

## A Biographical Prologue

### *The Transnational World of José María Blázquez de Pedro*

We asked, “Dr. [Blázquez de Pedro], you never wear a hat. Why not?” And he quickly replied emphatically, as if expecting the question: “No. I never wear a hat since above my head is THE WORLD.”<sup>1</sup>

As war raged on the distant island of Cuba in 1895, the Spanish government increasingly sent young men to the Caribbean to suppress a rebellion that had been joined by anarchists in Cuba, Florida, and New York. For Cuban nationalists who represented propertied interests, this was a war to liberate Cuba and become an independent, capitalist, Catholic country. For the anarchists who joined the rebellion, this was an anti-colonial social revolution that would liberate Cuba from Spanish tyranny, create decentralized control, abolish capitalism, and destroy clerical influences.

One of the young Spaniards sent to suppress the Cuban rebellion was a twenty-year-old from the western Spanish town of Béjar – José María Blázquez de Pedro, who fought in Cuba from September 1895 to December 1898 (Figure P.1).<sup>2</sup> Spain’s 1898 defeat in the Caribbean against combined Cuban and US forces, and the loss of most of its remaining

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Justiniani, “Recuerdos imborrables Don José María Blázquez de Pedro y el Dr. José Llorent,” *Revista Lotería* (Panama), 186, May 1971, 69–70.

<sup>2</sup> Ignacio C. Soriano Jiménez and Miguel Íñiguez, *José María Blázquez de Pedro: anarquista de ambos mundos (en Béjar, Panamá y Cuba)* (Vitoria: Asociación Isaac Puente, 2017), 27–28; Hernando Franco Muñoz, *Blázquez de Pedro y los orígenes del sindicalismo panameño* (Panama City, Panama: Movimiento Editores, 1986), 163; *La Revista Nueva*, January 1918, 16; and, *Nueva Luz*, October 16, 1923, 7.



FIGURE P.1 José María Blázquez de Pedro as a twenty-year-old Spanish soldier in Cuba in 1895

global empire, shocked the Spanish population. For some soldiers who were sent to Cuba, the experience led to a fundamental reevaluation of their beliefs and principles. Blázquez de Pedro returned to Spain thoroughly disillusioned by the war. He soon rejected militarism, patriotism, and nationalism when he encountered Spain's fervent anarchist movement.<sup>3</sup> He created a library in his home, wrote for the Spanish anarchist press, published books of poetry, and in 1910 organized the anarchist group "Los Autónomos."<sup>4</sup>

Cuba had noticeably impacted the young anarchist – an impact seen in one of his poems, "De Antaño y Ogaño" (From Olden Times and Our Times). He wrote the first half while fighting in Cuba. It praises Spain and the quest to put down the Cuban insurrection; however, the second half

<sup>3</sup> Franco Muñoz, *Blázquez de Pedro*, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Jiménez and Iñiguez, *José María Blázquez de Pedro*, 15–16.

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of the poem, written in 1904, presents disparaging images of the arrogant, overbearing Spain, while praising Cuba.<sup>5</sup> He further rejected Spanish imperialism and nationalist wars in his “La agonía del repatriado. Poema-monólogo” (The Agony of the Repatriated. Poem-Monologue). A soldier returning to Spain describes his deployment to Cuba and “being overwhelmed listening to the insults / enduring the insults / from those who should be thanking you / for your help, kindness, and care.”<sup>6</sup> But the soldier then comes to understand why the people he’s there to “help” would behave with such disrespect as he sees the senseless death, destruction, and bloodshed during the war. “That noble Spain / unfortunate and beautiful, / ... / look how they’ve turned me / into a violent soldier, / martyr of the country.”<sup>7</sup> The returning veteran channels this disillusionment into a broader hatred of all those who he believes profited from the war: “Damn my country ... those who enjoy life but don’t work ... who suffer but don’t protest ... avarice ... those who exploit ... pray ... the slave who doesn’t rebel ... all countries ... war ... Damn a thousand times the God of those with too much / the God of the nationalists / and the God of those who rule.”<sup>8</sup>

Blázquez de Pedro’s anarchism and his turn against God had repercussions. He labeled all religions as “stultifying and contrary to human dignity,” but the Catholic Church as “the worst and most absurd of all of them.” Church leaders demanded his imprisonment, prompting his arrest in Madrid in 1905, when he was sentenced to jail for nine months for his antireligious pronouncements. In fact, he was regularly jailed between 1904 and 1908.<sup>9</sup>

