. Their most usual achievement was to find some formula which neutralized social revolution or the ultra-reactionaries for a while by the combination of at least two of the three forces of 'official' politics: the army, the crown and the 'official' parties. As Carr shows, this was the pattern of Spanish politics: army plus politicians in the 1840s, crown plus politicians after 1875, army plus crown under Primo de Rivera in the 1920s, and a collapse of the crown when it alienated the other two, as in 1854, 1868 and

1931. When there was no crown there had to be an '*ad hoc* military dictatorship'.

Yet Franco is not simply the successor of Alfonso. For in the twentieth century the forces of social revolution grew stronger than they had been in the nineteenth, because revolution retained its 'primitive' assets while acquiring two new and formidable assets: peasant revolution and the labour movement. It is their failure which poses the major problem of Spanish history and may perhaps throw light on a number of other underdeveloped countries. That failure was due to the anarchists.

This does not mean that the remarkable ineffectiveness of the Spanish revolution is due merely to the historic accident that Spain was colonized by Bakunin more than by Marx. (Even this is not quite an accident. It is characteristic of the cultural isolation of underdeveloped countries in the nineteenth century that so often ideas which were unimportant in the wider world became immensely influential there, like the philosophy of a certain Krause in Spain, or the politics of August Comte in Mexico and Brazil.) The facts of Spanish geography and history are against a nationally coordinated movement, but countries with at least as much regional and more national diversity have achieved one, like Yugoslavia. The self-contained universe of the Spanish pueblo long made national changes the result of periodic plebiscites by direct action of its municipalities. But other countries also know the phenomenon of extreme localism, for instance Italy. All the Spanish revolutions, as Carr shows, had an archaic house-style, irrespective of the ideological labels they brandished. It is doubtful whether 'Belmonte de los Caballeros' an Aragonese pueblo, would have behaved differently in 1931-6 had it been organized by the CNT rather than by the socialist UGT. Anarchism succeeded so well, because it was content to provide a mere label for the traditional political habits of revolutionary Spaniards. Yet political movements are not obliged to accept the historic characteristics of their environment, though they will be ineffective if they pay no attention to them. Anarchism was a disaster because it made no attempt to change the style of primitive Spanish revolt, and deliberately reinforced it.

It legitimized the traditional impotence of the poor. It turned politics, which even in its revolutionary form is a practical activity, into a form of moral gymnastics, a display of individual or collective devotion, self-sacrifice, heroism or self-improvement which justified its failure to achieve any concrete results by the argument that only revolution was worth fighting for, and its failure in revolution by the argument that anything which involved organization and discipline did not deserve the name. Spanish anarchism is a profoundly moving spectacle for the student of popular religion -- it was really a form of secular millennialism -- but not, alas, for the student of politics. It threw away political chances with a marvellously blind persistence. The attempts to steer it into a less suicidal course succeeded too late, though they were enough to defeat the generals' rising in 1936. Even then, they succeeded incompletely. The noble gunman Durruti, who symbolized both the ideal of the anarchist militant and conversion to the Organization and discipline of real war, was probably killed by one of his own purist comrades.

This is not to deny the remarkable achievement of Spanish anarchism which was to create a working-class movement that remained genuinely revolutionary. Social democratic and in recent years even communist trade unions have rarely been able to escape either schizophrenia or betrayal of their socialist convictions, since for practical purposes -- i.e. when acting as trade union militants or leaders -- they must usually act on the assumption that the capitalist system is permanent. The CNT did not, though this did not make it a particularly effective body for trade unionist purposes, and on the whole it lost ground to the socialist UGT from the *trienio bolchevique* of 1918-20 till after the outbreak of the Civil War, except where the force of anarchist gunmen and long tradition kept rivals out of the field, as in Catalonia and Aragon. Still, Spanish workers as well as peasants remained revolutionary and acted accordingly when the occasion arose. True, they were not the only ones to retain the reflex of insurrection. In several other countries workers brought up in the communist tradition, or in that of maximalist socialism, reacted in a similar way when nobody stopped them, and it was not until the middle 1930s that this reflex was actively discouraged in the international communist movement

Again, neither the Spanish socialists nor the communists can be acquitted of responsibility for the failure of the Spanish revolution. The communists were fettered by the extreme sectarianism of the International's policy in 1928-34, at the very moment when the fall of the monarchy in 1931 opened up possibilities of strategies of alliance which they were not permitted (and probably unwilling) to use until some years later. Whether their weakness would have allowed them to use these effectively at the time is another matter. The socialists veered from opportunism to a strategically blind maximalism after 1934, which served to strengthen the right rather than to unite the left. Since they were visibly much more dangerous to the right than the anarchists (who were never more than a routine police problem), both because they were better organized and because they were in republican governments, the backlash of reaction was much more serious.

