

2012

Review of: Richard Purkiss, *Democracy, Trade Unions and Political Violence in Spain. The Valencian Anarchist Movement*

Jordi Getman-Eraso
Jordi@fake.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Getman-Eraso, Jordi (2012) "Review of: Richard Purkiss, *Democracy, Trade Unions and Political Violence in Spain. The Valencian Anarchist Movement*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 1 , Article 24.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol37/iss1/24>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Richard Purkiss, *Democracy, Trade Unions and Political Violence in Spain. The Valencian Anarchist Movement, 1918-1936* Brighton (UK) and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 201. 320 pp.

It is well known that anarchism had in Spain its most visible and influential expression in modern history. Within Spain, the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) labor union and the more radical anarchist *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI) enjoyed no more dominant influence than in Catalunya and Andalucía. Most studies of Spanish anarchism have concentrated on the development of the movement in these two regions, often extending generalizations about the character of those regional movements to the rest of the country without much consideration for potential variance. There were, however, important variants in the libertarian movement in other regions of Spain that have slowly emerged in recent historiography. Pamela Radcliff offered us a closer look at the critical influence of anarchism in Gijón and the role it played in the buildup to Civil War in that region. Some years ago, Eulàlia Vega described the differential elements of the Valencian anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements, emphasizing their much more moderate character and their repeated attempts at calming the revolutionist tendencies of their northern Catalan counterparts. Although other contributions have appeared over the past twenty years, Vega's work has remained the dominant interpretation of anarchism in the Spanish Levant. The publication of Richard Purkiss' monograph *Democracy, Trade Unions and Violence in Spain* offers us an opportunity to revisit the Valencian anarchists and Vega's earlier conclusions. The book's title is somewhat vague and misleading – it reads like a checklist of attractive key words in recent historiography – and is clearly aimed at attracting the browsing eye. In addition, the recent publication in Spain of a long string of dryly written local histories overloaded with mildly interesting but irrelevant minutiae and little in the way of synthetic analysis incites questioning whether a new study on anarchism in the Spanish Levant can contribute anything novel to the historical debate. After reading the book, the answer to this question is a definite yes.

Democracy traces the rise and development of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements in Valencia over the twenty years prior to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, seamlessly intertwining social, political and economic influences in explaining the development of what was the third most influential anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain. In the introduction, Purkiss argues in favor of his book by underlining for the reader that his is the first book

on the topic written in English. While this is true, the language of publication is not the book's most appealing offering. It is, instead, Purkiss' analytical (re)interpretation of the specific context within which Valencian anarchism developed in early twentieth century Spain and the place it occupied in the country's larger anarcho-syndicalist movement. The most striking (and central) claim made by Purkiss is that the Valencian CNT and FAI branches were in reality not as moderate compared to their Catalan or Andalucian counterparts as they have been made out to be in past studies. They were, according to Purkiss, quite the opposite, something that became brutally evident in the movement's early years and, particularly, during the Spanish Civil War when the region's militants participated in the violent repression of local populations and forced expropriation of property and land in the areas surrounding the city of Valencia.

In its approach, *Democracy* closely parallels the path followed by Chris Ealham in his recent study of early twentieth century Barcelona; *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona, 1898-1937* (London, 2005). Both seek to place the early twentieth century origins of the anarcho-syndicalist movement within each city's economic, social and political context. They both then tell the story of the movements' development through the eyes of the militants and their enduring conflicts against the period's governmental and economic authorities. Much as Ealham's work, Purkiss' book is well written, engaging and appealing. It combines a broad understanding of the historiography of Spanish anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism with captivating descriptions of the realities and experiences of the militants and rank and file of the Valencian CNT and FAI. The writing, in fact, makes this a very approachable book, even for those that are not experts in the field.

