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Review of Chris Ealham, Living Anarchism: Jose Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement

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Ealham, Chris. *Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho–Syndicalist Movement.* Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015. 314 pp. +14 pages of photographs.

The first sentence of the conclusion of Chris Ealham's illuminating biography of José Peirats, *Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho–Syndicalist Movement*, aptly reads "How do we judge a human life?" (223). Biographers, historians, and other scholars have been asking that question probably since the very first biography was ever written. It remains a vexing one. Ealham's title barely conceals the double meaning it implies for, as he amply reveals throughout the text, Peirats was both the embodiment of living anarchism while also living anarchism; meaning he lived true to the anarchist creed. Peirats was an admirable anarchist doing all that was necessary to live self–sufficiently, support his colleagues and friends, anarchist and non–anarchist alike, fight for the idea, never waiver from worker advocacy, never failing to hold those with authority and/or power accountable, and always keeping his sight set on the social revolution that would, eventually, bring true emancipation, free of exploitation, to humanity. In an epigram that begins the introduction to this meticulously researched and detailed tome, Ealham quotes Bertolt Brecht, a quotation that requires repeating here:

There are men who struggle for a day and they are good.

There are men who struggle for a year and they are better.

There are men who struggle many years, and they are better still.

But there are those who struggle their entire lives: These are the indispensable ones. (1)

Peirats' life was a continuous swim against a rip current. For this, and a myriad of other reasons I can only hint at in the space provided here, Ealham asserts, "Peirats was undoubtedly indispensable." (223)

Living Anarchism is comprised of nine chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters detail José Peirats' birth into working class poverty in 1908 and his political radicalization during the Primo de Rivera Dictatorship (1923–1930). His parents were *alpargateros* (makers of espadrilles, Spanish rope–soled sandals traditionally known as alpargatas) in La Vall d'Uixó, a small town in the northernmost of the three Valencian provinces. The Peirats' were, like most Valldeuxenses, forced into agricultural labor to make ends meet. To escape this existence, Peirats' mother prompted a family migration to Barcelona, a move that changed young Peirats' life, though not the family's economic circumstances. Ealham relates that José demonstrated a sharp mind, rebellious approach to authority, and pugnacious manner – in large part due to his contracting Legg–Calvé–Perthes disease. Perthes is a rare condition resulting in the deformation of the femur, which causes intense, debilitating pain and a permanent limp. Chapters 3 and 4 chart Peirats' socio–political commitment to anarcho–syndicalism during the Second Republic (1931–1939). Chapter 5 explains the Civil War in terms of a generational conflict that saw Peirats aligning himself with the anarchist factions that insisted on carrying out the social revolution while ostensibly defending the Republic against the Francoist insurgency. Ultimately, the insurgents' victory in 1939 resulted in an ideological cleansing of Spain via extermination, imprisonment, exile, and social ostracism for any individuals with anti–Francoist tendencies. This especially applied to Peirats and his co–religionists, many of whom ended up in exile in France. Chapters 6 & 7 detail the internecine conflicts of the anarchist movement in exile. During this period Peirats migrated from concentration camp to the West Indies, to South America, and back to southern France, while never losing contact with the movement. He also met his life partner, Gracia Ventura, upon his return to France, an indispensible person for Peirats.

Chapter 8 narrates Peirats' simultaneous anarchist activism and his work as writer/historian of the anarcho–syndicalist movement, culminating in his classic *La CNT en la revolución española* (published in 1953). Ealham here observes that, "most historians, regardless of their political baggage, have accorded importance to the study." (192) The chapter also examines Peirats' continuing efforts to reunite the fragmented anarchist movement in exile. Chapter 9 explains Peirat's declining years, his return to Spain, and exposes his confrontation with, and inability to relate to, the new anarchism with its new membership and their new agendas that included feminism and gay rights.

In many ways *Living Anarchism* is a traditional biography. Ealham, fulfilling his *quehaceres* as biographer, carefully charts the course of Peirats' life from childhood through adolescence into adulthood and, eventually, inevitably to his death. Readers will be thoroughly familiarized with Peirats' family, his life partner, circle of friends, community, co–workers, colleagues, and adversaries. But the book is also as much a biography of the C.N.T.'s (*Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* – the Spanish anarcho–syndicalist trade union) organization, leadership, and goals. Ealham never lets us get far from the conflicts that inevitably arise when people with a vision for their future, who are certain they know best how to get there, belong to the same organization that houses short–sighted people who are quite willing to sacrifice long term goals for short term gain. Finally, the book is also a sensitive portrayal of an anarchist life. Austerity, independence, self–sufficiency, mutual aid, and solidarity are unrelenting values that require deep commitment. Peirats, as portrayed by Ealham, consciously adheres to this lifestyle early on and, again, never waivers. Thus, Ealham admits, "unashamedly that there are many aspects of Peirat's life that I find admirable." (3) The author finds in his subject an affine as Ealham and Peirats share the life experience of having a "cultural deficit imposed on him from birth" (3) owing to their social class.

