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I **Decaffeinated Marxists: the PSOE, 1879–1914**

Introduction

Studies of the Spanish labour movement prior to the Second Republic, established in 1931, have tended to concentrate on the Anarchists. This is unremarkable, given the enormous strength and influence of Spanish Anarchism until its repression during the three-year civil war which destroyed the Republic. The war was marked by an unstated, unholy – and wholly unlikely – community of purpose between Francoists and Communists. Their mutual hatred barely masked a common desire: the stamping out of Anarchist revolutionary initiatives unleashed by the collapse of the Republic. The Second Republic itself, though, was intimately associated with the Spanish Socialists: its creation was above all their triumph, its collapse their tragedy (some argue, their fault).¹ As the largest political party of the Left, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) played a pivotal role, both in government and in opposition, during the Republic's all too brief five-year existence. For this reason, historians of Spanish Socialism have properly focussed their attention mainly on the PSOE's turbulent experiences between 1931 and 1936. Indeed, in recent years a lively historiographical debate has developed over the role of the PSOE's internal divisions in the polarisation of politics during the Second Republic.² However, the strength of Spanish Anarchism before 1931 and the centrality of the PSOE in the Republic have combined to obscure the fact that organised Socialism goes back a long way in Spain. In fact, the PSOE was originally founded in 1879, making it one of the oldest Socialist parties in Europe. The PSOE's early development is of the greatest significance: many of the divisions which so damaged the party during the Republic find their origins in the struggle to establish a political presence in late nineteenth-century Spain.

The central feature of the early Socialist movement was what might be termed 'decaffeinated Marxism'.³ This refers to the insistence of early PSOE leaders that the party's political praxis was derived from Marxist theory, even though the theory they espoused was rigid, schematic and derivative, bearing little obvious relation to the socio-economic or political situation in Spain. In turn, the praxis at times bore little obvious relation to

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the theory, thereby giving rise to an ideological confusion which continued to encumber Spanish Socialism throughout much of the twentieth century. Essentially, the first PSOE leaders believed themselves to be Marxists, but understood neither Marxist theory nor how it might be applied specifically to Spain. Whilst proclaiming the necessity and inevitability of Socialist revolution to end the corruptions of bourgeois democracy under the Monarchy, they engaged in precisely the legalist reformism which their own arguments dismissed as useless. Whilst calling for the establishment of a Republic, they shunned all collaboration with other Republican forces on the grounds that they represented the bourgeoisie. Isolationist and arrogant, the PSOE leaders made the crucial mistake of failing to see that Spanish democracy was more Bourbon than bourgeois, a dynastic deception designed to protect the Monarchy and ensure that the population had no effective voice. One result of this misconception was that the Socialist movement remained trapped by an interpretative schema which condemned it to the margins of political life. Only in 1909, when the PSOE finally abandoned its haughty isolationism and entered into an electoral alliance with the Republicans, did the Socialists begin to have an impact in Spain.

That indigenous Marxism in Spain has never been noted for its innovative theory hardly needs emphasising. Indeed, it has become almost axiomatic to comment on the marked poverty of theoretical production by Spanish Marxists, a point expressed most succinctly by Luis Araquistáin in the remark, 'I think we Spaniards have contributed nothing original to the theme of modern socialism.'⁴ Less agreement exists, however, as to why this should be so. There have been three main approaches to providing an answer. First, emphasis has been placed on issues of personality and contingency: the Internationalist message arrived via Bakunin's emissary Giuseppe Fanelli, whose strength of character laid the basis for the implantation of Anarchism rather than Marxism in Spain.⁵ Second, a slightly more sophisticated view argues that the industrial backwardness of the Spanish economy favoured the implantation of Anarchism rather than Socialism, although this explains neither why Anarchism should have taken root in the most advanced industrial region, Catalonia, nor Socialism in later years amongst the landless peasants of Andalusia and Extremadura in the south.⁶ Third, there is the perennial chestnut of Spanish idiosyncrasy: quasi-metaphysical speculations about the innate Anarchism of the Spanish national character.⁷

