

Gaston Leval, Principles and Lessons of the Spanish Revolution

Posted in Anarchism, Chapter 23: The Spanish Revolution, Volume 1 by Robert Graham

July 19, 2011 marks the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, and the remarkable social revolution which followed. Gaston Leval (1895-1978) was the great chronicler of the positive accomplishments of the Spanish anarchists and people during the Spanish Revolution and Civil War. In the following short piece, published in Resistance Volume XII, No. 1, April 1954, Leval describes the process of collectivization which spread through various areas of Spain, often spontaneously, and the obstacles ranged against the collectives. Leval deals with the collectives in much greater detail in his book, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975). I included excerpts from that book in Chapter 23 of *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300CE-1939)*, Selection 126, "Libertarian Democracy."

Principles and Lessons of the Spanish Revolution

1. In juridical principle the Collectives were something entirely new. They were not syndicates, nor were they municipalities in any traditional sense; they did not even very closely resemble the municipalities of the Middle Ages. Of the two, however, they were closer to the communal than the syndicalist spirit. Often they might just as well have been called Communities, as for example the one in Binefar was. The Collective was an entity; within it, occupational and professional groups, public services, trade, and municipal functions were subordinate and dependent. In form of organization, in internal functioning, and in their specialized activities, however, they were autonomous.

2. The agrarian Collectives, despite their name, were to all intents and purposes libertarian communist organizations. They applied the rule "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Where money was abolished, a certain quantity of goods was assured to each person; where money was retained, each family received a wage determined by the number of members. Though the technique varied, the moral principle and the practical results were the same.

3. In the agrarian Collectives solidarity was carried to extreme lengths. Not only was every person assured of the necessities, but the district federations increasingly adopted the principle of mutual aid on an inter-collective scale. For this purpose they created common reserves to help out villages less favoured by nature. In Castille special institutions for this purpose were created. In industry this practice seems to have begun in Hospitalet, on the Catalan railroads, and was applied later in Alcoy. Had the political compromise not impeded open socialization, the practice of mutual aid would have been much more generalized.

4. A conquest of enormous importance was the right of women to livelihood, regardless of occupation or function. In about half of the agrarian Collectives, women received the same wages as men; in the rest women received less, apparently on the principle that they rarely lived alone.

5. The child's right to livelihood was also ungrudgingly recognized: not as State charity, but as a right no one dreamed of denying. The schools were open to children to the age of 14 or 15—the only guarantee that parents would not send their children to work sooner, and that education would be really universal.

6. In all the agrarian Collectives of Aragon, Catalonia, Levante, Castille, Andalusia and Estremadura, the workers formed groups to divide the labour or the land; usually they were assigned to definite areas. Delegates elected by the work-groups met with the Collective's delegate for agriculture to plan out the work. This typical organization arose quite spontaneously, by local initiative.

7. In addition to these meetings—and similar meetings of specialized groups—the Collective as a whole met in a weekly or bi-weekly or monthly Assembly. This too was a spontaneous innovation. The Assembly reviewed the activities of the councillors it named, and discussed special cases and unforeseen problems. All inhabitants—men and women, producers and non-producers—took part in the discussion and decisions. In many cases the "individualists" (non-collective members) had equal rights in the Assembly.

8. In land cultivation the most significant advances were: the rapidly increasing use of machinery and irrigation; greater diversification; and forestation. In stock-raising: the selection and multiplication of breeds; the adaptation of breeds to local conditions; and large-scale construction of collective stock-barns.

9. Production and trade were brought into increasing harmony and distribution became more and more unified: first district unification, then regional unification, and finally the creation of a National Federation. The district (comarca) was the basis of trade. In exceptional cases an isolated Commune managed its own, on authority of the district Federation which kept an eye on the Commune and could intervene if its trading practices were harmful to the general economy. In Aragon the Federation of Collectives, founded in January, 1937, began to coordinate trade among the communes in the region, and to create a system of mutual aid. The tendency to unity became more distinct with adoption of a single "producer's card" and single "consumer's card"—which implied suppression of all money, local and national—by decision of the February, 1937, Congress. Coordination of trade with other regions, and abroad, improved steadily. When disparities in exchange, or exceptionally high prices, created surpluses, they were used by the Regional Federation to help the poorer Collectives. Solidarity thus extended beyond the district.

