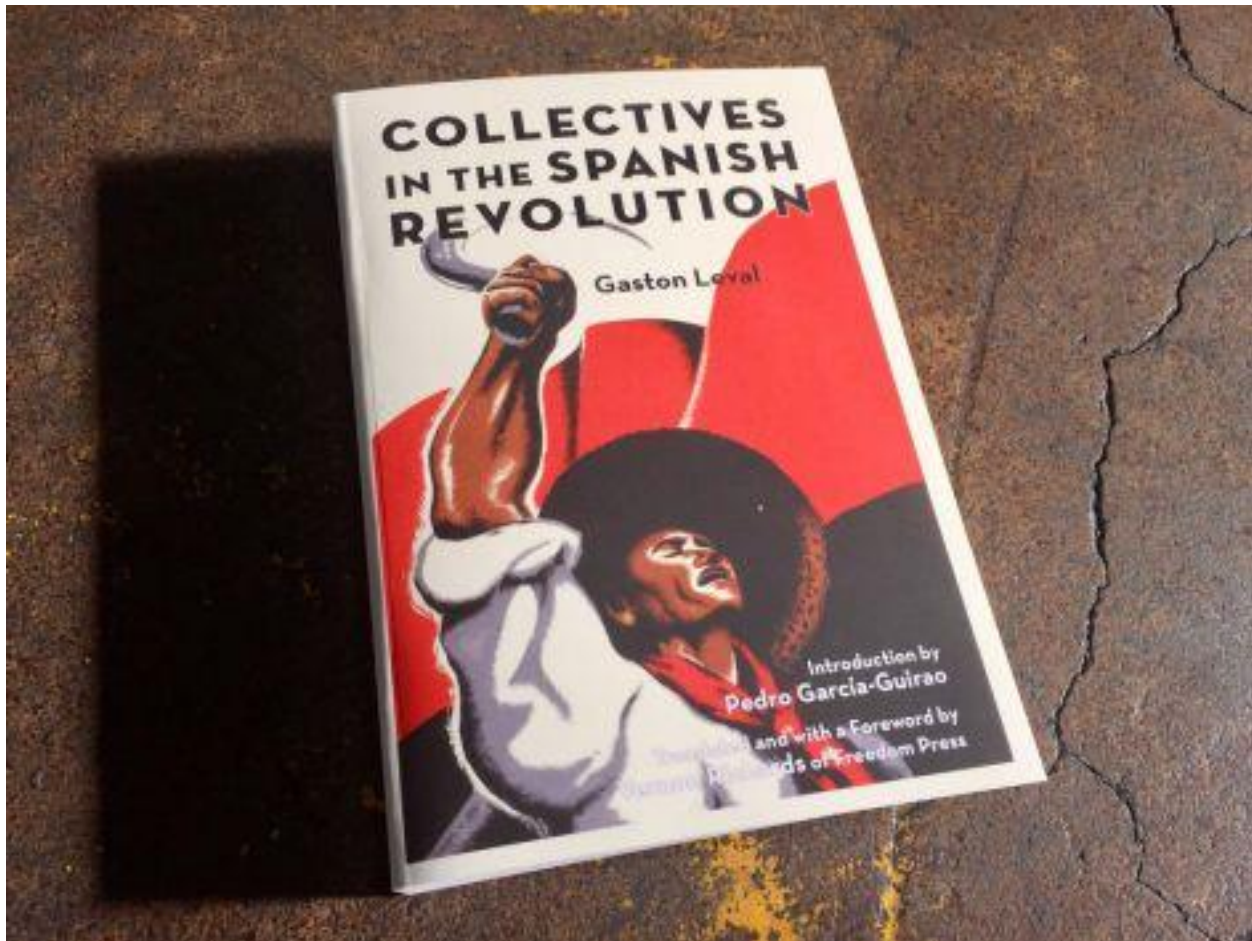


Gaston Leval: The Achievements of the Spanish Revolution



This year's anniversary of the Spanish Revolution and civil war sees the republication by PM Press of Gaston Leval's eyewitness account, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, with a new introduction by Pedro García-Guirao and a preface by Stuart Christie. I included excerpts from Leval's book in the chapter on the Spanish Revolution in Volume One of *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas*. Here I reproduce some of Leval's reflections on the achievements of the Spanish Revolution, taken from the concluding chapter of his book.

