

Invisible Friendships:

Anti-Colonial Anarchism in Spain and the Blind Spots of Historiography

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It is necessary, in these critical moments when chauvinists, businessmen, and all those who cause wars or eagerly wait for them to profit at the expense of the people, declare themselves first-class patriots, that us, the anarchists, the stateless, the disruptive, those who above divisions of borders and races see in each worker a brother, oppose to the miserable cry of “pro fatherland”, the sublime principle of “pro humanity”.

Editorial of nº 226 of the Spanish anarchist magazine *Tierra y Libertad* (“Land and Freedom”), 12th of August 1914¹

Introduction

In *The Age of Globalization*, Benedict Anderson traces the influence of European anarchism on the novels of the Filipino nationalist José Rizal. According to Anderson, at the end of the 19th century there was an active internationalist network that connected the Philippines, Cuba and Europe and contributed to the rise of anti-colonial movements in the former two.² This paper set out to the task of retracing these networks in the opposite direction: rather than looking at the way European anarchists influenced anti-colonial struggles, investigating the ripples provoked by independentist turmoil in the colonial world in European anarchist movements between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

I decided to focus on the context of Spain primarily due to two factors. Firstly, the Spanish anarchist movement was arguably the most significant in Europe. Secondly, while Spain had lost most of its colonies in the early 1800s during the Spanish American wars of independence, three of its territories were still struggling to break free in the latter decades of the century: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Spain thus presents a very interesting case study, as the surge of anarchist and socialist movements coincided with the Spanish Crown’s desperate efforts to

¹ Quoted in Joan Zambrana, “El Anarquismo Organizado En Los Orígenes de La CNT (Tierra y Libertad 1910-1919)” (CEDALL, 2009), 752. My translation.

² Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *The Age of Globalization: Anarchism and the Anticolonial Imagination* (London ; New York, NY: Verso, 2013).

hold on to its last imperial possessions. In contrast, France and Britain did not lose most of their colonies until the late 20th century; smaller European powers like Germany and Italy only started acquiring colonial territories at the end of the 19th century through the so-called ‘Scramble for Africa’.

An initial literature review, however, revealed a lack of scholarship on the Spanish anarchist movement’s position on the colonial question. While some information was available on ‘imperial sceptics’ in Britain and France (which I will touch upon later in the paper), I found virtually nothing analysing the influence of anti-colonial turmoil on anarchist organizing in Spain. Was this a sign that anarchists, while deeply committed to internationalism within Europe, were blind to the plight of those colonized by their own government? Or was it, on the other hand, a blind spot of historiography?

This paper will provide evidence suggesting the presence of anti-colonial sentiments within the Spanish anarchist movement and will consider why the topic is under-researched. I argue that a Eurocentrist paradigm still permeates the way we understand history and historiographical research, particularly regarding the direction of intellectual ideas between Europe and the colonial world. I propose some necessary shifts in understandings of global relations between social movements to reconstruct this overlooked history. The paper thus operates on two levels: on one hand, it presents some historical findings on the relation between anti-colonialism and Spanish anarchism; on the other, it reflects how prevalent historiographical approaches contribute to making this relation invisible.

Anti-Colonialist Influences in Spanish Anarchism at the Turn of the Century

Two phenomena occurring at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – respectively, the involvement of Spanish anarchists in Latin America (particularly in the 1895-1898 Cuban war of independence), and the protests against Spanish colonialism in Morocco – support the thesis that Spanish anarchists were attuned to independentist movements in the colonies. While this information is insufficient to conclusively map the character of anarchist anti-colonial discourse in Spain, it suggests that a deeper investigation of primary sources would demonstrate the existence of an attitude of solidarity.

Anarchism was flourishing in the Americas during the late 19th century: while Cuba “turned into an important centre of coordination of anarchist activities with a constant flux of militants coming and going” from various countries in the region,³ significant anarchist

³ José Julián Llaguno Thomas, “Las Voces Olvidadas Del Antiimperialismo: El Anarquismo Frente Al Avance de Estados Unidos En América Central y El Caribe,” in *El Imaginario Antiimperialista En América Latina*, ed. Andrés Kozel et al. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones del CCC Centro Cultural de la Cooperación Floreal Gorini, : CLACSO, 2015), 125–40. My translation.

movements were also present in Puerto Rico, Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Brazil, as well as certain parts of the US.⁴ It should thus come as no surprise that when the third Spanish-Cuban war broke out in 1895, anarchists were actively involved both in the conflict as members of the separatist forces and in the international mobilization in support of the independence.⁵