Many anarchists understood that any future revolution needed its seeds planted in the youth of today. For anarchist thinkers on education, like Spain’s Francisco Ferrer y Guardia and Blázquez de Pedro, youth were naturally free and antiauthoritarian. As Blázquez de Pedro put it:

<sup>5</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, “De Antaño y Ogaño,” in *Sangre de mi sangre (Poesías). Sin Ajena prologación* (Panama City, Panama: Impreso Talleres Gráficos “La Unión,” 1924), 116–118. The poems in the collection appeared in 42 newspapers and magazines in Spain and the Americas before he combined them into a book while in Panama.

<sup>6</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, *La agonía del repatriado. Poema-monólogo* (Lisbon: Typographia do Commercio, 1910), 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15. Throughout Spain and Cuba, anarchist newspapers sold his books. See, for instance, *¡Tierra!*, August 10, 1907, 4, which sold his poetry collection *Rebeldías Cantadas*.

<sup>9</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, *Pensares* (Barcelona: Imprenta de Cuesta, 1905), 33; Jiménez and Íñiguez, *José María Blázquez de Pedro*, 14.

“Observe children and you will see how they are naturally rebellious, how with the most ingenuous and simplistic spontaneity they reject all authority, all imposition.”<sup>10</sup> However, contemporary education destroyed spontaneity, liberty, and rebellion in children. Education especially crushed a child’s imagination, “castrating him morally and intellectually, killing or atrophying his impulses and energies – the essence of wellbeing that was given the child by nature.”<sup>11</sup> It did not help that the parents acquiesced in the destruction of their children’s freedom. They accepted the status quo of education without thinking of the myriad alternatives that children could experience: “they persist in the idea that their children do everything with the right hand only. As if there were no left hand! The true education is ambidextrous.”<sup>12</sup> And so Blázquez de Pedro advocated the importance of both physical and intellectual education – the very philosophy advocated by his better-known contemporary, Ferrer y Guardia.

Blázquez de Pedro also wrote about labor, but just as importantly he wrote about what life one’s labor should create. In the spirit of labor activists of the day, he called on workers to demand an eight-hour day: “don’t ask the bourgeoisie or authorities or gods, because if you ask them, they won’t give it to you.” Then, after winning the eight-hour day, the workers had to “continue afterwards conquering and conquering always until you have won Pleasure.” And pleasure – enjoying life – was key to all labor conquests for Blázquez de Pedro. “Work is not dishonorable but working to excess is.”<sup>13</sup> Working was not something to be idolized. “You work more than is necessary, much more than you ought to, much more than should be possible, much more than is just because you consent to it with a meek stoicism and an inconceivable resignation.” One shouldn’t display their calloused hands as some “noble flag of pride but instead as flagrant and irrefutable proof of your deformation, of your slavery.” In fact, he concluded, “those broken hands are the gravest and most irrefutable accusation against the present society of privilege, wrong, and violence.”<sup>14</sup> The ultimate goal was not a better job, but enjoying pleasures away from one’s job. In verse, he continued this theme: “Enjoying life is no crime / . . . / Enjoying life is human, natural, and beautiful / it degrades nobody and delights everyone.”<sup>15</sup> And there was no higher pleasure, he

<sup>10</sup> Blázquez de Pedro, *Pensares*, 42.    <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.    <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, *El derecho al placer* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Vertice, 1906), 9–12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–6.

<sup>15</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, *Rebeldías Contadas* (Béjar: Tipografía Silverio Sánchez, 1905), 11.

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noted, than “perpetuating life through the sexual act of reproduction.”<sup>16</sup> Publicly, anarchists were prudish and denounced workers who spent time drinking and playing cards or billiards. But here, alas, was an anarchist publicly reveling in pleasure and getting laid.

