

Apropos of a Foreword
José Peirats's Second Death

... or How Enric Ucelay Da Cal, eminent representative of academia, in his foreword to José Peirats's Memoirs, has invented a brand new method of intellectual execution: post mortem abuse

José Peirats (1908-1989), who was a brick-maker and worker-journalist before becoming one of the finest experts in Spanish anarchism, has often been cited in the columns of *A Contretemps*, and there are at least two reasons for that. One, because during the 1930s his role as a militant (he being on the editorial panel of *Solidaridad Obrera* at the time) placed him right at the heart of the “revolutionary gymnastics” that were to culminate in July 1936 in a revolutionary process of unparalleled dimensions. That revolution which even now continues to feed — as well as question — the libertarian imagination. Peirats saw its dawning and later witnessed its inexorable petering out as it found itself trapped in the hellish logic of warfare. Two, because he made up his mind to become its painstaking historian and in the 1950s produced a critical work of immense analytical and documentary merits — *La CNT en la revolución española*¹ — a crucial accomplishment for that time. The impeccable rectitude he demonstrated at times when at various points in its history the CNT trespassed against the fundamental principles by which it was governed, and the intellectual rigour with which he strove to fathom the reasons for such deviations made Peirats a most extraordinary individual and, without question, one of the most praiseworthy representatives of a generation of activists since deceased.

Given the interest we take in Peirats, news of the publication of his *Memoirs* was very welcome to us since we had been looking forward to publication for quite some time. In fact, written mostly in 1974 and 1975, this long, autobiographical text — some 1300 typewritten pages of it — foundered at the beginning of the 1980s on the demands of some booksellers, Planeta for one, who stated that they were eager to publish it but only an abridged version, focusing on the author's recollections of his boyhood, adolescence and pre-(civil)war experiences as is the usual practice in such published memoirs. Peirats, who could be very stubborn, doggedly refused any such abridgements, finding it much preferable that his *Memoirs* should not appear than that they appear in a truncated version. Which is why he turned to his representative in dealings with publishers, his friend the Uruguayan historian and sociologist Carlos M. Rama who rejected any such offer. As far as he was concerned it was all or nothing. So, for want of a publisher

1. José Peirats, *La CNT en la Revolución española*, 3 vols, Toulouse, Ed. CNT, 1951-1953; re-ed Paris, Ruedo Ibérico, 1971. For more about Peirats we would refer the reader to the interview published in *José Peirats* (introduction by Freddy Gómez in “Cuadernos de historia oral No 1” (Fundacion Salvador Seguí, Madrid, undated).

deserving of the name, nothing it was. Since which the only inkling we have had of those *Memoirs* is down to Peirats himself as he agreed at the end of the 1980s to a request from the Barcelona review *Anthropos* to select some extracts from his memoirs, a selection that appeared shortly after Peirats's death in the "Antologías temáticas" collection of that review.²

Since then the manuscript has been gathering dust on the shelves of the Biblioteca Arus in Barcelona after it was deposited there by Peirats's partner, Gracia Ventura.

So the news that, twenty years on from Peirats's death, the historians Susana Tavera García and Gerard Pedret Otero were working on publication of the *Memoirs* was very welcome to us. Unfortunately, having seen the results³, we have to confess that we had been hoping — and oh but how hard we were hoping! — for something rather better.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let us stipulate right from the off that it is not our intention to launch into a review of José Peirats's *Memoirs* here. We shall wait for Chris Ealham's⁴ promised biography, all the omens being that, taken in conjunction with these *Memoirs*, it will allow a serious and detailed scrutiny of the militant CV and handiwork as historian of the author of *La CNT en la revolución española*.

That said and as wait for better times to come, we are going to look into the way in which this abridged edition of Peirats's *Memoirs*, an abridgement made by the new mandarins of the universities, distorts their impact and implications. We say abridged because the shortened version of those *Memoirs* offered us by Susana Tavera García and Gerard Pedret Otero flies in the face of Peirats's wish, articulated on several occasions, that publication of those *Memoirs* be authorised on the single condition that they not be abridged, suggesting that, had he lived, he would have refused to give this project this seal of approval, just as he had resisted, in spite of the opinions of some of those close to him, the "pick-and-choose" overtures made by the publishing world during the 1980s. It is child's play trifling with the dead for they can scarcely be asked for their consent.

But the worst feature of those responsible for this very questionable publishing venture is, without the shadow of a doubt, that they let it to their hierarchical superior, Enric Ucelay Da Cal, to produce, by way of a foreword to the book, an unbelievable rant against the author and the *Memoirs*, which he was supposed to be introducing. Akin to José Vissarionovitch Djughashvili's having been invited to write a foreword to Trotsky's *My Life* or Leon Davidovitch Bronstein himself having penned a foreword to Makhno's autobiography.

2. José Peirats Valls *Una experiencia histórica del pensamiento libertario. Memorias y selección de artículos breves* (Barcelona, *Anthropos*, 'Antologías temáticas' No 18, January 1990, 160 pages.)

3. José Peirats Valls *De mi paso por la vida (Memorias)*, selected, edited and annotated by Susana Tavera García and Gerard Pedret Otero, foreword by Enric Ucelay Da Cal (Barcelona, Flor de Viento Ed., 2009, 784 pages).

4. Historian Chris Ealham oversaw the English publication of Peirats's master-work as translator, in conjunction with Paul Sharkey, of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* (three volumes, Christie Books, Hastings). He is, besides, author of the outstanding *La lucha por Barcelona. Clase, cultura y conflicto 1898-1937* (Madrid, Alianza Editorial 2005), a book reviewed in *A Contretemps* No 25 (January 2007), p. 14.