The above admissions do not signal, however, a descent into hagiography. Quite the contrary, Ealham's admiration for Peirats does not diminish his criticism of his subjects' shortcomings, blind spots, prejudices, and errors of judgment. This is a formal, academic biography as Peirats' person and life are situated in their historical context while being subject to the author's critical examination. It is also a deft demonstration of an age–old, straight–forward, but nonetheless complex, approach to historical study. History in this form is stripped down to its constituent elements: the story of a person confronting the limitations of her/his historical moment and their struggle to change those circumstances. Indeed, Ealham defends the genre and his approach to it when he writes, "My approach reflects the so–called 'particularist' perspective on social movements, which is concerned with the individual motivations and socialisation process of those who make up the movement and which focuses on biography and collective biography as a means of teasing out the meaning of movement membership for the individual." (2) Ealham delivers on this promise throughout *Living Anarchism* by consistently connecting Peirats' actions and reactions to the actions and reactions of others and the outcomes that develop from their mutual efforts to shape the present and future of the anarcho–syndicalist movement in Spain through the C.N.T., their chosen vehicle of social change. That the critical moment of the social revolution arrived simultaneously with the outbreak of a brutal, fratricidal, three–year civil war is as much a demonstration of human agency as it is historical contingency.

Chris Ealham is intimately familiar with Peirats, his life, and times and is probably the only historian who could have undertaken Peirats' biography and done it justice. He is a specialist on anarchism, Barcelona, and Cataluña, and the first third of twentieth century Spanish history, particularly the Second Republic and Civil War — most of his published work covering those areas, themes, and chronology. He also edited and revised an English

translation of José Peirats' three–volume classic *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* (PM Press, 2011). In *Living Anarchism* he has treated Peirats fairly and provided a video, rather than a snapshot, of his life that is informed by his subject's own writings, including letters to friends and peers where his innermost thoughts were revealed. Ealham consulted all of the relevant published works about the period and subject matter and added to it letters and interviews with those who knew Peirats personally and survived Francoism and/or the exile years. In addition, he interviewed and had correspondence with Gracia Ventura, Peirats' partner, then wife who lived with him since at least 1954. Thus, Ealham's sources and his dexterous use of them combined for a meticulously detailed, personal portrait of this seminal anarchist historical figure. Yet, he also takes his subject matter seriously, which too many historians are reluctant to do where anarchism and anarcho–syndicalism is concerned. Thus, anarchism is treated accurately and with a delicate appreciation of its subtleties and idiosyncracies.

Chris Ealham's *Living Anarchism* is well–researched, written with candor, sensitivity, and a deep appreciation of José Peirats and the historical moment in which he lived. Ealham's research brought him a wealth of sources, which he does not hesitate to employ abundantly. Indeed, two chapters had well over 200 citations, redefining historical transparency! The book indisputably portrays Peirats' character and his struggle to lead an anarchist social revolution while trying to hold the anarcho–syndicalist CNT to its professed principles, keep it united, all during a civil war, exile, dictatorship, and quasi–democratic transition. One has to admire Peirats' conviction and Ealham's historical perseverance to get this complex story right.

It will come as no surprise that I admire Ealham's scholarship and recommend *Living Anarchism* without reservation. The book deftly tells three interrelated stories: José Peirats' life story, the story of anarchism and anarcho–syndicalism in revolution, at war, in exile, and trying to adapt to post–Francoism upon its return to Spain. Finally, it tells the story of an extraordinarily tumultuous period in Spanish, European, and World history, through the beliefs, convictions, and perceptions of an admirable anarchist historical figure – doing so with integrity, accuracy, transparency, and aplomb. In my view, there is little more that a reader can ask of a historian's work and nothing more of the historian's craft.

If I return to the question with which I opened this review, an author does not judge a person's life. An author interprets it in its historical context. Chris Ealham has interpreted José Peirats' life in a very tumultuous, critical historical moment. If one wants to gain a complete picture of Spain's labor movement, anarchism, anarcho–syndicalism, Second Republic, Civil War, exile, and the biography of a man integral to all of it, then one ought to read this book. For those themes and more I find *Living Anarchism* to be…indispensable.

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