

Labour Movements and Memories of Spain

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Peter O'Connor died in June this year. O'Connor had fought in the International Brigades in Spain, joined the IRA, and helped refound the Communist Party of Ireland. A requiem mass for the old communist was held in the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Waterford.¹ Funerals for civil war volunteers like O'Connor occur from time to time around the globe. They are occasions to be remarked on as oddities in the local press [a communist funeral in a cathedral in Ireland!] and which, momentarily, draw together the remnant left of the inter-war labour movement.

Such funerals apart, the Spanish Revolution and Civil War rarely evoke either faith or solidarity. For the labour movements most enmeshed in the Spanish struggle of the 1930s, the sixtieth anniversary of Franco's victory, which passed on 31 March this year, has meant little. Decades, years, days even, have shrunk this most visceral crisis down to just another anodyne 'event' and labour movements in retreat, in almost all of the places which sent men, women and material aid to Spain, can find neither inspiration nor warning in the revolution which, while promising the greatest emancipation, ended in tragedy. The purpose of this paper is to ask what role memories of Spain might have in labour politics at the end of the century?

Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom/Tierra y Libertad* [1995] stands as one recent attempt to bring the disasters of Spain in the 1930s to bear on the politics of the 1990s.² From the earliest days of the revolution, film-makers, amongst them Buñuel, Malraux and Hemingway, as well as countless proletarian camera crews were at work, many of them attempting precisely the same project as Loach, to show the world an embryonic human emancipation.³ Far less optimistic than these propagandists, Loach employed the street fighting of May 1937, the Barcelona Riots, as the centrepiece of his film, and like George Orwell before him, attacks Soviet Communism. Loach's chronicles of the working class are now familiar, beginning with *Cathy Come Home* [1966] and continuing to his widely-acclaimed *My Name is Joe* [1999]. To film theorists he is better known as a target of the semiotic critique of realism launched at the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival.⁴ In *Land and Freedom* he shifts focus, partially, from Britain to Spain, for his film, as much as it is a story of revolutionary betrayal on a global scale, is a lament for post-Thatcherite England, set around a funeral, like that of Peter O'Connor.

Loach's David dies in a mournful Liverpool. His grand-daughter traces shades of his youth through letters, finding him unemployed in the Depression, volunteering for Spain and joining the POUM [Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista] to fight on the Aragon front. Wounded and returned to Barcelona, he is shocked by Communist purges of 'ultra-Leftists' like the *POUMistas*, returns to the trenches and ultimately, in disillusion, to Liverpool. As the film comes to its conclusion, his daughter unfolds a red bandanna picked up in his belongings, and from it scatters Spanish earth onto David's coffin. The bandanna she keeps and in this gesture, and in her speech at the graveside, she alerts us to the necessity, of social revolution at century's end.

Loach's film opened in Barcelona, where it coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the election of the Popular Front government. Although inspiring curiosity amongst Spanish youth, *Land and Freedom* also revived old schisms. The World

Socialists, for example, praised Loach for his attack on Stalinism, and then returned to the charges made in *Screen* and at Edinburgh nearly a quarter of a century earlier. Loach remained prisoner to the 'dead weight of empiricism' and 'confused passivity in the face of difficult dramatic choices with "letting events flow"'.⁵ Before the film's showing at the West Belfast Film festival, Mick O'Riordan, who, a few years later, was to deliver the oration at Peter O'Connor's funeral, called the film, a 'grotesque distortion', a response echoed by former *Brigadistas* around the globe.⁶

Historians too took Loach to task for making a film unlocated in any Spanish historical context. For all Loach's courage in making a difficult movie for a popular audience and despite the continuities he demonstrated between fascism and contemporary neo-liberalism, Paul Preston, one of the foremost historians of modern Spain, complained that by making a culprit of Communist centralism, Loach had contributed little to contemporary politics. Moreover, by allowing a minor episode like the May Days to dwarf wider themes of war and fascism, Loach, 'produced something which may stay in the memory more as an anti-Stalinist tract than a celebration of those Spanish and foreign men and women who gave their lives fighting Franco and his Axis allies'.⁷

Not surprisingly, film reviewers less immediately concerned with revolutionary politics in Spain welcomed the movie. 'Fiercely relevant', claimed the London *Times* reviewer and a film which 'at a time when too many period films are spineless as blancmange [is] a work with stark visual power and that unfashionable thing, a point of view'.⁸ Unfashionable perhaps, but how subversive is a film which, made after the collapse of the Soviet Union, relies centrally on the obvious demon of Stalinist centralism? Loach can easily be made subject to the very charges he levelled at the Communists: he has turned the revolutionary question into a more direct problem of why Franco won the war, and does so by constituting Spain as an exotic counterpoint to political reaction in his own country. In this, he comes close to the oral histories, diaries and collections of letters produced in the years between 1986 [the fiftieth anniversary of the Popular Front electoral victory] and the making of his movie.