Professor of Contemporary History at Barcelona's Pompeu Fabra University, Ucelay Da Cal is a specialist in nationalism and, more specifically, Catalan nationalism. However, aside from his area of expertise, he is a child of the middle-class Spanish republican diaspora, born in 1948, having studied in the United States — a graduate of the prestigious Columbia University in New York — and fancies himself an expert on the history of the workers' movement. A prolific author⁵, Ucelay Da Cal, a man of his times subscribes to an objective, rational approach to history, one supposedly stripped of all ideology and bereft of any militant intent. Whilst it is a fact that, from the political point of view, the master historian — who, like many of his colleagues feted by academia, writes for the press whenever and as much as he likes — is not some hot-headed extremist: but rather a political butterfly of an aesthete. Since what matters the most is keeping a tight grip on the social-liberal wheel, our expert set sail, depending on the prevailing winds, alongside the friends of José Montilla Aguilera, the “socialist” premier of the Generalitat of Catalonia. And those of Artur Mas and of the Trias Fargas Foundation, his “rightwing” opponents.⁶ That said, the fellow's sole preoccupation is with everybody, ‘left’ and ‘right’ alike, acknowledging him as being at the top of his game, the Historian par excellence, since His Supercilious Majesty Ucelay Da Cal is nothing if not self-regarding.

From “auto-didacticism” to “organicism” — or birth of an “organic intellectual”

It is common knowledge that historians have always had a hard time digesting the individuality and eclecticism of working class anarchism. As if in actuality that world could not help but defy the conventional explanations offered by a discipline unduly preoccupied with classification by virtue of the richness of its world of imagination and the breadth of cultural and activist practices that go with it. Besides, having long been Marxists — in the academic sense, that is — most of the leading lights of the discipline — the ones who get published and talked about — were used to treating working class anarchism with a condescension very much the stuff of the prevailing historiography. Hence the heap of stereotypes churned out by academia in relation to a subject which, apparently, it finds hard to shift beyond the confines of the cleverly

5. Among his best known publications we might cite *La Catalunya populista* (1982) and *El imperialismo catalán* (2003). On the Spanish libertarian movement, a topic he normally deals with in concert with Susana Tavera García (she being essentially the specialist in the field) we might cite an essay co-authored by the pair: “Grupos de afinidad, disciplina bélica y periodismo libertario 1936-1938” in *Historia contemporánea* No 9, 1993, pp. 167-192.

6. José Montilla Aguilera is currently head of the home rule government of Catalonia, the Generalitat. A member of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), he has been in office since 2008. His chief centre right institutional opponent is the Catalanist Artur Mas, general secretary of the Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC), formerly the stomping ground of Jordi Pujol, the unchallenged Generalitat premier from 1980 to 2003. The Trias Fargas Foundation — called after the liberal economist Ramón Trias i Fargas (1922-1989) is a local think tank focusing on cultural matters. As a member of staff of the Pompeu Fabra University which is heavily dependent on the generosity of Catalonia's Generalitat government, that Ucelay Da Cal should light a candle to God and another to the Devil is readily understandable: nobody can tell what the future may hold in store.

rehearsed and methodically sustained cliché. To this very day anarchism remains, as far as academia is concerned, the expression of an anachronism, a destructive zeal, an empty-headed idealism and/or some outmoded auto-didacticism. It should be pointed out that academia's being at such a loss is obviously a blessing as far as anarchism itself is concerned: it thereby dodges history's order of discourse, the sort of history that dances to a tune played by the functionaries of learning.

Whether Ucelay Da Cal was a Marxist back in his vaguely critical younger day which advancing years have made it their business to temper we do not know⁷, but the very title he has given his foreword "José Peirats, the auto-didact as organic intellectual" hints at some lingering Gramscian influence. Be it noted, though, that the notion of the "organic intellectual" — which, in the proper sense of the word fits intellectuals organically deferential towards the powers that be, intellectuals such as Ucelay Da Cal himself, is used in a more vulgar sense here to mean auto-didacts catapulted to intellectual status by dint of their belonging to a mass organisation, in this instance, the CNT. We shall not labour a method that consists of misusing a well defined concept and applying it to a situation to which it is utterly unsuited, but we need to highlight a defective appreciation of the (very remote) connection that working class anarchism maintains with intellectuals and consider that the status of "organic intellectual" might have held the slightest charm for libertarian autodidacts more interested in being "impassioned lovers of self-cultivation" (Pelloutier's phrase) rather than seekers after social or political self-advancement. Since, to say the least, they showed the utmost consistency in espousing "the refusal to 'make it'" (in Albert Thierry's words), this being another idiosyncrasy — and not the least of them — of working class anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism. To be blunt, their life-styles removed them light years away from the mental universe of Ucelay Da Cal, an organic intellectual if ever there was one.

In the estimation of this historian — and we shall gladly skip over his long-winded, heavy-handed trivialities about libertarians' attachment to books and culture — Peirats would therefore represent the perfect example of an autodidact who had managed to make a name for himself, which is to say, to step away from his status as a manual labourer and join the organically enviable ranks of the brain-workers. And if he pulled this off — or, to put this in historian's terms, if he built himself a career as an "organic intellectual", it was of course because he successfully harnessed his personal gifts, but above all because he managed to grasp the inner essence, the secret nature and "spiritual mortar" (p. 62) of the Spanish libertarian movement to which he belonged. And, our expert further states, having been shaped and guided by autodidacts, he displayed that lack of self-regard that rendered him the spokesman of a rabid "organicism" (p. 62) that favoured the promotion of its most "stubborn" (p. 62) representatives, "hand-picked

7. On this score, Ucelay Da Cal merely notes that in the only interview he ever had with Peirats, in 1986, he did not hit it off with the anarchist. As far as Peirats was concerned, he notes, "I was one of those marxist and academic jerks" (p. 101). It's clear that Peirats wasn't the credulous sort and was a quick and good judge of character.

for internal strife and social warfare”. On such ground, Ucelay Da Cal concludes, Peirats therefore found his niche as an “organic intellectual” par excellence, becoming the theorist of said “organicism”, an “obsessive metaphor” (p. 62) that helped disguise the anarcho-syndicalist organisation’s persistent lack of professionalism. And he comes to the following conclusion: that he never surrendered that position, based on the notion that organisational robustness was the CNT’s most precious possession, in contrast to its leanings in the direction of “revolutionary optimism” and of a “neo-Nietzschean ‘triumph of the will’” (p. 63).