The Achievements of the Spanish Revolution

We have said and repeated that the fascist attack created a favourable situation for the libertarian sector to take over an important part of the general situation and of almost the whole economy. Nevertheless the repercussions were only favourable, for negative and positive consequences were about equally balanced. On the one hand many militants, often the best, were, because of the war, mobilised and many died at the front. It was also the best who were missing from the Syndicates, in the Collectives, in the villages where they exercised a salutary influence. And on the other hand, the number of those who became a part of the government bureaucracy were also numerous enough for their absence to be felt.

One of the dominant characteristics which impresses whoever studies the Spanish Revolution is its many sidedness. This revolution was guided by certain very clear and very definite principles, which involved the general expropriation of the holders of social wealth, the seizure by the workers of the organisational structures of production and distribution, the direct administration of public services, the establishment of the libertarian communist principle. But

the uniformity of these principles did not prevent a diversity in the methods for their application, so much so that one can talk of “diversity within unity” and of a surprisingly diversified federalism.



In a very short time, in the agrarian regions and especially in Aragon, a new organism appeared: the Collective. Nobody had spoken about it before. The three instruments of social reconstruction foreseen among those libertarians who had expressed themselves on a -possible future were firstly the Syndicate, then the Cooperative, which did not win many supporters, and final ' on a rather large scale, the commune, or communal organisation. Some foreshadowed-and this writer was among them-that a new and complementary organism could and should appear, especially in the countryside, seeing that the Syndicate had not assumed the importance it had in the towns, and the kind of life, of work and production, did not fit into an organic monolithic structure which was contrary to the multiformity of daily life.

We have seen how that Collective was born with characteristics of its own. It is not the Syndicate, for it encompasses all those who wish to join it whether they are producers in the classic economic sense or not. Then it brings them together at the complete human individual level and not just at a craft level. Within it, from the first moment, the rights and duties are the same for everybody; there are no longer professional categories in mutual opposition making

the producers into privileged consumers compared with those, such as housewives, who are not producers in the classical definition of the word.

Neither is the Collective the municipal Council or what is called the Commune, the municipality. For it parts company with the political party traditions on which the commune is normally based. It encompasses at the same time the Syndicate and municipal functions. It is all-embracing. Each of its activities is organised within its organism, and the whole population takes part in its management, whether it is a question of a policy for agriculture, for the creation of new industries, for social solidarity, medical service or public education. In this general activity the Collective brings each and everybody to an awareness of life in the round, and everyone to the practical necessity of mutual understanding.

Compared with the Collective the Syndicate has simply a secondary or subordinate role. It is striking to observe how in the agricultural districts, it was more often than not spontaneously relegated, almost forgotten, in spite of the efforts that the libertarian syndicalists and the anarcho-syndicalists, had previously made. The Collective replaced them. The word itself was born spontaneously and spread into all the regions of Spain where the agrarian revolution had been brought about. And the word "collectivist" was adopted just as quickly and spread with the same spontaneity.

One could advance the hypothesis that these two words — collective and collectivism — better expressed the people's moral, human, fraternal feelings than did the terms Syndicates and syndicalism. A question of euphony perhaps, and of a breadth of views, of humanism: man as something more than the producer. The need for syndicates no longer exists when there are no more employers.

If we pass from Aragon to the Levante we see Collectives emerging there too but not as such a spontaneous, one might almost say instant, creation. It was the agricultural and sometimes the non-agricultural, syndicates which were there at the beginning, not to found other Syndicates, and this is most significant, but to found Collectives. And those who joined these Collectives, Often without belonging to the Syndicates, were also collectivists and acted and behaved as well as anybody else. Let us hasten to add that the groups of organisers often consisted of men who had until then been active in the Syndicates or even in libertarian groups.