Democracy's parting point is Valencia's painful passage through early twentieth century industrial expansion and the consequent social turbulence, both within the city and along the surrounding countryside. The influence on Purkiss' interpretation of social historiography – especially Nick Ryder's early work on Barcelona rent strikes – is evident here. This is a welcome addition to the scholarship, as it allows us to contextualize the emergence and popularity of the CNT and FAI in Valencia across a longer *durée*, reaching back beyond the Second Republic (the temporal limit of most previous works) to track the influence of the Great War and the *trienio bolchevique* on the rise of anarcho-syndicalism in Valencia. In these early years, the manifest influence of anarchist ideas in Barcelona and Andalucia was not replicated in Valencia, where said inspiration was limited to the building of Ferrer-inspired *escuelas libres*. The rise of anarcho-syndicalism in the region, Purkiss maintains, came in the years immediately following the Great War, in which the social impact of the *trienio bolshevique* is seen to have played a critical role. The violent confrontations that

characterized labor relations in the early 1920s are argued to have cemented the modus operandi of the burgeoning Valencian CNT and FAI. The preference for these labor negotiation tactics remained largely unaltered through the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and well into the Second Republic period. The violent revolutionist influence increased in the early 1930s as the debates that deeply divided the Catalan regional spread south to their Valencian neighbors, leading to active participation in the *tres ojos* insurrections in 1932-1933. Purkiss correctly contextualizes internal debates and power struggles within the CNT during these years as ongoing struggles for control over organizational resources, with moderates deeply opposed to the radical militancy's repeated attempts to redirect CNT funds toward their insurrectionist objectives. The schism's negative impact on organizational stability and anarcho-syndicalist labor negotiation efforts is also underlined. The book concludes with descriptions of local efforts to overcome these deep divisions on the eve of the outbreak of Civil War in the spring and early summer of 1936. The conclusion provides a succinct summary of Purkiss' main arguments. He underscores the reasons for the success of anarcho-syndicalism in Valencia – ultimately, the socialist failure to offer a counterpoint to the strong *blasquista* dominance of local politics linked to the success of anarcho-syndicalist labor negotiation tactics in channeling the frustrations of a local work force deeply affected by economic predicament – and closely ties the violent repressions and expropriations carried out in the name of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Valencia during the Spanish Civil War to the extended and continued strong influence exerted by radical factions within of the region's movement in the years leading up to the fratricidal conflict.

Overall, *Democracy* is a book that does a splendid job of developing the economic, political and social causes and effects of the development of anarcho-syndicalism in Valencia. That said, there are a few weaknesses that are worthy of mention. Perhaps the most evident is the ending point Purkiss has chosen for the book. Considering that the main aim of his work is to rationalize the violent libertarian radicalism that characterized anarchist actions in Valencia during the Civil War, it would have been appreciated if a more detailed description of those actions – at least during the first few months of the conflict – were included to better connect the movement's evolution with the events it helps explain. The source work is also somewhat unsatisfying. Although it is appreciated that the book's arguments are based extensively on primary source materials – many of which have never before seen light in scholarship – most of the references come from only three periodicals local to Valencia. They are not exactly insufficient, but they at times give the impression of superficiality. With his rather daring thesis, Purkiss could have included in his footnotes more of the sources he has surely used to strengthen his arguments. In a related manner, Purkiss' conclusion that Valencian anarcho-syndicalists were not as moderate as previously claimed is

at times based too closely on a narrow reading of the objectives and experiences of the region's most radical *grupos de acción*. Not really addressed in the book is the evident reality that the Valencian *Sindicatos de Oposición* represented the largest and strongest opposition within the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement to the revolutionary insurrectionism of the more radical factions. Of course, this seeming contradiction is what makes Purkiss' argument eye-catching. Lastly, although Purkiss does a good job of discussing the multiple dimensions and intricacies of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Valencia, the simplistic *treintista/faísta* dichotomy that has traditionally dominated historical analysis of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism occasionally rears its head in his writing. This is almost inevitable, however, as these monikers have become ubiquitous in the historiography, no matter how erroneous their use.

The above imperfections notwithstanding, Purkiss has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the development of the Valencian anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement. His perspective is also a welcome addition to the larger discussion of the question of anarchism's success in Spain, a question that continues to elude a satisfying answer. In this respect, all future works on anarcho-syndicalism will have to take Purkiss' work into account.

Jordi Getman-Eraso
Bronx Community College – City University of New York