We should dwell for a moment here on the unrelenting methodological approach of the honourable professor: it consists of simultaneously deploying (a semblance of) praise and (actual) dismissal. So that even as auto-didacticism is being lauded as something praiseworthy it is written off also as something that encouraged a bulimic and rough-edged learning. “In the land of the illiterate”, Ucelay Da Cal boldly writes, “the auto-didact rules” (p. 47), thereby consigning this “self-made intellectual” (p. 51 — English in the original) to the junior status of a tawdry theorist that could only find a welcome in the Spanish libertarian movement “such a motley collection bereft of speculative and analytical compactness” (p. 51). Gushing condescension from every orifice, he goes on to cut everybody else down to size: speaking of “erstwhile train ticket-collector” Francisco Ferrer (p. 50), he points out that Ferrer’s self-taught educationism was primarily designed to disguise “his insurrectionist republican past” and his “terrorist ventures” (p. 50); turning to the CNT’s direct democracy practices, he finds merely that they generated obscure minutes of meetings in “a coded language” (p. 33) that could only be fathomed by those in the know (autodidacts all); apropos of one of the earliest writings of the younger Peirats — *Lo que podría ser un cinema social* (dating from 1935) — he ridicules the “typical style of the auto-didact [who has] done his homework properly” (p.53).⁸

And so on it goes ... page after page of it. Ucelay Da Cal parades his arrogance as the man in possession of the only knowledge that counts as far as he is concerned, the knowledge conferred by “academic training” (p. 49). And does so to such an extent that his rip-roaring rant should primarily be taken for what it is: a down home plea on behalf of a graduate of the intelligentsia as horrified by the sight of ragamuffins trespassing on his ‘patch’ as any homeowner by house-breaking. And the rest of the prosecution case that he puts bears this out.

The rise of a be-sandaled Rastignac

Seen through the eyes of Ucelay Da Cal, Peirat’s course resembles the rise of some rope-soled-sandaled Rastignac who switched within a few years from being a brickmaker to

8. It will be noted that Ucelay Da Cal is so much into belittling that he systematically peppers any quotations from Peirats with “(sic)”, occasionally accompanied by vindictive remarks between square brackets, a method not believed to be much in vogue between qualified historians.

a journalist on *Solidaridad Obrera*. Proof, he says, that he had the wit to understand that the real cockpit of control and decision-making in that “movement-shaped anti-party” (p. 56), as he describes the CNT, was not, as has often been stated, to be found in the FAI, but rather right at the heart of the mother-ship, inside the walls of its historic mouthpiece *Solidaridad Obrera*, whose “coordinating function [exceeded] the usual functions of ‘party newspaper’” (p. 57). Convinced that he has stumbled on something here, Ucelay Da Cal carries on: that was where he needed to be if he was to join the ranks of the reliable “leading cadres” (p. 56) of a movement that “yearned to be the whole of the labouring people as a compact whole.” (p. 57). And should anybody want to know in the name of what and on what basis sources he suggests this hypothesis, better take a said and wait. Ucelay Da Cal does not trouble to prove anything; mere assertion from him suffices. So the issue is very clear: to rise out of the rank and file and become an “organic intellectual”, there was no position more sought after than that which amounted to his performing a teacher function from within *Solidaridad Obrera*. The CNT to him was like a sort of an academia of the poor, a ruthless world where the promotion of elites depended on their ability to take over the levers of power and occupy “the right place” (English in the original)... Facing up to the risk of leaving a few corpses in one’s wake.

This being the reason why, our expert carries on, the course followed by Peirats was “more contradictory and less linear than he always claimed it was” (p. 42). And he launches into the detail of that course: Peirats was against the ‘treintistas’ — whose internal logic, Ucelay Da Cal loftily pronounces, culminated perforce in the launching of a syndicalist party (i.e. Pestaña’s Syndicalist Party — he backed the “anarcho-syndicalist pistoleros” (p. 60), forming an alliance in 1931 with the “‘anarcho-bolsheviks’ [...] supporters of Durruti and company” (p. 59), before becoming in 1933, together with the FAI group of which he was a member [the ‘Afnidad’ group], one of the chief critics of “‘anarcho-bolshevik’ insurrectionism” (p. 60). Not that that made him a moderate, Ucelay Da Cal argues: he was more of a maverick radical, convinced that “it was better to plough a lonely furrow than to keep bad company” (p. 61).

Sound proof of this, supposedly, were his tendency to support a purge against the ‘treintistas’ and also against Francisco Tomás, who had been damned by an “honour board” in 1934 for having failed to live up to his obligations during the December 1933 uprising in Hospitalet — Peirats’s stomping ground, the historian points out.