10. Industrial concentration—the elimination of small workshops and uneconomical factories—was a characteristic feature of collectivization both in the rural Communes and in the cities. Labour was rationalized on the basis of social need—in Alcoy's industries and in those of Hospitalet, in Barcelona's municipal transport and in the Aragon Collectives.

11. The first step toward socialization was frequently the dividing up of large estates (as in the Segorbe and Granollers districts and a number of Aragon villages). In certain other cases the first step was to force the municipalities to grant immediate reforms (municipalization of land-rent and of medicine in Elda, Benicarlo, Castellone, Alcaniz, Caspe, etc.).

12. Education advanced at an unprecedented pace. Most of the partly or wholly socialized Collectives and municipalities built at least one school. By 1938, for example, every Collective in the Levante Federation had its own school.

13. The number of Collectives increased steadily. The movement originated and progressed swiftly in Aragon, conquered part of Catalonia, then moved on to Levante and later Castille. According to reliable testimony the accomplishments in Castille may indeed have surpassed Levante and Aragon. Extremadura and the part of Andalusia not conquered immediately by the fascists— especially the province of Jaen—also had their Collectives. The character of the Collectives varied, of course, with local conditions.

14. We lack exact figures on the total number of Collectives in Spain. Based on the incomplete statistics of the Congress in Aragon in February, 1937, and on data gathered during my stay in this region, there were at least 400. In Levante in 1938 there were 500. To this the Collectives in other regions must be added. In my research I found only two Collectives which failed: Boltona and Ainsa, in Northern Aragon.

15. Sometimes the Collective was supplemented by other forms of socialization. After I left Carcagente, trade was socialized. In Alcoy consumers cooperatives arose to round out the syndicalist organization of production. There were other instances of the same kind.

16. The Collectives were not created single-handed by the libertarian movement. Although their juridical principles were strictly anarchist, a great many Collectives were created spontaneously by people remote from our movement (“libertarians” without being aware of it). Most of the Castille and Extremadura Collectives were organized by Catholic and Socialist peasants; in some cases of course they may have been inspired by the propaganda of isolated anarchist militants. Although their organization opposed the movement officially, many members of the Socialist UGT (Union General de los Trabajadores) entered or organized Collectives, as did Republicans who sincerely wanted to achieve liberty and justice.

17. Small land-owners were respected. Their inclusion in the consumer’s card system and in the Collective trading, the resolutions taken in respect to them, all attest to this. There were just two restrictions: they could not have more land than they could cultivate, and they could not carry on private trade. Membership in the Collective was voluntary: the “individualists” joined only if and when they were persuaded of the advantages of working in common.

18. The chief obstacles to the Collectives were:

a) The existence of conservative strata, and parties and organizations representing them: Republicans of all factions, Socialists of Left and Right (Large Caballero and Prieto), Stalinist Communists, and often the POUMists. (Before their expulsion from the Catalonian government—Generalidad—the POUMists were not truly a revolutionary party. They became so when driven

into opposition. Even in June, 1937, a manifesto distributed by the Aragon section of the POUM attacked the Collectives.) The UGT was the principal instrument of the various politicians.

b) The opposition of certain small landowners (Catalan and Pyrenees peasants).

c) The fear, even among some members of Collectives, that the government would destroy the organizations once the war was over. Many who were not really reactionary, and many small landowners who would otherwise have joined the Collectives, held back on this account.

d) The open attack on the Collectives: by which is not meant the obviously destructive acts of the Franco troops wherever they advanced. In Castille the attack on the Collectives was conducted, arms in hand, by Communist troops. In the Valencia region, there were battles in which even armoured cars took part. In the Huesca province the Karl Marx brigade persecuted the Collectives. The Macia-Companys brigade did the same in Teruel province. (But both always fled from combat with the fascists. The Karl Marx brigade always remained inactive, while our troops fought for Huesca and other important points; the Marxist troops reserved themselves for the rearguard. The second gave up Vivel del Rio and other coal regions of Utrillos without a fight. These soldiers, who ran in panic before a small attack that other forces easily contained, were intrepid warriors against the unarmed peasants of the Collectives.)

19. In the work of creation, transformation and socialization, the peasant demonstrated a social conscience much superior to that of the city worker.

GASTON LEVAL