All three explanations boil down to the basic assertion that Marxist Socialism was weak in Spain because Anarchism was strong. The present study seeks to move beyond this truism by analysing why this should be so; more specifically, it seeks to analyse why the Socialists remained committed to espousing Marxist revolutionism whilst engaging in often

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timid reformism, and the effect it had on the development of organised Socialism in Spain.⁸ Emphasis will be laid upon the nature of the Spanish state and how it inhibited the implantation of Socialism; the dependence of the first Spanish Socialists on their French colleagues for an introduction to much of Marx's work, thereby allowing a simplistic and mechanistic reading through the distorted lenses of Jules Guesde, Paul Lafargue and Gabriel Deville to penetrate Spain; the overriding preoccupation of Spanish Socialists with questions of organisation rather than theoretical analysis, leading to virtual silence on such vital matters as the agrarian problem and regional diversity in Spain; the ideological inheritance of both Catholicism and 'Krausism', an obscure philosophical system of Germanic origin which had a remarkable impact upon many of the early Socialist leaders; and, finally, the intransigent dominance within the PSOE of its founder, Pablo Iglesias, whose determination to make Madrid the centre of Socialist operations allowed the Anarchists to establish a presence virtually without challenge within the more industrial Barcelona. The Catalan capital was always more likely to provide a focus for challenges to the power of the state, as evidenced in both 1909 and 1917, and the Socialists' failure to organise effectively there was of considerable significance.

Socialism and the Spanish state

Fundamental in the development of the Spanish state was the lack of a bourgeois-democratic revolution from below in which the structures of the *ancien régime* were broken. Unlike in Britain and France, there was no establishment during the nineteenth century of a relatively democratic polity able to adjust to and absorb new social forces. Instead, the Spanish state developed along what might be termed 'Prussian' lines, with the one notable difference that industrial capitalism in Spain remained underdeveloped. Although Spanish history throughout the nineteenth, and indeed much of the twentieth century, has been marked by a counterpoint between the forces of progress and reaction, it was the latter which generally remained dominant. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century a 'reactionary coalition' had become established between a powerful political oligarchy, made up of the monarchy, landowners and the Church, and a politically weak commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie.⁹ This laid the basis for the development in Spain of *agrarian* capitalism, no less exploitative than the industrial variant. Despite the immense diversity of Spanish agriculture, the politically dominant sectors were, broadly speaking, the large landowners. Their *latifundios* were generally concentrated in the central and southern parts of the country, Andalusia and Extremadura, although there were also powerful *latifundistas* in Old Castile and particularly in Salamanca. Industrial development, by contrast, was sporadic,

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being concentrated mainly on textile production in Catalonia and mining in the Basque Country.

The roots of the reactionary coalition had been established during the 1830s and the 1850s when Church lands were disentailed as part of an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at social reform. These lands were bought up mainly by existing landlords, but also by members of the embryonic commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. However, rather than using their capital to modernise agricultural production and invest in industry, the bourgeoisie allowed itself to be 'co-opted' by the political oligarchy. Attracted by the prestige conferred by land ownership, a substantial proportion of the new *haute bourgeoisie* was easily persuaded to collaborate in the coalition's basic aim: the maintenance of the prevailing social system against any reformist threats to agrarian dominance. Threats certainly existed. Although numerically weak, and still further emasculated by the existence of the reactionary coalition, the northern-based commercial and mercantile bourgeoisie did make sporadic efforts to alter the manifest injustices which abounded in nineteenth-century Spain. Their lack of genuine revolutionary drive, however, was demonstrated in the period 1868 to 1874; these six years of political chaos culminated in the establishment of an ultimately abortive republic, created more by accident than design. Population growth since the middle of the century had intensified pressure on the land, provoking widespread internal migration to urban centres by peasants desperate to leave the countryside. This exacerbated the already high rates of urban unemployment, whilst at the same time economic depression, worsened by the collapse of cotton supplies to the Catalan textile industry during the American Civil War, engendered morale-sapping inflation.