Nevertheless, the anarchists cannot escape major responsibility. Theirs was the basic tradition of labour in most parts of the republic which survived the initial military rising, and such deeply rooted traditions are difficult to change. Moreover, theirs was potentially still the majority movement of the left in the republic. They were in no position to 'make' the revolution of which they dreamed. But when the decision of the Popular Front government to resist the military rising by all means, including arming the people, turned a situation of social ferment into a revolution, they were its chief initial beneficiaries. There seems little doubt about the initial preponderance of the anarcho-syndicalists in the armed militia, and none about their domination of the great process of 'sovietization' (in the original sense of the word) in Catalonia, Aragon and the Mediterranean coast which (with Madrid) formed the core of the republic.

The anarchists thus shaped or formulated the revolution which the generals had risen to prevent, but had in fact provoked. But the war against the generals remained to be fought, and they were incapable of fighting it effectively either in the military or political sense. This was evident to the great majority of foreign observers and volunteers, especially in Catalonia and Aragon. There it proved impossible even to get the sixty thousand rifles parading on the city streets, let alone the available machine-guns and tanks, to the under-strength and under-equipped units which actually went to the crucial Aragon front. The inefficacy of the anarchist way of fighting the war has recently been doubted by a new school of libertarian historians (including the formidable intellect of Noam Chomsky), reluctant to admit that the communists had the only practical and effective policy for this purpose, and that their rapidly growing influence reflected this fact. Unfortunately it cannot be denied. And the war had to be won, because without this victory the Spanish revolution, however inspiring and perhaps even workable, would merely turn into yet another episode of heroic defeat, like the Paris Commune. And this is what actually happened. The communists, whose policy was the one which could have won the war, gained strength too late and never satisfactorily overcame the handicap of their original lack of mass support.

For the student of politics in general, Spain may merely be a salutary warning against libertarian gestures (with or without pistols and dynamite), and against the sort of people who, like Ferrer, boasted that 'plutot qu'un revolutionnaire je suis un revoke'. For the historian, the abnormal strength of anarchism, or the ineffective 'primitive' revolutionism still needs some explanation. Was it due to the proverbial neglect of the peasantry by the marxists of western Europe, which left so much of the countryside to the Bakuninists? Was it the persistence of small-scale industry and the pre-industrial sub-proletariat? These explanations are not entirely satisfactory. Was it the isolation of Spain, which saved Spanish libertarianism from the crisis of 1914-20 which bankrupted it in France and Italy, thus leaving the way open for communist mass movements? Was it the curious absence of intellectuals from the Spanish labour movement, so unusual in twentieth-century underdeveloped countries? Intellectuals were democrats, republicans, cultural populists, perhaps above all anti-clericals, and active enough in some phases of opposition: but few of them were socialists and virtually none anarchists. (Their role seems in any case to have been limited -- even educated Spain, as Carr says rightly, was not a reading nation -- and the cafe-table or Ateneo was not, except in Madrid, a form of nation-wide political action.) At all events the leadership of Spanish revolutionary movements suffered from their absence. At present we cannot answer these questions except by speculation.

We can, however, place the spontaneous revolutionism of Spain in a wider context, and recent writers like Malefakis⁴ have begun to do so. Social revolutions are not made: they occur and develop. To this extent the metaphors of military organization, strategy and tactics, which are so often applied to them both by marxists and their adversaries, can be actively misleading. However, they cannot succeed without establishing the capacity of a

national army or government, i.e. to exercise effective national coordination and direction. Where this is totally absent, what might otherwise have turned into a social revolution may be no more than a nationwide aggregate of waves of local social unrest (as in Peru 1960-3), or it may collapse into an anarchic era of mutual massacre (as in Colombia in the years after 1948). This is the crux of the marxist critique of anarchism as a political strategy, whether such a belief in the virtues of spontaneous militancy at all times and places is held by nominal Bakuninists or by other ideologists. Spontaneity can bring down regimes, or at least make them unworkable, but can provide no alternative suitable to any society more advanced than an archaic self-sufficient peasantry, and even then only on the assumption that the forces of the state and of modern economic life will simply go away and leave the self-governing village community in peace. This is unlikely.