Where Loach has, until *My Name is Joe* and *Carla's Song* [1997] been most closely identified with an English working class, the Spanish struggle, with its uneasy continuities between local ethnicities, principally Catalan and Basque, may have resonated more powerfully with Welsh and Scottish volunteers. For many Welsh miners, active in a union which suffered defeats from 1926 and into the 1930s, the war became, unequivocally, the next necessary step after the Hunger Marches.⁹ For many, the triumph of the anarchist and socialist unions in Spain brought reassurance, especially when seen from the ruin of depressed mining and shipbuilding industries and a failed Labour government. Victor Kiernan eloquently captures the strength which the volunteers might bring to the present, and their difference from us, in introducing the recollections of Scottish *Brigadistas*. It was the International Brigades, he recalled, 'in whose ranks some of my earliest friends gave their lives and to which some of my old friends have looked back as the great adventure and virtue of their lives'.¹⁰ Kiernan described himself as 'a survivor of the generation of the 1930s for whom the Spanish republic's struggle was the most heroic thing in our lifetime and its defeat

the most tragic'.¹¹ Herein lies the difficulty of such memory texts in the 1990s. The volunteers remain too fully the finest of the '30s generation.

Spain created a near-global cause, one nonetheless closed in time and experience, and so distanced from us in recollections, most completely in those of American volunteers, where combat obtains less justification from the sufferings of the Spanish people, than from the subsequent war against Nazism. In such memories, even the success of radical unions in the United States is marginalised, in favour of the great anti-fascist cause. Harry Hynes is remembered as the International Brigade machine-gunner who died in Spain, and not as a leader of waterfront workers in the United States. Over some collections still hangs the shadow of 'the writers' war', as captured by Hemingway and Herb Matthews.¹²

Recent collections intentionally diverge from journalistic recollections. Nelson and Hendricks in *Madrid 1937*, sought to move beyond a virtuous apologia by using volunteers' letters, so as to reconstruct the soldiers as 'believable human beings, as people with different impulses and desires, sometimes contradictory ones'. The contemporary concern with subjectivity shines through in Evan Shipman's letters in *Madrid 1937*, [written on leave in Paris] from where he complains 'apart from the food, the drink and the races, Paris was terrible...even the races are not worth it'. And yet he still answers the question 'Why did we go?' with 'in a crusade against fascism'.

At least the new oral history of common soldiers turns us towards the bulk of the volunteers, trade unionists and workers, and away from the intellectual class, whose somewhat contrived recollections previously set limits to an Anglophone memory of the war. At the same time, the American effort appears too frequently to proceed in isolation, with barely an acknowledgment that the United States' southern neighbour, Mexico, was, the Soviet Union apart, the only source of national aid to the Spanish Republic. Mexico and Argentina, for the duration of the war, and afterwards in the lives and writing of exiles, shared directly in Spanish suffering and defeat. In Argentina, where the trade unions had confronted a similar attack on a radical republic from the military and oligarchic wealth, a popular aid program was maintained throughout the war.¹³ And whereas most of the volunteers in the Brigades were Europeans, the American collections reposition the Spanish conflict through subsequent failings of the Left in the United States; beginning with the slowness of the response to Nazism the barring of civil war veterans from active service after Pearl Harbour, the blacklisting of Abraham Lincoln Brigaders the 1950s, and their often ineffectual efforts to maintain ties with revolutionary nationalism in Cuba, Nicaragua and the elsewhere in Latin America.¹⁴ Such failures are overcome by painting volunteers as American veterans rather than as labour movement activists, men no less deserving of national respect than those who fought against the Axis after 1941.