Poorly organised and inarticulate, Spanish workers increasingly expressed their growing resentment through violence. In turn, the monarchy's ever-growing corruption and disdain for the politically powerless angered liberal army officers, disgusted by the hypocrisy of Queen Isabella's clerico-conservative leanings. A series of *pronunciamientos* combined with urban riots to oust her in 1868. In the ensuing power vacuum, the liberal bourgeoisie let slip its golden opportunity. Lacking coherent leadership and direction, the working class and peasantry were able to do little more than stage a number of poorly coordinated cantonalist risings.¹⁰ These were easily put down, but the spectre of proletarian disorder dampened liberal enthusiasm for progress. Unable to establish its authority, the First Republic, formally established in February 1873, was crushed by the army in December 1874. Once more, the bourgeoisie ceded its right to rule in return for the provision of political stability in which to make money. The monarchy was restored in the person of Alfonso XII; reform was abandoned.

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The 'Restoration Monarchy' ruled over Spanish political life until 1923. Up until 1897 it was dominated by the politician Antonio Cánovas de Castillo, architect of the so-called *turno pacífico*.¹¹ The idea behind the *turno* was to maintain the configuration of political power in Spain basically unaltered, while presenting a façade of parliamentary democracy. Two political parties, the Conservative and the Liberal, were created to represent the two principal sections of the landed oligarchy, the wine and olive growers of the south and the wheat growers of the centre. These landed classes, whose economic power rested on their *latifundios*, were linked to the political centre in Madrid, alongside the Church and the higher-ranking military, through the system of *caciquismo*.¹² *Caciques* were local political bosses who, through a variety of more or less corrupt means, ensured that electoral results approximated to the predetermined outcomes decided upon in Madrid. Since the only options were Conservative government under Cánovas, or Liberal government under Práxedes Sagasta, it was effectively impossible for alternative interests to find political expression. The Canovite system, modelled on its founder's admiration for British parliamentary procedures, had little to do with democracy, even less did it cater for the representation of workers' and peasants' interests.

The crucial point to note, however, is the weakness of the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie in Spain. In terms of socio-political development, the majority of these middle classes were

Catholic and conservative, imitators in their modest sphere of aristocratic attitudes and without a proud, independent bourgeois culture.¹³

There was no sizeable middle class in nineteenth-century Spain linked to the development of an industrial economy at the forefront of political transformation. In other words, in Marxist terms, the political revolution which brought about the modern constitutional state in Europe and thereby 'destroyed all the estates, corporations, guilds and privileges which expressed the separation of the people from its community',¹⁴ had not occurred in Spain. Rather than the Spanish state being a reflection of bourgeois civil society, the ruling class remained an oligarchy comprising the latifundist nobility, the Church, the *haute bourgeoisie* and the higher-ranking military. Its concerns were conservative, its determination to guard against revolutionary initiatives fierce.

Revolution, of course, was precisely the supposed *raison d'être* of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), founded in Madrid on 2 May 1879 by a small group of men, many of whom had been members of the minority 'authoritarian' branch of the International in Spain.¹⁵ The division in Spain between 'authoritarians' and 'anti-authoritarians' reflected the struggle for control within the First International between Marx and

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Bakunin, with the difference that in the Iberian peninsula it was followers of the latter who managed to establish initial hegemony. The mouthpiece of the first Marxists in Spain had been *La Emancipación* (1871-3), which moved away during 1872 from the Bakuninist current of the Federación Regional Española (FRE) towards a more explicit identification with Marx.¹⁶ Under the prompting of Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, who had fled to Spain from the Paris Commune in 1871, the editor of *La Emancipación*, José Mesa y Leompart, tried to keep the FRE faithful to the orientations of the General Council of the First International. However, Mesa's main concern was to attack the 'anti-authoritarian' positions derived from Proudhon and Bakunin, which were being propagated by the Catalan-based *La Federación*, rather than to use Marxist theoretical postulates as a basis for analysing the situation in Spain.