Spain, though, was not enough for him. Or, perhaps it was too much, with two sisters and both parents dying between 1909 and 1913. In 1914, he moved with his two brothers and a sister to Panama at the invitation of a long-time anarchist activist in the Canal Zone. He went with the grand idea to use the Panamanian isthmus as a geographical point to unite anarchists throughout the Americas. Upon arriving in the Caribbean port of Colón, Blázquez de Pedro embarked on a regular writing schedule with anarchists in Havana and Spain. In mid-1915, he left Colón and relocated to the Pacific port of Panama City with his siblings, where he began to shift his focus to more militant labor-based anarchism, publishing *Himnos anarquistas* (Anarchist Hymns) and forming a new “Los Autónomos” group with the Peru-born anarchist Víctor Recoba and twenty-two others.<sup>17</sup>

In October 1916, upwards of 10,000 workers walked off the job to protest wages and conditions on the Panama Canal.<sup>18</sup> Blázquez de Pedro was one of the multinational leaders of the new Maritime Workers Union, speaking at rallies where he called on strikers to persuade those still working to stop and join the strike while condemning American control of the canal.<sup>19</sup> Following the strike, Blázquez de Pedro – though regularly labeled a “radical” and a “socialist” by US informants – worked and agitated openly in Panama City for the next nine years. During that time, he published periodic columns in the city’s mainstream and progressive papers as well as the anarchist-edited *Cuasimodo: Magazine Interamericano* and

<sup>16</sup> Blázquez de Pedro, *Pensares*, 23–24.

<sup>17</sup> Franco Muñoz, *Blázquez de Pedro*, 173; Jiménez and Íñiguez, *José María Blázquez de Pedro*, 17, 31, 33, 230, 243; *Tierrat*, July 16, 1914, 2 and July 23, 1914, 2; *Tierra y Libertad*, May 3, 1916, 4. In early 1915, Blázquez de Pedro sent nearly weekly columns to the Barcelona newspaper *Tierra y Libertad*. Copies were then mailed back to readers in the Caribbean. These columns helped to keep anarchists in Panama linked to the outside world. Money often accompanied these columns, most of it collected by Blázquez de Pedro. See, for instance, *Tierra y Libertad*, December 29, 1915, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 50–53.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum for Captain Mitchell, October 4, 1916; Letter from Resident Engineer to Acting Governor, October 5, 1916; and, Re: Maritime Union Society, October 9, 1916 in RG185 Isthmian Canal Commission Records. 1914–1934 (hereafter cited as ICC 1914–1934), 2-P-59.

his own magazine, *El Cabellero Andante*. He worked to create a cultural center promoting the free exchange of ideas and collaborated with other leftists in Panama to create rationalist education. As he noted in the opening editorial of *El Cabellero Andante*, “We are knights errant of all generous ideals, of all redemptive ideals, of all ideals for improvement . . . Our ideal can be reduced to three words: Freedom, Love, Beauty.”<sup>20</sup>

Culture and aesthetics were important to the middle-aged anarchist, and Panama City lacked both. He decried the state of disrepair of Panama City’s Lesseps Park and the Paseo de las Bóvedas, the lack of trees and flowers in the Plaza de Herrera, the poorly attended public classical music performances, the ghastly yellow-painted façade of the Municipal Palace, and the architectural blasphemy behind someone painting the old, historic stone towers of the Panama Cathedral – which might have been the site of religious fanatics, but that was no reason not to appreciate the beauty of the building constructed by working people.<sup>21</sup>

Added to this were his fervent denunciations of republican democracy. As a good anarchist, he mistrusted all government initiatives.<sup>22</sup> Not only was individual initiative superior to governmental initiative, but states – even republican ones – were themselves anti-individual. Ultimately, he suggested that people would do well to understand that democracy was not the most progressive political development in human history, nor the end of historical development. “After absolute monarchy, there was constitutional monarchy. After constitutional monarchy, there was the democratic republic. After the democratic republic, there will be syndicalism, state socialism, and anarchism . . . The children of good democrats ought to be syndicalists, socialists, and anarchists.”<sup>23</sup> He tried to get his readers to see that democracy was really just a bunch of legislators passing laws for their own interests, and “returning to the People” their own natural rights, customs, and aspirations that they never lost in the first place. “Individualism,” he concluded, “is not, nor can it be democratic, aristocratic, monarchic, theocratic, or plutocratic, but simply and solely anarchic, or better said, anarchist.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> José María Blázquez de Pedro, *Observaciones de un andariego en Panamá: crónicas y artículos, sin prólogo ajeno* (Panama City: Talleres Gráficos de “El Tiempo,” 1922), 176–178.

<sup>21</sup> *La Revista Nueva*, June 1917, 446–448; September 1917, 204–207; Blázquez de Pedro, *Observaciones*, 21–25 and 26–27.