Apparently one needs to be a graduate of Columbia University to put such nonsense down on paper without endangering one’s reputation. So let us be the ones to remind Ucelay Da Cal that there were very few ‘treintistas’ who embraced Angel Pestaña’s reasoning, Pestaña’s political plans not fitting in with the initial rationale of ‘treintismo’ which was a direct inheritance from the French-style of highly anti-political direct action syndicalism characteristic of the original CGT. And talk of supposed

alliances, albeit circumstantial and temporary, between Peirats and García Oliver (García Oliver rather than Durruti) suggests that he has no grasp of the deep-seated differences of opinion that made them lasting opponents of each other, an opposition about which neither of them was the least bit mealy-mouthed. Hyper-anarchist though he may have been — and on occasion his anarchism was exaggeratedly orthodox — Peirats plainly felt closer, in ethical terms, to the syndicalist Peiró than to the political García Oliver.⁹

Finally, turning the expulsion of the very deservedly criticised Francisco Tomás Facundo (whose expulsion Peirats recounts in detail, sparing nothing, in his *Memoirs* (pp. 237-238) into evidence of his taste for punishment, is utterly out of order, especially when one knows the activities of that that notorious “expellee” as an authentic purge-master when he was the CNT local police chief in Lérida during the Spanish revolution.

In addition, the most illustrious Ucelay Da Cal is primarily concerned with painting the darkest of pictures, even should this lead him into making claims that are nebulous, trivial, defamatory or grotesque. As we read him we discover that the FAI (and it was not previously known that it was so receptive to echoes from the outside world) was heavily influenced by Makhno — who is described as the “sponsor of the so-called ‘Arshinov Platform’ thesis” (p. 40). Or that Emma Goldman, of whom Peirats wrote a biography¹⁰, was, in fact, merely a “sour libertarian matriarch” and an “insufferable battle-axe” whose chief characteristic was “doctrinal conformity” (p. 81). Or that libertarians’ activism against the Republic “afforded the insurrectionist right an excuse for its military rebellion” (p. 75), a view that differs very little from that of out-and-out revisionists of the calibre of Pío Moa, for whom the Catholic-Nationalist Crusade was, ultimately, only a backlash against Red barbarism. And originally we read that “Durruti, García Oliver and their ‘anarcho-bolshevik’ chums” were supposedly inspired solely by the urge to do things “better” (p. 39) and more forcefully than the communists — whose power was, as is well known, crucial in 1930s Spain (given that, even according to the most generous estimates, they had some 3,000 militants on the eve of the Civil War). And in order to hammer home a ‘discovery’ that cannot quite stand up in the local context, this most subtle of analysts contends — all joking aside — that all the anarchists did was to traipse after the communists on every score: setting up their IWA after the Comintern was launched, setting up their SIA after Socorro

9. As Ucelay Da Cal admits when he notes that Peirats was delighted to make Joan Peiró’s acquaintance at a rally held in Mataró in the summer of 1937, that is, when the sniping between the “anti-collaborationists” and the “circumstantialists” was at its most intense. “Personal interactions”, he notes, “were always more complicated and contradictory in anarchist circles” (p. 69) which is, when all is said and done, an acknowledgement that, contrary to what applied in marxist company, there was no reason for personal dealings to break down along the lines of internal policy divisions.

10. José Peirats, *Emma Goldman, anarquista de ambos mundos* (Madrid, Campo Abierto 1978), re-published as *Emma Goldman, una mujer en la tormenta del siglo* (Barcelona, Laia, 1983).

Rojo (Red Aid) was up and running, with Berkman's *ABC of Libertarian Communism* a Johnny-come-lately compared with Bukharin's *ABC of Communism*. This is such egregious nonsense that one wonders if our ultra-Catalan professor may not be in the habit of drinking his *orxata* with a dash of muscatel added. As far as the genius from the Pompeu Fabra University is concerned, one gathers from all these things, as deplorable as they are confusing, such unfathomable anarchism can only be treated with the utmost contempt.

From war to exile, the man playing the “double game”

Very much against his natural inclination, Ucelay Da Cal does not go into too much detail about Peirats's war years. Peirats's stance, we are told, was allegedly that of a “die-hard” (p. 64), forever playing “a ubiquitous, double game” (p. 69). Being against “those who were in control of the FAI and [...] of the higher agencies of the CNT (though not necessarily the local Federations)” (p. 68), Peirats, he stresses, had no option but to retreat into the “rather fragmented” (p. 68) ranks of the Libertarian Youth which offered him some scope for opposition to the overall policy, a space he took up when he took over the direction of *Ruta*, their [the Libertarian Youth] mouthpiece. However, our historian hints, Peirats never followed his opposition argument through to its logical conclusion. Neither in May '37 nor when he was being considered for secretary of the Libertarian Youth. Likewise in late 1937 he joined the command staff of the 119th Brigade of the 26th (formerly the Durruti Column) Division when he had been one of the most fervent opponents of militarisation of the militias. Which, according to our University sleuth, just goes to show the same indecisiveness.

Yet again, Ucelay Da Cal is out to build his case and never offers any proof for his hypothesis. If Peirats, as an outspoken opponent of CNT participation in the central government, plumped to expend his energy on denouncing that policy in the columns of *Ruta*, it was because the paper to which he had hitherto been contributing — *Acracia*, published out of Lérida — had just been muzzled at the instigation of the CNT. If he declined to accept a leadership post within the Libertarian Youth, it was because he knew that they too were about to be set back on the “straight and narrow” of collaborationism. If he clearly demarcated himself in May '37 from Jaime Balius and the ‘Friends of Durruti’, it was because he had his doubts about their political stance, adjudging it to be overly Bolshevistic. That autumn he made up his mind to join the ranks of the 26th Division, albeit militarised, because he reckoned that there he would feel more at ease with his conscience than inside an organisation bound for ideological regularisation. So there is nothing in this minority course to suggest anything like a “double game”, unless the view is taken that the only solution for him was to blow his own brains out.