Mesa was the guiding impulse behind the creation of the Nueva Federación Madrileña (NFM), supposedly faithful to the Hague Congress of the International.¹⁷ In fact, the NFM failed to supersede the anti-electoral line of the early Spanish workers' movement. Abstentionist mistrust of electoral participation was out of line with Marx's emphasis on the need to struggle to win reforms from the existing state. However, even though abstentionist attitudes could be justified on the grounds that the Spanish state had not reached the stage at which it was meaningful to seek reform through it, these grounds were not used. Instead, the line of *La Emancipación* on the August 1872 elections, for example, was unequivocal in its erroneous assertion:

Internationalists! Do not go to the elections. . . we workers have nothing to do in bourgeois parliaments.¹⁸

If the prescription made sense, the diagnosis remained faulty. This rigid anti-electoral stance, derived from a simplistic understanding of both Marxism and the Spanish state, led to a costly inflexibility: thus it was that the proclamation of the First Republic in February 1873 was treated as if nothing had happened, producing no change in the NFM's political line.

José Mesa left Spain for France in 1872. There he established close contact with Jules Guesde, a leader of the French Socialist movement who was subsequently to have an important influence on the nascent Spanish movement. In Madrid, meanwhile, the Asociación General del Arte de Imprimir, a typesetters' union originally constituted in 1871, was reformed in 1874. Under the presidency of Pablo Iglesias, who was to become the central figure in the Spanish workers' movement, the Asociación was to be the driving force behind the eventual formation of the Socialist Party: the majority of the founding members of the PSOE were affiliated to it. However, although the Socialist Party was very much a creation of workers, the predominance of members of the Asociación General del Arte

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de Imprimir, an artisanal union of the labour aristocracy, gave it an elitist hue which at times was to verge on sectarianism. The typographers associated with the Asociación formed a closely knit nucleus, headed by Iglesias, which was to create difficulties in terms of collaboration both with other workers felt to be of inferior status, and with intellectuals.¹⁹ This was an important factor contributing to the slow progress made by the group between the fall of the First Republic at the end of 1874, and the official constitution of the Socialist Party, in conditions of illegality, in 1879.

The first formal constitution of the Socialist Party was Madrid-based, initially known as the Grupo Socialista Madrileño.²⁰ Its primary concern was to set up a commission to write a programme and formulate the organisation of a country-wide party. The commission comprised Pablo Iglesias, Victoriano Calderón, Alejandro Ocina, Gonzalo Zubiaurre, and Jaime Vera, although Vera did not take part in the actual writing of the programme nor in formulating the organisation. The election of Iglesias to the position of Secretary of the Executive Committee confirmed him in the leading position which he was to retain until his death in 1925. He was challenged, though, by Francisco Mora, who played an important part in the formulation of the 1880 revised version of the first party programme. It has been suggested that this first programme of 20 July 1879 was probably sent for revision to Marx and Engels.²¹ If so, they would surely have been left aghast at its 1880 reformulation which was based in large measure on the 1872 Manifesto of the Federal Committee of the Federación Regional Española, in turn constructed from tenets taken mainly from Bakunin and Proudhon. The main elements of the 1872 Manifesto had been twofold. First, there were two principal affirmations couched in a Bakuninist framework: 'in the economy, collectivism; in politics, anarchism', alongside a conception of political power based on a theory of a revolutionary state made up of workers' collectives and autonomous local federations. Second, a Proudhonian conception of Justice was seen as the leading principle of social equilibrium once capitalist exploitation had been eliminated.²²