In particular, Cuban anarchists were active in distributing propaganda amongst the Spanish troops to encourage them to desert their army. Not only there is evidence of desertions, but some Spanish soldiers even joined the *Ejército Libertador de Cuba* (ELC, “Liberation Army of Cuba”): according to the census of the ELC, three of the six total departments of the army alone counted 473 Spanish members.⁶ Anarchist efforts in Cuba were matched by a parallel international boycott of the Spanish and American governments, supported by prominent anarchist militants such as Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons and Voltairine De Cleyre.⁷ Anarchists in Spain also campaigned against the Cuban war: researcher Joan Casanovas claims that “all Spanish anarchists disapproved of the war and called on workers to disobey military authority and refuse to fight in Cuba”.⁸ It is clear that anarchist solidarity with the Cuban independence struggle was an international phenomenon, and that Spain was one of the bases for such campaigns of support.

Similar mobilization efforts occurred about a decade later when Spain increased its militarist activities in Morocco. The Northern region of the Rif was formally under Spanish protectorate but in practice hardly controlled up to this point, given the resistance of Berber tribes to the Arab Sultan and European domination alike.⁹ Tensions between Spanish troops and local Riffian tribes prompted the government to recruit Catalan reservists to Morocco: the targeting of only one region was perceived as a punishment of Catalunya’s separatist aspirations.¹⁰ Workers’ discontent at the idea of risking death to protect capitalist mining activities in the Rif

⁴ Llaguno Thomas. See also: Clara E. Lida and Pablo Yankelevich, eds., *Cultura y Política Del Anarquismo En España e Iberoamérica*, Primera edición, Colección “Ambas Orillas” (México, D.F: El Colegio de México, 2012); and George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, Broadview Encore Editions (Peterborough, Ont. ; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2004).

⁵ Llaguno Thomas, “Las Voces Olvidadas Del Antiimperialismo: El Anarquismo Frente Al Avance de Estados Unidos En América Central y El Caribe.”

⁶ Domingo Acebrón and María Dolores, “Los Canarios En Ejército Libertador de Cuba, 1895-1898,” *Tebeto - Anuario Del Archivo Histórico Insular de Fuerteventura* 2, no. 5 (1992): 35–52.

⁷ Llaguno Thomas, “Las Voces Olvidadas Del Antiimperialismo: El Anarquismo Frente Al Avance de Estados Unidos En América Central y El Caribe.”

⁸ Jose Casanovas, cited in Lucien van der Walt, “Towards a History of Anarchist Anti-Imperialism,” *The Anarchist Library*, 2005, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lucien-van-der-walt-towards-a-history-of-anarchist-anti-imperialism>.

⁹ Hisham Aidi, “Is Morocco Headed Toward Insurrection?,” *The Nation*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/is-morocco-headed-toward-insurrection/>.

¹⁰ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, 372.

fuelled the protests, which had been initially called for by the anarcho-syndicalist union *Solidaridad Obrera* (Workers’ Solidarity).¹¹ Those protests culminated in the 1909 Barcelona uprising that eventually led to the brutal repression known as the Tragic Week and the subsequent incarceration and torture of anarchists in the Montjuich prison.

The criticism of Spanish colonialism in Morocco, and more generally of European imperialism in Africa, was a recurrent theme in the weekly anarchist magazine *Tierra y Libertad* (“Land and Freedom”, henceforth TyL), which became within a few decades the biggest political publication of the time by number of printed copies.¹² Joan Zambrana categorized the content of the issues of TyL published between 1910 and 1919, providing the opening editorials of each number as well as a list of titles of articles accompanied by a short summary of their content. This documentation project provides an overview of the most common topics appearing in the writings of Catalan anarchists.¹³ I surveyed the list of articles published between 1910 and July 1914 to look for criticisms of imperialism in Africa, and in Morocco in particular.¹⁴ What follows is my translation of titles and summaries of the articles I selected as most relevant:

Criticism of Imperialism in Africa

Year	Number	Title	Summary of content
1910	4	In vino veritas	Criticism of the imperialist bourgeoisie
	18	Report of Algiers	Short account of the situation in Algeria
1911	80	Gloomy Africa	On imperialist fighting in Africa
	86	Civilization in Tripoli	On the war of Italy in Libya
1912	92	The Italian banditry	On Italian imperialism in Africa
	130	The border	Criticism of borders and divisions amongst humans
1913	153	The “Biribi”	On the war in North Africa
	160	Civilizing?	Criticizing the occupation of North Africa
	172	Spain in Africa	Criticism of the Spanish intervention in Africa
	172	War and European civilization	Criticism of the “civilizing” war in Africa

¹¹ Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*, 1. Harper Colophon ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 146-148.