There are various ways in which a revolutionary party or movement can establish itself as a potentially national regime before the actual taking of power or during it. The Chinese, Vietnamese and Yugoslav Communist Parties were able to do so in the course of a prolonged guerrilla war, from which they emerged as the state power, but on the evidence of our century this seems to be exceptional. In Russia a brilliantly led Bolshevik Party succeeded in establishing itself as the leader of the decisive political force -- the working class in the capital cities and a section of the armed forces -- between February and October 1917, and as the only effective contender for state power, which it then exercised as soon as it had taken over the national centre of government, defeating -- admittedly with great difficulty and at great cost -- the counter-revolutionary armies and local or regional dissidence which lacked this coordination. This was essentially the pattern of the successful French revolutions between 1789 and 1848 which rested on the capture of the capital city combined with the collapse of the old government and the failure to establish an effective alternative national centre of counter-revolution. When the provinces failed to fall into line and an alternative counter-revolutionary government did establish itself, as in 1870-1, the commune of Paris was doomed.

A revolution may establish itself over a longer period of apparently complex and opaque conflict by the combination of a fairly stable class alliance (under the hegemony of one social force) with certain strong regional bases of power. Thus the Mexican revolution emerged as a stable regime after ten years of murderous civil strife, thanks to the alliance of what was to become the national bourgeoisie with the (subaltern) urban working class, conquering the country from a stable power-base in the north.⁵ Within this framework the necessary concessions were made to the revolutionary peasant areas and several virtually independent warlords, a stable national regime being constructed step by step during the twenty years or so after the Sonora base had established itself.

The most difficult situation for revolution is probably that in which it is expected to grow out of reforming politics, rather than the initial shock of insurrectionary crisis combined with mass mobilization. The fall of the Spanish monarchy in 1931 was not the result of social revolution, but rather the public ratification of a very general shift of opinion among the political classes of Spain away from the monarchy. The new Republicans might have been pushed decisively towards the left -- more specifically, towards agrarian revolution -- by the pressure of the masses. But at the time when they were most susceptible to and afraid of it, in 1931, this did not occur. The moderate socialists may or may not have wanted to organize it, but the communists and anarchists who certainly did, failed in their attempt to do so. One cannot simply blame them for this failure. There were both avoidable and -- perhaps predominantly -- inevitable reasons why 'CNT and communist recruiters in general were so distant from the prevailing peasant mood that both organizations remained primarily urban based even so late as 1936' (Malefakis). The fact remains that 'peasant rebellion became a significant force after 1933, not in 1931, when it might have been politically more efficacious'. And after 1933 it served to mobilize reaction as effectively as -- in the long run more effectively than -- the forces of revolution. The Spanish revolution was unable to exploit the historical moment when most successful revolutions establish their hegemony: the spell of time during which its potential or actual enemies are demoralized, disorganized and uncertain what to do.

When it broke out it met a mobilized enemy. Perhaps this was inevitable. But it also faced the battle for survival, which it proved incapable of winning. Probably this was not inevitable. And so we remember it, especially those of us to whose lives it belongs, as a marvellous dream of what might have been, an epic of heroism, the Iliad of those who were young in the 1930s. But unless we think of revolutions merely as a series of dreams and epics, the time for analysis must succeed that of heroic memories.

(1966)

Notes

1 Raymond Carr, *Spain 1808-1939*, Oxford, 1966.

2 V. G. Kiernan, *The Revolution of 1854 in Spanish History*, Oxford, 1966.

3 They can be criticized not only for lending themselves to the irrelevant vendettas of Stalin's secret police, but for discouraging not merely the unpopular or counterproductive excesses of the revolution, but the revolution itself, whose existence they preferred not to stress in their propaganda. But the basic point is that they fought to win the war and that without victory the revolution was dead anyway. Had the republic survived, there might be more point to criticisms of their policy which, alas, remain academic.

4 E. Malefakis, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain*, New Haven and London, 1970. This book ought to be required reading for all students of the Spanish revolution.

5 From the days of Obregon until 1934 the presidents came almost without exception from the state of Sonora.