<sup>22</sup> Blázquez de Pedro, *Observaciones*, 133–134. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–58, 144, 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29; 54–55, 63.

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As for capitalist Panama, Blázquez de Pedro was true to his anarchist roots. Capital was not preserved for those who produced it, but controlled by “a parasite, far removed from production, by an idle *señor*, backed up by laws and by all of the armed forces,” taking from the true producers and “giving back in exchange a salary INFERIOR to the value of what they produced . . . Let every capitalist disappear and Humanity will not suffer in the least; let every worker disappear, and the most chaotic disorder will ensue without delay.”<sup>25</sup> The first nationwide labor organization in Panama since the 1916 general strike emerged in 1921, and Blázquez de Pedro played a decisive role. Workers created the Federación Obrera de la República de Panamá (Workers Federation of the Panamanian Republic, or FORP) and its newspaper *El Obrero*. Blázquez de Pedro was elected to the FORP’s Central Executive Committee. That July, he and his comrades formed a separate entity known as the Grupo Comunista. Weekly, the group met in Blázquez de Pedro’s Panama City home.<sup>26</sup> They opposed all politics and capitalism, declared themselves followers of communism, and viewed the Bolshevik government as the best and most practical contemporary expression of their own ideals.<sup>27</sup> By 1925, the Grupo Comunista formed a new union – the Sindicato General de Trabajadores (General Trade Union of Workers, or SGT). The SGT members then formed the Liga de Inquilinos y Subsistencias (Tenants and Basic Necessities League, aka the Liga), which protested soaring rents and living costs in Panama.

Through its newspaper, *El Inquilino*, the Liga organized a campaign to empower renters to resist rent increases. On October 1, some 4000 people of multiple nationalities in Panama City went on strike, refusing to pay rent. At the same time, Blázquez de Pedro and his brother Martín were coordinating the first Inter-Continental Congress of Anarchists, scheduled for early November and with delegates from throughout Latin America pledging to attend. But the United States and Panama repressed the strike and detained anarchists arriving for the congress.<sup>28</sup> The government deported Blázquez de Pedro, who disembarked in Havana, where he lived

<sup>25</sup> *Cuasimodo*, April 1920, 40–43.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum for the Governor from Inspector George Vraff, November 17, 1921, in RG185 ICC 1914–1934, 2-P-8.

<sup>27</sup> Marco A. Gandásequi, *Las luchas obreras en Panamá (1850–1978)* (Panama City: Talleres Diálogo, 1980), 35, 52, 58–59; Ricaurte Soler, *Panamá: historia de una crisis*. Panama City: Siglo XXI, 1989), 50–51; Franco Muñoz, *Blázquez de Pedro*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Letter dated November 4, 1925, Diego Abad de Santillán Collection (hereafter referred to as DASC), Correspondence. IISG, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



FIGURE P.2 The Blázquez de Pedro family grave in Amador Cemetery (Panama City) with the original cross removed.

Author's personal collection

until his death a year and a half later at the age of fifty-two to thirty-two years since he first saw Cuba as a Spanish soldier.<sup>29</sup> Still, José's journey was not over. Even in death he continued as a migrating anarchist. In 1929, comrades shipped his remains to Panama City and buried them in Amador Cemetery. Oddly, someone erected a cross over this anti-clerical man's grave – a cross that (appropriately) was removed decades later (Figure P.2).<sup>30</sup>

Blázquez de Pedro is not a member of the anarchist canon. Few people today have heard of him, but this Spanish-born radical played a crucial role in Panama and linking the isthmus to the wider Caribbean anarchist world – a role that many other migrating anarchists from Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Peru played throughout the region. Blázquez de Pedro was the best-known and longest working of a wide-ranging group of migrant anarchists in Panama. His writings to colleagues in Spain and

<sup>29</sup> US State Department Weekly Country Report from Panama for 10/31 to 11/7 on Communist Leanings of Inquilinos with Enclosures, November 14, 1925, 819.00B. RG59 General Records of the Department of State. Internal Affairs of Panama. General Conditions (hereafter referred to as RG59 Panama). US National Archives, College Park, MD.

<sup>30</sup> I cannot say when the cross was removed, but when I found the grave in summer 2015 the cross was no longer there.



