



**Agustín Comotto**, *The Weight of the Stars: The Life of Anarchist Octavio Alberola* (translated by Paul Sharkey), Chico: AK Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781849354080 (paper); ISBN: 9781849354097 (ebook)

This is the English translation of a biographical interview-book that Argentinian writer and cartoonist Agustín Comotto realised with Spanish anarchist Octavio Alberola. This translation is very welcome as there is a vital need to make known anarchism beyond linguistic barriers.<sup>1</sup> While this should not be an excuse for monolingualism, which is a serious limit in the field of anarchist studies, and especially in the Anglophone circuits, given the transnational and multilingual nature of the anarchist tradition, this book tells the fascinating and rich story of an individual who encountered a number of “history’s accidents” (p.1) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century across several countries and a couple of continents.

To a militant reader, the first critique of this work that comes to mind is that it describes a quite unpolitical and intimist view of anarchism, deemed “not an ideology ... [but] a stance vis-à-vis authority” (p.330). One of the results of this setup is a narration that seems too self-centred at some points of the book, especially in the (too many) pages in which the interviewee gives (overly) lengthy details of the innumerable petty controversies and human miseries that afflicted the *Movimiento Libertario* during the “exile” period which spans from 1939 to the end of the 1970s and beyond. As they stand, these parts of the book look more like a way to settle personal scores with some individuals than something of real interest for the reader wanting to discover something on the extraordinary histories and geographies of Spanish anarchism, whose 1936-39 revolutionary accomplishments and successive efforts to survive totalitarian and “democratic” repression would deserve a more generous account.

<sup>1</sup> The original, *El peso de las estrellas: Vida del anarquista Octavio Alberola*, was published in Spanish by Rayo Verde in 2019.

Yet, from Alberola's recollections one can get an idea of the protagonist's lived contacts with some key features of that movement, first of all the importance of *Pedagogía Libertaria* (anarchist education). This notion characterised Octavio's family history as his father, José Alberola (1895-1967), was educated at the Escuela Moderna founded in Barcelona by anarchist pedagogist Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859-1909), a circumstance that, as Comotto observes, "was one of the keys to understanding why José and then Octavio became anarchists" (p.8). The *Pedagogía Libertaria* movement was directly inspired by anarchist geographers Reclus and Kropotkin, also given that Ferrer was one of their collaborators and correspondents (Ferretti 2016). This strand took a political expression in the so-called "educationist" tendency of anarchism, an approach arguing first for spreading consciousness among the proletariat to establish the premises of social change. This was the approach adopted by José, who became himself a "rationalist teacher" in the people's schools organised by the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), the powerful anarcho-syndicalist organisation that would be responsible for the social revolution which occurred in several Spanish regions in 1936 (Breitbart 1978).

Rather than a "man of action", José was an intellectual, "enthralled by the anarchist ideas of Elisée Reclus, Piotr Kropotkin, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon ... [D]eeply influenced by his own experiences as a student of Ferrer ... he made the acquaintance of Paul Reclus—nephew of the anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus ... " (p.9-10). Persecuted like all Spanish anarchists in the agitated 1910s and 1920s, José settled in Fraga (Aragon) in 1933, when Octavio was five years old. In that region, following the popular resistance against the nationalist coup of July 1936, they could witness one of the most extraordinary events in the history of anarchism: the passage of the militias' column led by legendary anarchist fighter Buenaventura Durruti (1896-1936), which fostered collectivisation in all the Catalonia and Aragon villages that they touched in their march toward the warfront (Peirats Valls 2011).

Yet, Octavio was still very young at that time. In 1939, he had to follow his parents who fled to Mexico in the context of the diaspora of Iberian anti-fascists that followed the military victory of Franco's army. It was there that Octavio had his anarchist training, first on Reclus' and Kropotkin's books. Following their inspiration, Octavio developed an interest in the natural sciences which led him to choose to study physics as a way to deal with "life's mysteries ... [and] the universe. We are the universe too" (p.49). This chimes with classic works of Reclus arguing for the consubstantiality of humankind and nature and defining humankind as "self-conscious nature" (Reclus 1905: 1). This idea is implicit in some of Octavio's remarks on humankind as conscious "matter", such as "In a way, the water created in the big bang has come around to expressing itself and, say, trading ideas the way we are now doing. This notion of intelligent water confuses and perturbs me" (p.330). Octavio's interests also recall the interest of early anarchists in the natural sciences as a way of getting rid of religious beliefs about the world's origins. Asked by Comotto whether there was a relation between physics and anarchy, Octavio responded affirmatively, because "Society is a stage in the evolution of matter" (p.51). It is from Octavio's accounts on his stays in the San Angel lava fields in Mexico to watch the stars and reflect on these matters of cosmic order that Comotto takes the book's title and the accompanying illustrations, which well exemplify the Alberolas' educationist intellectual background.