¹² Miguel Iñiguez, *Esbozo de Una Enciclopedia Histórica Del Anarquismo Español*, 1a. ed (Madrid: Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo, 2001), 592.

¹³ Zambrana, “El Anarquismo Organizado En Los Orígenes de La CNT (Tierra y Libertad 1910-1919).”

¹⁴ I decided to stop after July 1914 because the start of the First World War shifted the magazine’s focus predominantly towards anti-war discourse.

Criticism of Imperialism in Morocco

Year	Number	Title	Summary of content
1910	6	We civilize Morocco?	Criticism of the possibility of warfare
	32	Solidarity of the Moors	Notice of solidarity from Moroccan workers
1911	60	National honour	On a possible invasion of Morocco
	65	A manifesto	Manifesto against the repression in Morocco
	78	Democracy... and weapons at hand	On the repression in Morocco
	86	Is the war over?	On the intervention in the Rif
1913	196	From Ceuta to Tétouan	Report on the abuses in North Africa
	209	The crimes of civilization	On the “civilizing plague” in Morocco

As seen from the titles and summaries provided, TyL was unquestionably opposed to imperialism and interventionism, considered tools of the bourgeoisie for capitalist exploitation. In particular, TyL featured recurrent critiques of the colonial rhetoric of the “civilizing mission”. In fact, one of the opening editorials poses the questions:

Civilization? Who, then, represents it now? The German State with a militarism so powerful and formidable, that it has killed at birth any germ of rebellion? The Russian State, whose only methods of persuasion are the knout, the gallows and Siberia? The French State with Biribi, the bloody conquests of Tonkin, Madagascar and Morocco and the forced recruitment of Blacks? France, who has kept comrades in its prisons for years, for the sole reason of having said or written against the war? England that exploits, divides and starves and oppresses the people of its immense colonial empire?¹⁵

Although these sources are dated over a decade after the wars of independence in Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, they suggest a relation between these anti-colonial movements and anti-colonialist discourse in Spanish anarchism. As Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow argue in *Contentious Politics*, social movements employ “repertoires of contention”, or sets of tools

¹⁵ Editorial of n° 253 of the Spanish anarchist magazine *Tierra y Libertad* (“Land and Freedom”), March 31 1915, cited in Zambrana, “El Anarquismo Organizado En Los Orígenes de La CNT (Tierra y Libertad 1910-1919).”, 271. My translation.

and actions that are context-specific and built over time. Anti-imperialist discourse and practice were undoubtedly part of the repertoire of Spanish anarchism by the 1910, and collaborations with international solidarity campaigns during the Cuban war suggest that such ideas had likely been circulating within anarchist circles for quite some time.

Overcoming Euro-Centrism & the Politics of Friendships

The commentaries of Spanish interventionism in Morocco and European exploitation of Africa clearly show a strong rejection of imperialism and colonialism. Anarchist mobilization for Cuban independence suggests that such rejection was not articulated in isolation, but in conjunction with independentist movements in the colonial world. This limited information is hardly sufficient to draw the conclusion that the turmoil in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines directly shaped the direction of Spanish anarchism, and more robust evidence of a direct intellectual exchange should be gathered from primary sources such as newspapers, pamphlets, letters and personal correspondence.

This preliminary evidence, however, provides substantial motive to investigate the question further, and begs the question of why this topic is so under-researched. I suspect the lack of attention could be attributed to a surviving Euro-centric paradigm, according to which intellectual ideas and political theories are first articulated in the Western world and then exported to the (post-)colonial world. In fact, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism fits into this mold: as Anderson demonstrates in *Imagined Communities*, nationalist intellectuals like José Rizal or José Martí typically belonged to a European-educated elite that had absorbed Enlightenment ideas about nation-states and political rights and re-proposed them in the colonies, ‘imagining’ a national community in lieu of pre-colonial regional, religious, or ethnic loyalties.¹⁶ As articulated by Caroline Hau in her analysis of politics in Rizal’s *Noli me tangere*, nationalist anti-colonialism is characterised by an intrinsic contradiction between ideals of emancipation from the colonizers, and the vision for this emancipation as only realizable within a political framework imported from European thought.¹⁷

Anarchist thought, while initially developed in Europe, challenges ‘European-ness’ as an essential category by drawing from non-Western forms of social organization to envision alternatives to the State as the paradigmatic political structure. Thanks to their rejection of the nation-state as the basis for community and their consequent emphasis on internationalism, anarchist movements were inherently porous and predisposed to transnational influences and

¹⁶ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁷ Caroline S. Hau, “The Fiction of a Knowable Community,” in *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 48–93.

collaborations – including from the colonies to the ‘motherland’. Both colonialist and post-colonialist thought, however, have understood modernity as a phenomenon originating in Europe and exported to the rest of the world (the difference being that the former considered this process positive, while the latter exposed its trauma and perversity). The idea of a movement located in Europe rejecting quintessentially ‘European’ political paradigms, while taking inspiration from non-European people, directly challenges the presumed direction of intellectual exchange from Europe to the peripheries.