But this is Ucelay Da Cal we are dealing with here and there is always worse to come

and it comes in the form of a hammer-blow — in the real as well as figurative sense: once the war was over, he informs us, the identification of Peirats “with the losing side in the ‘May Events’” (p. 70) was to find a natural outlet in “the sourest anti-communism” (p. 70), a stance that the antifascist progressive Ucelay Da Cal deems “literally unfathomable” (p. 70) insofar as ... German armies invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. If we are reduced to such a nonsensical level of argument, there is no option but to ring down the iron curtain.

Faced with such a battery of bad faith, one wonders, time and again, as one reads this dense prose, just what bee our splendid professor must have in his bonnet to prompt him to indulge in such belittling and slide so slickly into criticism out of sheer nastiness. But first, a couple of more examples. First: Peirats, he tells us “was lucky” (p. 71) to have been sent to the Le Vernet (Ariège) camp, a rather odd observation when we know, first, that every single fighter from the erstwhile Durruti Column was interned there, being unable to go anywhere else and, secondly, that Le Vernet was an especially notorious prison camp. Second: of Peirats’s time in exile in the Americas (Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela), Ucelay Da Cal remarks that Peirats made some “rather racist” (p. 72) comment about the locals, and, by way of evidence, quotes an extract from a book of his¹¹ which merely expresses the view — quite a valid view, when all is said and done — that the mestizo’s stamina in those hostile climes far exceeded that of the Europeans. A remark that could scarcely be faulted even by the standards of today’s political correctness.¹²

Letting the usurper have both barrels!

Strong stuff this foreword which shows every sign of having been written with that intention in mind. The thirty pages that Ucelay Da Cal spends belittling Peirats’s masterpiece represents a perfect example of the (caste) hatred by which an acclaimed historian can be overcome when lesser mortals dare to trespass on his private preserve. In the face of such tastelessness he, like the smallholder who loads his shotgun to scare off the robber of his orchards, has but one answer: let him have both barrels!

There are two parts to the approach adopted by the hack historian. The first, classically bourgeois approach, purports to be a reminder of the sacrosanct principles of objectivity: being sponsored and funded by the CNT at the beginning of the 1950s, Peirats’s book *La CNT en la revolución española* could scarcely have been anything other

11. José Peirats *Estampas del Exilio en América* (Paris, CNT, undated [1951]), pp. 72-73.

12. Anecdotally we might point out that even the politically correct can carry linguistic nuances. Thus Ucelay Da Cal notes that “those who prepared this volume have not been able to come up with a single text of his in Catalan” (p. 23), which would suggest that Peirats conformed to the linguistic ideology prevailing at the time, i.e. the primacy of Castilian. The finding is all the more odd in that Peirats, who made any bones about his resentment of Catalan nationalists, used to use his native tongue daily, including in his correspondence — on deposit at the IISH (Amsterdam). As to publishing in Castilian, which he did — along with most Catalan libertarian writers of his day — this was quite simply because that language platform ensured that his writings were more widely accessible.

— or so our expert tells us — than an official or at any rate authorised chronicle of the confederation’s exploits. Right from his very first remark, Ucelay Da Cal for the prosecution sees the accusation as an open-and-shut case: representing himself as an historian when the best he could have claimed to be was a “chronicler” (p. 97), Peirats usurped a status that nobody had awarded him. The second pincer in the indictment is this: if the commitment Peirats had made to an organisation of which he was one of the officers precluded him, right from the off, from performing as a historian, his self-promotion to the status of historian was a good way of pulling off the sole purpose by which he is supposed to have been driven: gaining access into the golden circle of libertarian notables, the only means he had of securing intellectual recognition. As Ucelay Da Cal sees it, it went like this: elevated to historian status, this “organisation man” (English in the original) turns into an “authentic organic intellectual” (p.78).¹³

At this point we really must grant that Peirats’s critic is skilled in treachery because there is no denying that *La CNT en la revolución española* actually was commissioned by the CNT and sparingly funded by its militants. But the question is not only who, other than the CNT, might have seen to its publication, but that, if he was objective, the highly punctilious Ucelay Da Cal¹⁴ should have remembered that Peirats’s cooperation with that publishing venture was predicated on one condition’s being scrupulously observed: his research was not to be subject to any “organisational” meddling. In which regard, and much against what Ucelay Da Cal suggests, that stance cannot obviously be compared to the approach adopted between 1967 and 1979 in the publication, over four volumes — and under the supervision of a historical commission chaired by Dolores Ibarruri aka La Pasionaria — of *Guerra y revolución en España, 1936-1939*, the history (and the official history at that) of the Spanish war from the viewpoint of the Communist Party of Spain.

The next thing to issue from Ucelay Da Cal’s poison pen is an analysis of the book’s publishing “success”. He tells us that if *La CNT en la revolución española* has found its niche in the historiography of the war in Spain, it is because Peirats’s book was blessed by a political juncture relating to “Stalin’s death in March 1953” and the sudden

13. Ucelay Da Cal unhesitatingly asserts that the first benefit derived from Peirats’s achievement of said status of intellectual was the triggering of a solidarity campaign on his behalf by his intellectual peers — including the ‘great’ Albert Camus — when Peirats was arrested in Lyon in February 1951 when he was secretary of the CNT. In actual fact, that campaign related not just to Peirats but also to Pedro Mateu and José Pascual who were not, by any stretch of the imagination, “intellectuals”: and was only one of many tokens of solidarity with the Spanish libertarians tirelessly orchestrated, to be sure, by Camus. See Freddy Gómez “Fraternité des combats, fidélité des solitudes: Camus et *Solidaridad Obrera*” in Lou Marin, *Albert Camus et les libertaires* (Egrégores Editions, 2008) pp. 325-342. But the oh so objective Ucelay Da Cal rushes headlong in. The only thing that concerns him is the truly pathetic conclusion of his proof: “The French authorities have always been very sensitive to literature and a ‘terrorist’ turned writer instantly turns into an intellectual to be extended the full protection of the law” (p. 76).