Yet, the "accidents of history" rendered Octavio an outstanding "man of action". In touch with the Spanish anarchist diaspora in Mexico, and a collaborator of CNT journals, mainly published in France where most Spanish anarchists resided after the war, Octavio travelled back to Europe in 1957. From that moment, his life looked like that of the protagonist of an adventure novel. Between France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and the several countries where he was pushed by the necessities of clandestine life, Octavio became a key exponent of the *Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias* (Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation) and *Defensa Interior*, the

clandestine group in charge of organising resistance against the Francoist dictatorship in Spain and abroad, sometimes in connection with anti-colonial and autonomist movements. For instance, noting that some CNT activists were exiled in North Africa, Octavio recollects their contribution to anti-colonial struggles: “The CNT was in touch with people who were working with the Algerians and fighting against the OAS ... [that] was hand in glove with the Franco government and had ties to the *Brigada Político-Social*” (p.144). When José Alberola was mysteriously murdered in Mexico in 1967, activists’ suspicions fell on such Francoist agents.

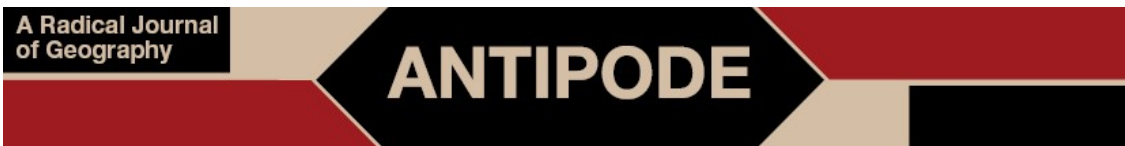
For his part, Octavio was involved in two of the most spectacular actions of the 1960s: one of the numerous planned (and failed) attacks on Franco in 1962, and the (successful) kidnapping of Monsignor Ussia in Rome in 1966. While attempts to shoot dictators such as Franco and Mussolini were a key characteristic of anarchist antifascism but failed each time for a variety of reasons, the kidnapping of Marcos Ussia, Spain’s diplomatic representative in the Vatican, that Alberola carried out with his comrades of the *Grupo Primero de Mayo* (First of May Group), perfectly matched its targets. Inspired by a similar action carried out four years earlier by a group of young Italian anarchists who kidnapped Spanish vice-consul Isu Elías in Milan to obtain the withdrawal of the death sentence pending on young anarchist student Jordi Conill on which “Franco was forced to back down” (p.115), Octavio and comrades wanted to make a clamorous action that called the attention of worldwide press to the conditions of political prisoners in Spain, as they did in April 1966. In the end, as Comotto notes, “the operation showed that the anarchists conducted themselves very differently from the fascist rulers of that country; indeed, some time later, Monsignor Ussia was forced to acknowledge that he had been treated impeccably” (p. 174), as he was released after a couple of weeks, once the goal of the operation had been reached.

This exposes how Octavio, although quoting him only once (p. 116) in this interview, implicitly shared Errico Malatesta’s considerations on violence as a principle that should be

rejected by anarchists, except for extreme cases of defensive necessity (Malatesta 2014). In fact, when important parts of the European radical Left (such as the Red Army Faction in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy) adopted the tactic of armed struggle to seize power, anarchist groups such as *Primero de Mayo* “utterly refused, right from its inception, to consider the use of physical violence as a method of struggle” (p.192). This was not only an ethical stance but also a matter of political strategy, as anarchism supports mobilisation from below rather than vanguard parties that create a symmetric relation with the state. As Octavio explains: “There was no point mounting violence on the same scale as the state. Getting drawn into extremely violent operations—like Andreas Baader from the German Red Army Faction was—and tackling the state head-on, causing many deaths, made no sense to us” (p.228).

As for Ussia’s kidnapping in Rome, while Octavio laments that this action was not supported by CNT “leaders”, it is worth noting that the Italian anarchist press of those weeks was replete with declarations in support of the action and of the First of May Group. In the journal of the Italian Anarchist Federation, *Umanità Nova*, a senior activist who was internationally respected and would become one of the founders of the International of Anarchist Federations in 1968, Umberto Marzocchi (1900-1986), wrote an editorial where he strongly endorsed the struggle of Spanish anarchists in favour of political prisoners, stressing how “no harm” had been done to the ecclesiastical advisor (Marzocchi 1966).

Finally, once Franco died in 1975, the process of “transition” started, and many of the former exiles came back to Spain in the second half of the 1970s, reactivating the “internal” CNT. In disagreement with the organisation, Octavio remained in France where he carried out intellectual work and contributed to anarchist thought with his publications until today. In 2019, in his nineties, he still had the energy to address Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez with an open letter to claim respect for anti-Francoist fighters in the current memorial politics of the Spanish state.



Once more, in this interview-book, one may regret the abundance of polemical petty anecdotes undermining a number of CNT public exponents, including some serious allegations about certain individuals that are reported as “suspects” without any supporting evidence. Yet, this book remains a resource that opens a number of avenues for the reader who wants to discover more on anarchism—both militant and intellectual.

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