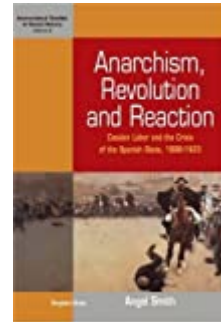




Angel Smith. *Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction: Catalan Labor and the Crisis of the Spanish State, 1898-1923.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 405 S. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-176-9.



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A. Smith: Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction

Continuing with the same academic interest in the history of 20th-Century Catalonia shown by the researchers of the school created by Paul Preston at the London School of Economics, this book is a great step forward, insofar it offers a new reading of one of the major mysteries posed and still unresolved by Catalan and Spanish historiography: that of the rise and extraordinary vitality of anarchism in Catalonia during that period. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Barcelona accounted for thirty per cent of Catalonia's population and around half of its industrial labour force. It was also one of the most industrialized centres of the Mediterranean area and Western Europe and probably one of the cities with a highest cost of living. Compared to other European regions, Catalan industry was small-scale and technologically backward in some aspects. It was in this context that anarchist-syndicalism was taken up as a syndical and political strategy by Catalan labour. The author goes into the causes that may account for the methods of direct revolutionary action adopted by the Catalan labour movement to achieve its goals in contrast to the chiefly reformist or socialist policy adopted by European trade unions. This study also sheds new light on

the difficult crossroads at which the Spanish state was standing after the loss of its colonial market in 1898. That is modern Catalonia as opposed to declining Spain. From the summer of 1917, the moral and political decline of the Bourbon Restoration was plunged into the open crisis of liberal parliamentarianism. It was the success of reaction and authoritarianism, supported by Catalonia's economic and social elites, which backed the coup d'état carried out by general Primo de Rivera in 1923.

As it is wisely reflected in the title of the book, anarchism, revolution and reaction are exactly the backbone of Smith's research. For this purpose, he carefully analyses the reasons of the strong support given to anarchism by Catalan labour. The author looks for the causes among the social and economic changes occurred during the first two decades of the twentieth century as well as in the cultural values and political attitudes related to Catalonia's specific labour structure. He also tries to interpret the collective outburst of anger, such as the revolutionary outbreaks of the Tragic Week of 1909, the social crisis of 1917 and the fateful years of terrorism employer-sponsored-terrorism, which may be regarded as a sort of

covert military dictatorship from the author's point of view. Lastly, Smith examines the gestation of the reaction that led to the establishment of the military dictatorship in 1923.

To conduct this ambitious research, Smith makes an skillful use of transverse and micro methodology in which the social dimension of the topic is combined with an strictly political and institutional angle, connected to the collapse of the political system of the Restoration regime. A number of aspects are examined from the point of view of its social dimensions: on the one hand, the geographical approach of the study is tackled by the author's focus on the working-class neighbourhoods of Barcelona and secondarily on other industrial towns, where non-Catalan Spanish migrants, particularly from Murcia, Aragón and Valencia, were gradually taken in; specific attention is also placed on the relations, not always cordial, among workers of different geographical origin. On the other side, the author also considers the complex labour stratification that distinguished the skilled workers of the shop floors (foremen), some of them connected to an idea of production based on traditional craftsmanship, from an increasingly large number of unskilled workers, in a transitional stage towards the generalization of the factory system causing acute tensions between both groups. Lastly, Smith integrates gender relations into his study, since women were predominant in most industrial sectors, such as textile. And, although their presence within the labour process was socially rejected, their participation in industry was necessary to cut wage rates.

This thorough examination of the social life of Catalan labour allows the author to demythologize some of the most recurrent clichés in historiography, like the tendency to see popular sectors as an homogeneous whole, without making a clearer differentiation between workers and low middle classes, which were prone to identify with the medium and high bourgeoisie.

The political and institutional aspects are incorporated into a more strictly social analysis by Angel Smith in order to understand the reasons why Catalan workers were apolitical. This theoretical framework within which his study is set is thus an attempt to find out why social history ignores politics. It is from this approach that gives priority to the sources of social history over those of political history that the author endeavours to explain the preference of Catalan labour for methods of collective action, such as general strikes, instead of their participation and integration into a liberal political system that was resistant to democratization. This

way, Catalan labour's opinion was voiced in a political regime that systematically marginalized it and at the same time feared it as a destabilization factor. Following this line of argument, Smith provides new explanatory elements about the rise of anarchist-sindicalist movement within an industrial structure subordinated to the erratic and fluctuating Spanish market, the conversion of skilled trades into trade unions and the disagreement between a wing backing a reformist policy and another one inclined to direct action and eventually prevailing in spite of the strength of the former sector.

The author makes an in-depth analysis of the intense escalation of social conflicts occurring particularly after the First World War, which continually altered the political stability of the regime. This way the CNT, the anarchist-sindicalist confederation, became one of the central political actors in the Restoration crisis. This fact was paralleled by the Spanish state, which prove unable to reconcile the interests and conflicts between capital and labour and gave a violent police and military response to workers' demands and protests. This course of action was supported by Catalan employers, who made a great effort to eliminate this powerful trade union, which had half million members in Spain in 1919, sixty per cent of whom were in Catalonia.

In future editions of this book, either in Catalan or in Spanish-Castilian, the addition by the author of some general conclusions intertwining the various social and political variables examined in the study with the labour movement and the final crisis of the regime, would be very positive. In spite of the author's clear intention to interweave all these factors, a number of final considerations would also be desirable. And, however indisputable the industrial importance of Barcelona may be, there are other labour, scarcely integrated markets that should not be forgotten, like the wool clusters, which were barely considered in the author's references to Sabadell and the cotton textile centres on the banks of the rivers Cardener and Llobregat. Perhaps, the author pays too much attention to the factories and company towns [colònies] on the river Ter-Freser while attaching less importance to economic relations established among other industrial areas. In short, it would be positive to go into this line of research in greater depth in future studies, stressing the diverse evolution of industrial capitalism and insisting on the various dynamics of the labour movement and their political expressions, which are beyond those of the successful, exemplary economies of France and the United Kingdom. This will be the only way for us to offer a new synthesis that includes such relevant cases as Catalonia's.

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