The Mora text of 1880 made a few significant changes to this. References to Anarchist faith were dropped and, in line with the London and Hague conferences of the International, political action was accepted as a necessity for the workers.²³ Nonetheless, much of what remained was clearly in the line of Bakuninist rather than Marxist conceptions. The three aspirations defined by the 1880 programme were: the possession of political power by the working class; the transformation of individual or corporative ownership of the means of production into common ownership by the whole society; and the organisation of society on the basis of economic federalism, guaranteeing to all members of the workers' collectives the full proceeds of their work. Marx's likely reaction to the third aspiration can be

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deduced from his 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', in which he ridiculed the Lassallean notion of each worker receiving the undiminished proceeds of his labour. As Marx pointed out, there would always be a number of inescapable deductions to be made, and in any case the notion of distribution involved remained trapped within categories derived from capitalist society. Moreover, though, coupled to the Spanish Socialists' concern with distribution was a notion of a rational and egalitarian social order, presided over by the figure of Justice, with clear reference to Proudhon. This went hand in hand with a Bakuninist theory of the state being reduced to merely administrative functions.

What all this reflected was the lack of any systematic study of the works of Marx by the early Spanish Socialists, with a resultant poor understanding of Marxist economic analysis. The upshot of these theoretical inconsistencies was that the political action called for in the Socialist programme had a strongly 'reformist' hue, with a passive conception of inevitable revolution. Thus, the 'minimum' demands of the 1880 programme amounted to gradualism in both the political and economic planes, an orientation that continued to underlie the various reworkings of the programme throughout the 1880s, and formed the basis of the definitive programme of 1888. It was here that the disjuncture between revolutionary rhetoric and reformist tactics was established, for throughout the 1880s Pablo Iglesias in particular spoke of the proximity and inevitability of revolution which would come about as a necessary effect of the evolution of capitalism, in a manner completely external to political class action.²⁴

This is the central striking feature of the early PSOE. As has been shown, the Spanish state at the end of the nineteenth century remained imbued with pre-capitalist features and had made scant and uneven progress along the transitional road towards industrial capitalism. Nonetheless, this did not inhibit the early PSOE leaders from proclaiming loud and often that Spain did indeed exhibit what was perhaps the most basic characteristic in Marxist terms of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, Pablo Iglesias, in just one example of what was to become virtually an incantation, proclaimed

Class antagonism has now lost its complexity of former times, and today is reduced to its simplest expression – the struggle between...the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.²⁵

Iglesias was not alone in such pronouncements, even if he was the most insistent. Jaime Vera, the major intellectual of early Spanish Socialism and a man elevated to hagiologic status in the history of the Spanish workers' movement, was equally guilty. This was perhaps most clearly illustrated in the responses of the Agrupación Socialista Madrileña to the Comisión de Reformas Sociales, set up in a rare progressive act by Royal Decree in

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December 1883. Organised by the Liberal administration of Sagasta, its brief was to investigate the living conditions of the working class in Spain.²⁶

The two most important Socialist responses to the Comisión were presented by Vera and Iglesias. The former eschewed the official questionnaire and instead produced a written report, which has come to be known simply as the *Informe*, while the latter presented two oral reports. Vera's *Informe* has provoked extraordinary responses. Rarely studied closely, it has nonetheless been widely acclaimed, in the words of Juan José Castillo, as 'the greatest theoretical expression of Marxism in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century.' Juan José Morato, founder member and first biographer of the Socialist movement, went so far as to suggest that 'Spanish Socialist thought is Jaime Vera in the *Informe*.'²⁷ It is thus somewhat surprising to discover that the *Informe* is something of a naked monarch: an eclectic admixture of various ideas, some mutually exclusive, put together with little seeming consideration of their applicability to the situation in Spain. Iglesias, meanwhile, was far less concerned than Vera with questions of theory, and effectively argued that the crucial issue was the organisation of the workers' struggle.