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Cuba, his transnational communiqués, and his activities with anarchists throughout the Caribbean Basin also illustrate his importance in larger transnational anarchist networks. Blázquez de Pedro functioned as a “middle-man” of sorts in the networks. As the leading anarchist voice in Panama, his writings to Cuba and Spain helped to showcase Panamanian politics and culture to his colleagues abroad. In another sense, Blázquez de Pedro was greatly concerned with the development of culture (literature, arts, schools, etc.) in Panama. At the same time, he was an essayist and poet – a creator of anarchist cultural productions that appeared in Panama, Cuba, and Spain. Thus, when he wrote about his wartime experiences in Cuba, prison in Spain, rent strikes in the canal, or Pan-Americanism and cultural debates in Panama, he was translating the local for global consumption as well as applying the global for local interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

José María Blázquez de Pedro’s story is one of several anarchist biographies in this book. Or, maybe biography is not quite the right term because we rarely have full-scale biographical profiles of these men and women. Rather, we usually have brief encounters and episodic meetings. We see them here and there, or maybe just for an instance and then they are gone. So, what we really have are mini-memoirs that enable us to unravel anarchist networks by tracing people’s physical movements, actions, influences, and both the ideological and geographical trajectories of their writings. Networks did not just appear. They were coordinated by anarchist agency to resist and subvert authoritarian institutions. Some of these people were well known, others were blips on the historical record. As Constance Bantman and Bert Altena note in their volume on transnational anarchist history, “individuals . . . are like cities, the ‘nodes’ in the networks, and they provide an insight into the latter.”<sup>32</sup>

Through coordinated actions of workers from different countries; through fundraising campaigns abroad for local use or local fundraising for use abroad; through transfers of newspapers, books, journals, and

<sup>31</sup> On the role of individuals as cultural “go betweens” and as people who help us unravel the networks, see Constance Bantman, “The Militant Go-Between: Émile Pouget’s Transnational Propaganda (1880–1914),” *Labour History Review* 74, no. 3 (2009): 274–287; and Davide Turcato, “Italian Anarchism as a Transnational Movement, 1885–1915,” *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 407–444.

<sup>32</sup> Constance Bantman and Bert Altena, “Introduction: Problematizing Scales of Analysis in Network-Based Social Movements,” in *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*, eds. Constance Bantman and Bert Altena (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017), 4.

articles; and, through the movement of flesh and blood between nodes – through all of these “transtemporal transfers” of ideas, money, migrations, and even memories – anarchists forged networks as a way to bring forth a new anarchist dawn.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, Caribbean anarchists were not alone. Anarchists elsewhere in the Americas likewise created and benefited from such networks. Steven Hirsch notes how Peruvian radicals joined anarchist migrants and communicated with anarchist organizations in Chile and Argentina.<sup>34</sup> The Buenos Aires Federación Obrera Regional de Argentina was “regional,” not national, as it organized workers along the waterways linking and transgressing the political borders of Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil to create “anarchist federative networking throughout the region,” in the words of Geoffroy de Laforcade.<sup>35</sup> Caribbean anarchists worked in similar ways. From Spain to Cuba to Panama to Cuba to Panama, José María Blázquez de Pedro’s story almost perfectly “bookends” the high era of Caribbean anarchism. He was the most important voice in the Panamanian node of a series of networks that linked the Caribbean to South America, Central America, New York, and Spain. His story is one of dozens of well-known (at the time) and less well-known anarchists who moved around the Caribbean network, published criticism and propaganda, communicated with their radical brethren in the network and beyond, and helped to create a Caribbean anarchist presence to counter priests, politicians, capitalists, and American imperialists in the three decades following the Cuban Independence War.

<sup>33</sup> I wish to acknowledge Achim von Oppen and Christine Hatzky, who offered these ideas about transtemporal transfers and network intentions respectively in their closing remarks at the “Entangled Spaces in the Americas: Concepts and Case Studies” workshop at Bielefeld University in Bielefeld, Germany, April 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Hirsch, “Peruvian Anarcho-Syndicalism: Adapting Transnational Influences and Forging Counterhegemonic Practices, 1905–1930,” in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Post-colonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, eds. Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010), 267.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffroy de Laforcade, “Federative Futures: Waterways, Resistance Societies, and the Subversion of Nationalism in the Early 20th-Century Anarchism of the Río de la Plata Region,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina* 22, no. 2 (2011): 91.