The blind spot of historiography on the affinity between anarchism and (some) anti-colonial movements is reflected in the distinction between the terms anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. The former is commonly associated with socialist, syndicalist and anarchist movements in Europe, while the latter is assumed to pertain to independentist struggles against European powers in the colonial world. In reality, both positions are essentially the same: they both denounce the horrors of European domination over non-European people, denounce the economic exploitation of colonial territories, challenge the idea of an essential superiority of European culture, and affirm the right to self-determination of all people worldwide. No one would be surprised to hear the term anti-imperialism associated with socialism or anarchism, but it is rarer to observe an equivalent use of anti-colonialism to characterize European radical thought. In reality, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism fundamentally advance the same arguments: that they are systematically used in different contexts reflect the inability of imagining that (some) European and (some) non-European people might fight for the same interests and goals.¹⁸

As Leela Gandhi argues in *Affective Communities* (interestingly mirroring Anderson’s title *Imagined Communities*), post-colonialism has “remained tentative in the appreciation of individuals and groups who have renounced the privileges of imperialism and elected affinity with victims of their own expansionist cultures”.¹⁹ The project of making these individuals visible necessarily requires a renunciation of the idea of a homogenous West, occupying a uniform position and exhibiting uniform interests. On the contrary, a broad definition of imperialism as a principle organizing the world according to hierarchies of race, culture, class, gender, civilization, etc.,²⁰ reveals the existence within Europe itself of subjects at the bottom of

¹⁸ You might have noticed that in this paper I deliberately used the term anti-colonialism to characterize the thoughts and practice of anarchist movements, even when such a term was not present in the sources I examined, precisely with the intent of questioning and breaking down this distinction.

¹⁹ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

²⁰ Gandhi, 7.

such hierarchies: “sexual misfits, slaughterhouse animals, factory slaves, colonized subjects, unruly women” all belong to the same “imperial periphery”.²¹

Gandhi argues that the shared belonging to these peripheries allowed for the development of what she terms “politics of friendship” between European and non-European people, marking the development of a “metropolitan anti-colonialism”.²² Politics of friendship are characterized by an “anti-communitarian communitarianism”: while they seek to embrace and magnify sociality, empathy, and community, they reject the Hegelian imperative to prioritize commitment to the “proximate”, “our own” kind from the same unit (whether the family, the tribe, the nation, etc.), that permeates traditional communitarianism.²³ This kind of friendship is not based on any recognizable form of kinship except for a shared inhabitation of the “periphery”. Today’s No Border activist who gets arrested for blocking a deportation flight is operating on the same politics of friendship as the Spanish anarchist tortured in the Montjuich prison for protesting militarism in Morocco a century ago.²⁴

Conclusion

Despite apparent connections between the Spanish anarchist movement and anti-colonial turmoil in Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and anti-imperialist discourse as Spanish interventionism grew in Morocco in the early 20th century, a lack of scholarship on the subject represents a blind spot on the history of affective relations between European and non-European ‘peripheries’. In fact, historiographies of anarchism in Spain focus predominantly on the movement’s internal organization and its relation to socialism, while historiographies of anti-colonialism focus on the events of the wars of independence, with few links traced between these two worlds.²⁵

In conclusion, I argue that the collaboration with anti-colonialist movements and the rejection of imperialism by anarchist movements in Europe challenges paradigms of modernity as a phenomenon exported from Europe to the colonies. Prevailing assumptions of a one-direction flow of political ideas render invisible the influence of anti-colonial turmoil on European radical movements, despite evidence suggesting its significant weight. Given the

²¹ Gandhi, 7.

²² Gandhi, 9.

²³ Gandhi, 25.

²⁴ Diane Taylor, “Arrests as Stansted Anti-Deportation Protesters Lock Themselves to Plane,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2017, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/29/arrests-as-stansted-anti-deportation-protesters-lock-themselves-to-plane>.

²⁵ In contrast, the approach I advocate for has been explored in relation to Britain: notably, by Bernard Porter’s *Critics of Empire*, Gregory Claeys’ *Imperial Sceptics*, Nicholas Owen’s *The British Left and India*, and Leela Gandhi’s aforementioned *Affective Communities*.

conjunctural contemporaneity of the collapse of the Spanish Empire and the rise of the anarchist movement, Spain is a particularly interesting case study that should be given further attention.

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