Since 1986, a number of new memory texts have taken us away from the heroic memories of soldiers, to women behind the frontline. Hywel Francis had hinted that the masculine comradeship of the anti-fascist soldier would need to be broken down if the revolution was to have enduring meaning, and reminded us of the Welsh novel about the Spanish War, Lewis Jones' *We Live*. Jones, loyal communist that he was, strenuously opposed the Party's hunt for more recruits when the war was plainly lost in 1938. His comrade, Mavis Llewellyn, had rewritten the last chapters of the book before its publication, giving the war an open, more pacifist, reading.¹⁵ The first American publication of Gamal Woolsey's *Malaga Burning*, brought a view quite different to that of the male volunteers. Woolsey wrote about civilians, men and women caught up in what she was the first to call 'the pornography of violence'

and in which there could be neither heroism nor romance, however noble the principles for which routine evil was enacted.¹⁶ This 'miserable and horrible business' of human slaughter runs through the Australian nurse, Aileen Hodgson's diary, published in 1988.¹⁷ She went to Spain, through no ideological conviction, but with what the historian Gabriel Jackson recognised to be 'a sense of justice and perhaps more strongly, a sense of outrage'.¹⁸ Denounced by communist nurses, isolated from other English-speakers and sent to deal with the mutilation of the victims of war in a field hospital, she shared none of comradeship of International Brigade volunteers. Leaving Spain in guilt that she had not seen the war through to the bitter end, years later, she still insisted that working for the Spanish Republic remained the great noble event of her life.

Nobility, a sense of justice and outrage even, struggle for survival in a more complete feminist reading of the war. Shirley Mangini's *Memories of resistance*, exhaustively explores women's recollections. In this reading, the 'truth' of autobiographical writing has minor import, the professed communism of even leaders such as Dolores Iburruri [La Pasionaria] is challenged, and anarchists like Federica Monseny are noted for 'squeamishness vis-a-vis feminism'.¹⁹ Women whose dreams of freedom were awakened by the republic and destroyed by fascism, now measured by the standards of post-structuralist critique, are found wanting. Loach may have hoped that he could inspire the contemporary Left by an attack on the Comintern. International Brigade volunteers may have thought that they could retrospectively justify their cause by reference to World War 2. Neither Loach nor the *Brigadistas* could deconstruct the revolution in any way comparable to post-structuralist feminism. Republican women may have their subjectivity and difference recuperated in readings like Mangini's. Their sacrifice and commitment to the collective struggle against fascism begin to wither in the harsh light of a postmodern feminism.

Labour politics in the 1990s, has come to depend emphatically, on the new social movements, of which the most powerful is Anglophone feminism. Women's writings about the war and feminist re-reading of them, can take us towards the terrible contradictions of political principle enacted through savagery. There remains however a distinction to be made between those reflections which allow for difference within a broader struggle against fascism, and those which set working-class demands aside in a continual search for a feminised alterity, to which there can be no abstracted antagonist, an historically unvarying patriarchy apart. Such recuperation of memory diminishes the Republican women of Spain. What must it say to women engaged in the working-class struggles of Chile or Argentina, whose memories remain closer to those of Spain in the 1930s, than to the Anglophone academy of the 1990s?

What place can Spain in the 1930s have in any actions of today's labour movements? The Spanish Civil War presents itself in textual form, through the massive production of books, the more than five hundred movies, the photographs of Robert Capa, the republican posters exhorting resistance. Its textual fragments have left us with one of the century's richest sources of popular memory. In attempting to engage with this popular sense of the past, Loach's filmic narrative took an obsolete communism as its central character. However the popular reaction to *Land and Freedom* went much further, raising questions about collectivization and republican identity and reviving, for young Spaniards, an historical era about which many knew little.

And yet as one critic of the film, Santiago Carrillo, Communist Youth Leader during the war, and later theorist of Eurocommunism charged, Loach showed a Republic which was not worth fighting for.²⁰ Absent from the film was any sign of the fascist enemy. This criticism has been made most often from Spain itself and from Latin America where labour movements are keenly

aware of the failures of the revolutionary left, and the evils of Franco-inspired dictatorships. Military campaigns conducted by national revolutionaries seem less able to obtain emancipatory goals, and similarities between the Spanish Civil War and those of the 1990s, remain most clearly in Franco's strategy, of *limpieza*, or cleansing, of those who are not like-minded. The central problem inherent in memories of the first war against fascism, remains our confusion about fascism itself. In Australia, leaders of the labour movement too often reduce fascism to racism, thus divorcing fascism from neo-liberalism, and ignoring the essential connection between fascist forms and the interest of global capital. Even in his deliberately fragmented oral history, *Blood of Spain*, Ronald Fraser saw that fascism was simply a transitory cloak, for the exaggerating power of the corporation.²¹