14. We might point out that Ucelay Da Cal who has an aversion to “commissioned” books when they come from the CNT was himself commissioned, sponsored and funded by Catalan institutions in the cases of at least two of his own books, *Francesc Macià: una vida en imatges* (Barcelona, Departament de la Presidencia, 1984) and, in collaboration with Francesc i Llussa, *Macià i el seu temps* (Barcelona, Diputació, D.L., 1985).

emergence of “revelations about the brutality of communist dictatorship” (p. 77). Which comes pretty close to accusing Peirats of having slipped some arsenic into the Little Father of Peoples’ vodka. And then, pursuing the same line of argument, our inspired analyst confronts us with the following: against the backdrop of the decline of world communism, the book’s “success”, and, as a result, its author’s “intellectual success” (p. 77) was largely dependent on Peirats’s appropriation of the old anti-Stalinist rhetoric borrowed from the POUMist tradition¹⁵ and especially that articulated by Julián Gorkín, with Ucelay Da Cal reminding us of Gorkín’s connection with the Congress for Cultural Freedom “which is to say, the American CIA” (p.80).¹⁶

According to our historian, this borrowing, daubed in red and black, had the main advantage of “freshening up the rundown [libertarian] ideological and explanatory edifice” (p. 84) as well as not delving too deeply into the internal contradictions of an anarcho-syndicalism that was very divided over the conduct of the war and/or the revolution. To put that another way, the “bitter anti-communist” Peirats and those who commissioned him had every reason to heap the blame for defeat upon the Soviet Union and its local communist chapter.

The “chronicler” and the historians

In keeping with this dialectic whereby (sham) praise is always an overture to (outright) calumny, Ucelay Da Cal is prepared to concede that Peirats had one quality — that on the margins he was able to handle criticism of the “organic’ collective” of which he was a member (the CNT, that is), but this is merely in order to specify that, in so doing, Peirats had the unquestionable advantage of not having been “a leading protagonist” in the civil war (p. 89). Had he been, he goes on cynically to state, he should have made do with the role of mere witness rather than ever staking his claim to the historiographical renown that he earned after turning into “libertarianism’s’ champion in the face of historical falsehoods” (p. 88). And everything that went along with this. The historian concedes that there is no doubt but that *La CNT en la revolución española* helped position “libertarian militant historiography in the forefront of the new wave of output relating to the Spanish conflict” (p. 90), a wave that was only starting at the beginning of the 1960s, but he immediately stipulates that that success was necessarily temporary, given the reams of quality academic publications that decade. And Ucelay Da Cal, eager to show that he knows his onions and above all to put this upstart Peirats back in his box as a two bit chronicler, buries the reader under a mass of bibliographical

15. A thematic undertow with which Ucelay Da Cal associates George Orwell, a “fine stylist” but a “‘revolutionary socialist’ who lost his way”.

16. Let us remind the reader, as Ucelay Da Cal does not, that in the day when Julián Gorkin (real name Julián Gómez García, 1901-1987) was working, as were lots of other anti-Stalinist internationalists, for one or another of the many publications of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, in this instance *Cuadernos*, it was believed that the activities of the Congress were being funded by a number of American cultural foundations. The CIA’s hidden involvement in said funding was only revealed in the 1970s.

citations along with comments from which we gather that he far prefers Hugh Thomas to Burnett Bolloten and to the Broué-Témime double act, but above all that he greatly admires (a rare enough thing for him) Gabriel Jackson, the notorious mandarin ‘roasted’ by one Noam Chomsky some time ago.¹⁷

As far as Ucelay Da Cal is concerned, it was precisely this attack by Chomsky on Jackson that rescued Peirats from the oblivion to which he would have been consigned by newer historiographical output, especially from Jackson’s pen.¹⁸

He writes: “What a joy it must have been for Peirats to read him!”, meaning Chomsky, the “scientific eminence artfully mastering all of the requirements of academic good practice” and whose prose, ultimately, hinted that “Peirats, the auto-didact, was entirely correct” (p. 95). On the other hand we can imagine how irritated the as-yet-unqualified Ucelay Da Cal must have felt on reading, back in 1969, Chomsky’s unanswerable analysis of the “counter-revolutionary subordination” of the Stalino-liberal mandarins.¹⁹

The point being that now that he has become one of the leading lights himself he has yet to digest that analysis.

But there is more: if Professor Ucelay Da Cal takes Chomsky’s analysis so badly, it is because it strikes him as unforgivable that, in the bosom of the elite as he conceives of it, there can be someone like this “highly ideologised linguist” (p. 94) speaking up for the rabble. So much so that he strikes our professor as very nearly the incarnation of treachery. In Ucelay Da Cal’s view of history (and quite possibly in his world-view), everybody has his place and the rabble belong in the back yard. Whilst he concedes that Peirats was within his rights to write a book — our neo-mandarin being one of the most liberal of liberals, after all — he was not within his rights (the author of this foreword rails) to try to play in the big boys’ yard, through which Ucelay Da Cal, a firm believer in his own greatness, struts daily with no fear of bumping into any working

17. Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 1961; Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage*, 1961; Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *La Guerre civile et la révolution en Espagne*, 1961; Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War*, 1965; Noam Chomsky “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, 1969. Note, besides, that Ucelay Da Cal’s nuanced pen turns Bolloten into a man “obsessive” in his anti-communism (p. 93), Broué and Témime into experts in “murky narration” (p. 95) and Chomsky into a rabble-rouser “very short of insight” (p. 94). In addition to the authors named, Ucelay Da Cal also cites the works of Stanley G. Payne, Grandizo Munis (aka Manuel Fernández Grandizo) and Carlos M. Rama — saying of the latter that he is overly “academic”, a somewhat amusing label, coming from the source it does, but then Rama is above all overly sympathetic to the libertarians.