But there were some cases where the Commune fulfilled the role of the Collective. Among the examples we have given one especially recalls Granollers, Hospitalet, Fraga, Binefar, and many places in Castile. We also find municipalities which had been reconstructed to conform with governmental decisions (January 1937) and had, as a result, played a more or less important, more or less subordinate, role; and in the Levante the Syndicate and the Collective in the end linked their activities. But in that region the role of the Syndicate was often to become more important, both through direct participation and as inspirer and guide, which it was not in Aragon.

Finally we see in Castile, the Collectives being started in large numbers, under 'the impulse of militant workers and even intellectuals who left Madrid and spread out into the countryside.

This plasticity, this variety of ways of acting allowed for the creation of true socialism, in each place according to the situation, circumstances of time and place, and for the resolution of a great number of problems which an authoritarian concept, too rigid, too bureaucratic would have only made more complicated with, in the end, a dictatorship reducing everything to a

uniform pattern. The variety of methods used reflected the variety of the facets of life. Often in the same region, villages with similar forms of production, with a somewhat similar social history, would start by socialising the local industries and end with agriculture, while others would start with the socialisation of agriculture and end with that of local industries. In some cases, in the Levante for instance, we have seen it start with distribution then proceed towards socialisation of production, which was the opposite procedure to most other places.

But it is remarkable that this diversity of organisational structures did not prevent membership of the same regional federations nor, through them, national coordination, practical solidarity, whether it concerned our Collectives, mixed Syndical Collectives or communities at different stages of municipalisation.

The general law was universal solidarity. We have underlined, in passing, that the Charters or Statutes in which the principles were defined and from which stemmed the practical attitude of each and all, made no mention of the rights and liberty of the individual. Not that the Collectives had ignored these rights, but simply because the respect of these rights went without saying, and that they were already recognized by the standard of life guaranteed to everybody, in their access to consumer goods, to well-being and culture, to the attention, consideration and human responsibilities of which each one, as a member of the Collective, was assured. It was known, so why mention it? In return, for this to be possible, everyone had to carry out his duty, do his work like the other comrades, show solidarity according to the ethic of a universal mutual aid.



One was the guarantee of the other. It is for this reason we so often read that same sentence in the Charters though there had been no previous discussion between Collectives hundreds of kilometres apart: "Anyone not having any work in his trade will help comrades in other activities who might need his help." This was supra-professional solidarity in practice.

Going deeply into these matters it could perhaps be said that they were developing a new concept of liberty. In the village Collectives in their natural state, and in the small towns where everybody knew one another and were interdependent, liberty did not consist in being a parasite, and not interesting oneself in anything. Liberty only existed as a function of practical activity. To be is to do, Bakunin wrote. To be is to realise, voluntarily, Liberty is secured not only when one demands the rights of the "self" against others, but when it is a natural consequence of solidarity. Men who are interdependent feel free among themselves and naturally respect each other's liberty. Furthermore so far as collective life is concerned, the freedom of each is the right to participate spontaneously with one's thought, one's heart, one's will, one's initiative to the full extent of one's capacities. A negative liberty is not liberty: it is nothingness.

This concept of liberty gave rise to a new morality-unless it was this new ethic that gave rise to another concept of liberty. It explains why when the author sought information about changes, and improvements introduced in the lives of everyone, they did not speak of "liberty" though they were libertarians, but, and they did so with deep joy, of the results of their work, experiments, and research on which they were engaged; on the increase in production. No, they were no longer thinking of liberty in the way workers in capitalist factories or day workers on the land of the owner-employer think.

On this subject we would like to make an observation to which we attach great philosophical and practical importance. The theoreticians and partisans of the liberal economy affirm that competition stimulates initiative and, consequently, the creative spirit and invention without which it remains dormant. Numerous observations made by the writer in the Collectives, factories and socialised workshops permit him to take quite the opposite view. For in a Collective, in a grouping where each individual is stimulated by the wish to be of service to his fellow beings, research, the desire for technical perfection and so on are also stimulated. But they also have as a consequence that other individuals join those who were the first to get together. Furthermore when, in present society, an individualist inventor discovers something, it is used only by the capitalist or the individual employing him, whereas in the case of an inventor living in a community not only is his discovery taken up and developed by others, but is immediately applied for the common good. I am convinced that this superiority would very soon manifest itself in a socialised society.

Gaston Leval

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