For labour movements in the 1930s, with their often contradictory memories of success and defeat, the Spanish revolution created collectivities worth defending. The power of Spain is obvious in the immediacy with which the cause was embraced by union leaders, communist and non-communist, already fighting struggles as diverse as those of Argentina and Mexico, the United States, the [white] British Empire, and continental Europe. In the present moment, while we remain obsessed with difference rather than collectivity, neo-liberalism has embarked, almost without challenge, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, on 'a programme of methodical destruction of collectives'.²²

Neo-liberal ideologies insinuate themselves as readily into neo-fascist states, as into Argentina and Mexico, where conservative union leaders act in harmony with somewhat democratic governments. Collective control over wealth and culture are as much under attack in the acceptably democratic labour politics of Australia and the United Kingdom, as in the United States. The so-called advanced labour movements of the West now find themselves struggling against an identical foe to those of Latin America. If surviving collective identities are to be defended against this global threat, then perhaps memories of Spain can still make a difference. How much of a difference, of course, depends now, as in the 1930s, on our collective efforts.

Endnotes

- 1 *Irish Times*, 21 June 1999.
- 2 Ken Loach dir: *Land and Freedom/Tierra y Libertad*, Parallax films 1995.
- 3 On Loach's work generally see George McKnight, ed., *Agent of challenge and defiance: the films of Ken Loach*, Westport Connecticut 1997. For films on the war, see Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and history: British newsreels and the Spanish Civil War*, Scholastic 1979, John Michalczyk, *André Malraux's Espoir: the propaganda/art film and the Spanish Civil War*, Mississippi University Monographs, no. 27, 1977 and Joan Ramon Resina, 'Historical discourse and the propaganda film: reporting the Revolution in Barcelona', *New Literary History*, no. 29, 1998, pp. 67-84.
- 4 *Days of Hope*, Loach's television series which culminated in the 1926 General Strike and a betrayal of the working-class rank and file by union and Labour Party leadership, was in many ways a precursor to *Land and Freedom*, and was subjected to trenchant critique in the film journal *Screen*, arguments later reproduced in Tony Bennett et al., *Popular television and film*, London 1981.
- 5 World Socialist Web-site, film review, 25 October 1995, <http://www.wsws.org/arts/aug1998/land-96.shtml>
- 6 *An Poblacht/Republican News*, 17 August 1995.
- 7 Paul Preston, 'Viva la revolution', *New Statesman and society*, 16 February 1996, vol. 9, no. 390, p. 18.
- 8 See Geoff Brown, 'Looking back on celluloid', *London Times*, 22 May 1995, p. 14 and Geoff Brown, 'Animated but no sign of life', *London Times*, 5 October 1995, p. 35.
- 9 See Hywel Francis, 'Say nothing and leave in the middle of the night: the Spanish Civil War revisited', *History Workshop*, no. 32, 1991, pp. 69-76.
- 10 Victor Kierman, 'Forward', in Ian McDougall, ed, *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, Edinburgh 1986, p. xi.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 This is especially true of one of the most readable and moving collections, Peter Wyden, *The passionate war: the narrative history of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, New York 1983. This is the war told through American eyes and in which the experiences of Hemingway and his American circle of journalists and volunteer leaders are central.
- 13 See generally, Mónica Quijada, *Aires de republic, aires de crusada: la guerra civil española en Argentina*, Barcelona 1991 and FB Pike, *The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939: American hemispheric perspectives*, London and Lincoln 1982.
- 14 For a recent and thorough account of the French volunteers see, Rémi Skoutelsky, *L'espoir guidait leurs pas: les volontaires français dans les Brigades Internationales, 1936-1939*, Grasset Paris 1998
- 15 Francis, 'Say nothing and leave...', p. 75.
- 16 Gamal Woolsey, *Malaga Burning: an American woman's eyewitness account of the Spanish Civil War; introduction by Zalin Grant*, Pythia 1997.
- 17 Judith Keene, ed., *The last mile to Huesca: an Australian nurse in the Spanish Civil War*, Kensington NSW 1988.
- 18 Gabriel Jackson, introduction in *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 19 Shirley Mangini, *Memories of resistance: women's voices from the Spanish Civil War*, New Haven 1995, p. 48.
- 20 See M Eade, 'Gracias Mr Loach', *New Statesman and society*, 29 September 1995, no. 372, vol. 8, p. 48.
- 21 Ronald Fraser, *The Blood of Spain: an oral history of the Spanish Civil War*, first published London 1979, reprint 1986, see 'Introduction to the 50th anniversary edition.
- 22 Pierre Bourdieu, 'Neo-liberalism, utopia of unlimited exploitation', in *Acts of Resistance: against the new myths of our time*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 95-96.