The PSOE leaders were plainly labouring under severe misapprehensions about the socio-political and economic situation in Spain. Less obvious is why this should have been so. There are perhaps three major reasons which converged and which contribute towards an explanation. The first of these concerns the influence of French interpretations of Marxism. Clearly, the early Spanish Marxists had a decidedly limited firsthand knowledge of the works of Marx and Engels. This, in fact, is hardly surprising: not only was it exceedingly hard to gain access to what was proscribed by the state as subversive literature, but even if central Marxist texts had been available in good translations it is unlikely that the PSOE leaders would have found time to internalise them.²⁸ The majority of early members of the PSOE came from a working class which enjoyed neither leisure nor the facilities to acquire more than basic levels of education. Moreover, Marx's *Das Kapital*, for instance, is hardly light reading, nor indeed would it have provided many obvious clues as to the political nature of the Spanish state.

In the light of these constraints, the early PSOE leaders not unnaturally turned to the French Socialists for guidance and advice. It was far more likely that the Spanish Socialists would have a working knowledge of French than of German or English, and this fact, together with geographical proximity, contributed to a heavy French influence on early Hispanic Socialism. Moreover, this link was fortified by José Mesa who, it will be remembered, had left Madrid for Paris in the early 1870s. Once in France, Mesa established contact with Carl Hirsch and Guerman Alexandrovitch Lopatin, friends of Marx and Engels, who in turn introduced him to the

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Café Soufflet group, which included Jules Guesde and Gabriel Deville. Heavily involved with the Parisian circle associated with the journals *Les Droits de l'Homme*, *La Révolution* and later *L'Egalité*, Mesa became an intermediary between Paris and Madrid, transmitting to the Spaniards ideas formulated by the French.²⁹

In many ways, this was a disaster for the Spanish Socialists. The influential Guesdist version of Marxism

rested upon the monotonous expression of a single theme: the coming 'expropriation of the expropriators'. . . In the Guesdist scheme. . . the antagonism of capital and labour is seen as leading inevitably to a dramatic confrontation which transfers the means of production to the collectivity.³⁰

Guesde's ideas derived ultimately from Malthus, via Ricardo and in particular Ferdinand Lassalle with his 'iron law of wages', an idea scorned by Marx. Essentially, Guesdist Marxism was reductionist and deterministic, characterised by the rigidity and simplicity of most of its postulates. In turn these derived from a lack of knowledge of some of the fundamental works of Marx and Engels, the survival of ideological influences of pre-Marxist Socialism and an incapacity to relate theoretical perspectives to concrete conditions. The simplistic appeals of Guesdist formulations, in which revolution was seen as both easy and on the political agenda, had much to commend them to the theoretically unsophisticated early Spanish Socialists.³¹

The second reason relates to the manner in which Pablo Iglesias stamped his authority upon the PSOE. While it is certainly the case that the potential for fruitful theoretical developments in Spain was in any case limited, it remains equally true that the character and actions of Iglesias compounded an already unpromising situation. At the same time, however, it must be conceded that he played a fundamental and vital role in the organisational formation and development, such as it was, of the Spanish Socialist movement – a paradox symptomatic both of the man and of the interpretations to which he has been subject. Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of Iglesias was pragmatism wedded to a basic mistrust of whatever lay outside his own personal ambit. Thus, he mistrusted not just Republican politicians, but also the few intellectuals who, at an early stage, joined the PSOE. Both of these antipathies, it could be argued, incurred heavy costs for the Spanish Socialist movement. In many ways, though, Iglesias personified Spanish Socialism. The victim of many personal attacks from Anarchists and Republicans alike, his puritanical laic sanctity and total commitment to Socialist ideals is undeniable. In this he was representative of a tradition which came to mark the Spanish Socialists – a tradition of ascetic morality which derived from the Socialist ideal of an all-embracing code of conduct.³²