18. Apropos of Spanish anarchism, Ucelay Da Cal indicates that the 1973 publication of John S. Brademas’s book — *Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en España (1930-1937)* — signalled the inception of a movement determined to claw back that topic which had previously been left to “fans” by “young academic historians” (pp. 103-104). Unfortunately, the academic historian Brademas finally plumped to seek a career in US politics — as a Democratic Party representative — rather than in history. Anyway, Ucelay Da Cal forgets to mention that a post-‘68 wave had something to do with this rediscovery of anarchism by the academics and that the sudden interest did not involve as clear cut a gulf as he claims between “academic” history and “militant” history and they both fed off each other.

19. On this subject we would refer the reader to José Fergo’s article in *A Contretemps*, No 32, October 2008 (pp. 8-10) on “Mai 37 et l’Alma Mater: du néo-mandarinate stalino-libéral”.

class types, other than the ones tasked with sweeping the yard. History, he writes with a straight face, belongs to those with the right qualifications, that is, that subtle blend of learning and style which only membership of the academic elite can confer. If being ridiculous could kill, Ucelay Da Cal would already be a stiff and his tomb, suitably maintained by the servitors of the Generalitat and the Pompeu Fabra University, a shrine to post-modern superciliousness.

We dare to imagine that the grotesquely corporatist defence of academic history to which Ucelay Da Cal is committed will have slightly discomfited some of his colleagues — perhaps even Susana Tavera García and Gerard Pedret Otero, the promoters of this edition — but in all probability, in the refectories of the world of academia, when it comes to distancing oneself from a big wheel, everybody makes do with a quiet whisper, like they do in the Vatican when apostolic paedophilia is rampant. The fact is that, so far as we know, nobody, not even on the margins of the University, has had the gumption to tell Ucelay Da Cal that an excess of defending his peers might prompt people to think that maybe they were blameworthy or at any rate suspected of something.²⁰ From which it follows that, among such people, the corporative mind-set is exactly proportional to the panic by which they are seized when, simply for speaking their minds, they might be placing their academic careers in the utmost peril. Because, actually, it is a known fact that among a number of academic experts in anarchism, Ucelay Da Cal is regarded as a ‘chancer’ or a cynic. Yet, since they remain so tight-lipped, the guy just barges on. Once upon a time, even in Columbia University, this used to be referred to as the power of the mandarins.²¹

That said, and getting back to the opinions voiced regarding the author of *La CNT en la revolución española*, it might be worthwhile pointing out that historians as a body have not had the same misgivings or reserve as Ucelay Da Cal when it comes to the historical quality of Peirats’s efforts. Thus in the 1980s Julio Arostegui, another luminary in the contemporary history field, invited Peirats, in the light of his “scientific merits” to join the Sociedad de Estudios sobre la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo (SEGUEF — Society for the Study of the Civil War and Francoism). Likewise at about the same time Spanish Radio and Television (RTVE) invited Peirats to join a committee

20. Ucelay Da Cal, no shrinking violet when it comes to defending the honour of his calling, goes so far as to absolve it of any suspicion of having backed the still extant ideological arsenal deployed by the democratic Transition. And actually believes that “academic [...], professional, university historiography” (p. 103) lived up in full to its role as seeker after truth by deploying its infinite rigours to the diarrhoea-like spurt in memoir materials, the volume of which, he says, finished up swamping the memoir market. Such claims overlook the fact that, back in the days of the Transition, the most prestigious university academics all in all abided by the democratic mission entrusted to them by the dominant ideology to which they subscribed: reducing the history of the Civil War to the story of a confrontation between fascism and democracy, playing down its social dimension as a class war. Here I would refer the reader to my article “Guerre civile: les soubresauts d’une histoire sans fin” in *A Contretemps*, No 25, pp. 3-6.

21. A lot more unfathomable is the heavy silence observed by the Spanish libertarian press as a whole about this tiresome foreword. There are two obvious possibilities here: either Spain’s anarchists no longer read, which would suggest that they are in tune with their times, or they have dropped their guard for good, which would amount to proof that Ucelay Da Cal is right to hold them in contempt.

of experts tasked with gauging the scientific rigour of a series of documentaries on the civil war which it was planning to broadcast, which offer was not queried by Paul Preston nor by the many leading academics serving on said committee.

Final clarifications

To be fair, Ucelay Da Cal does not despise all libertarians the same. For instance, he praises César M. Lorenzo, whose thesis is diametrically opposed to Peirats's thesis, for his "very comprehensive work" (p. 96).²² Though truthful, that compliment is primarily designed to allow him to cast it up to Peirats that he had ignored Lorenzo's book when *La CNT en la revolución española* was republished in 1971 by Ruedo Ibérico publishers, which is, to say the least, a specious argument when we know, on the one hand, that Peirats drafted his introduction to said republication in 1969, the very year in which Lorenzo's book was published and also that he was unsparing in identifying everything that he found bad about the book.²³

Actually, and he is within his rights here, Ucelay Da Cal prefers government anarchism over the anarchism of the rabble, his preference being for the line championed by Horacio M. Prieto and of which Lorenzo has been an unrelenting apologist for the past forty years. Similarly, Ucelay Da Cal regards the *Memoirs* of the very political García Oliver²⁴ as infinitely superior to those of the very anti-political Peirats, something else that can readily be accepted. What is happening is that in both instances, the praises showered by Ucelay Da Cal upon Lorenzo and upon García Oliver serve but one and the same function: to discredit the writer whose *Memoirs* he had been commissioned to present. Besides, Lorenzo, García Oliver or Peirats are of little account and the important point as far as Ucelay Da Cal is concerned is that, contrary to the shared hopes of those three writers, labour anarchism collapsed once and for all and in the early stages of the so-called democratic Transition into "self-parody" (p. 108), since when the CNT has not raised its head again.

But even though he might have confined himself merely to reporting this slide into oblivion, Ucelay Da Cal's prolific pen opts instead for the truly orgiastic. As far as he seems to be concerned, there were several reasons for the self-destruction of the high-

22. César M. Lorenzo, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en Espagne. Pouvoir et révolution sociale* (Les Editions libertaires, 2006). The reader may refer to José Fergo's review of this book in *A Contretemps*, No 25, in January 2007: "De la guerre sociale à la guerre civile, trajectoires et mutations de l'anarchisme espagnol", pp. 7-9.

23. José Peirats "Los anarquistas y el poder" in *Frente Libertario*, No 1, September 1970.

24. On the matter of Juan García Oliver's memoirs, *El Eco de los pasos*, allow us to note that Ucelay Da Cal very elegantly leads us to credit that the publisher of them, José Martínez Guerricabeitia, who was also Peirats's publisher, was supposedly "banking" on that book to "launch" Ruedo Ibérico in the Spanish market after Franco's death. And, wise-cracking as ever, he adds: "It didn't and there are those who insist that Martínez did not die but perished by his own hand out of sheer depression" (p. 89). Depressed, maybe, but why? Because the García Oliver book never became a 'best-seller' or sickened by the spectacle of an era when democratic and intellectual mediocrity was thriving? Regarding Ruedo Ibérico and José Martínez, I would refer the reader to *A Contretemps*, No 3, June 2001, which is devoted to the subject.

flying CNT: the loss of credibility caused by an alleged financial alliance between the Confederation and the Catalanist Jordi Pujol, designed to counter the communists; the influx into the mother ship of “long-haired youths” together with their “feminist girlfriends” (p. 109); the “psychedelic wave”, overwhelming Barcelona’s “Libertarian Week” when, in July 1977, the Parque Güell took on the appearance of a “Catalan Woodstock” (p. 110); the growing influence of the ‘homintern’ (p. 110) meaning the militant homosexuality embodied by the transvestite Ocaña²⁵: and, well-timed and “with or without police provocation” (p. 108), the Scala Affair.²⁶ The fact is, this histrionic observer of that juicy disintegration adds, that Peirats who was “a man made in the old mould” (p. 111) could not identify with this new style CNT and, like García Oliver, chose to “exclude himself” from it (p. 109). This way of focusing only on the sensational aspects of a period which actually saw the CNT rebuilt in record time, only to lose most of its membership through internecine bickering within five years, sums up Ucelay Da Cal’s primarily dismissive approach rather well. The truth is that, no matter how rough the debates by which the CNT was racked may have been, they deserve better treatment than the caricature we are offered by this writer. And, no matter what Ucelay Da Cal may say, Peirats certainly did not exclude himself from those debates. Quite the opposite: he monitored them closely and took part in them, at least up until the split in 1979, after which date he certainly did decide to stand aloof. Restricting the terms of a debate that pitted several versions of the CNT against one another — to be crude, a strictly syndicalist CNT, an anarcho-syndicalist CNT, an anarchist, movement-driven CNT — to a simple generational factor is, ultimately, to parade a blatant intellectual inability to see past the froth of events. As for remembering the terms of the consensus which, during those days of transaction, brought together the institutional left (political and trade unionist alike), post-Francoists and the representatives of capital in order to wipe out any prospect of a radical challenge posed to the system, well, Ucelay Da Cal steers well clear of that. It actually suits him better to depict the CNT as a madhouse — and it was that as well, of course — rather than scrutinise, as a historian would, the multiple factors conspiring even from within to marginalise it.

“Of course, Peirats made it as an intellectual and far outgrew his auto-didact roots”, the author of this foreword-cum-indictment concludes, “but in the end he found that the recognition afforded ‘brain-workers’ in Spain was and still is meagre, if not disdainful.” (p. 112) Behind this cantilevered formula which is very typical of Ucelay Da Cal’s poor prose, it is as plain as day that the “disdain” he attributes to Spain as a whole is the very same disdain that he has been exercising throughout some hundred pages.

25. The transvestite José Pérez Ocaña (1947-1983) a “naive” painter, was a gay rights activist back in the days of the “take-off” and thanks to Ventura Pons’s movie *Ocaña, retrato intermitente* (1978) he achieved a degree of notoriety.

26. On 15 January 1978, when the CNT had called a mass demonstration in Barcelona against the so-called Moncloa Pact (a sort of ‘social contract’ agreement) there was a fire-bomb attack at the Scala theatre, an attack that the police promptly blamed on anarchists; its chief effect was to help criminalise the CNT.

Which leaves a question hanging in the air: Why the hell did Ucelay Da Cal, whom we can only imagine must be very busy distilling his unbounded learning in the workplaces of the education salariat, expend so much energy on such a lengthy introduction to the autobiography of someone whom, everything suggests, he finds unsufferable? The startling thing here is not so much the aversion felt by this big wheel — an aversion to which he could have given free rein in the form of a review in one of the many academic publications to which he contributes — as his determination to drive a stake through a dead man in the introductory pages to a book that bears, not his name, but that of the victim. So we do not feel that we are overstepping the mark when we say that this paragon of academic objectivity has just invented a brand new method of intellectual execution, a method all the more risk-free because, as we all know, the dead have no right of reply. For which very reason we have made it our business to respond to this infamy.

Freddy Gómez

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Translated by **Paul Sharkey**

