

of Łódź serves to illustrate the bumpy road travelled by eastern cities, their development being interrupted by the collapse of empire, war, revolution, genocide, and dictatorship. Still, amazingly, cities like Łódź have begun to bounce back from some of the worst nightmares of the twentieth century. Thirty years after socialism they are – despite many problems – attractive places for business, academics, culture, and tourism. Yet, they are also haunted by problems familiar from the past: loss of population, a weak state, nationalist politics, and a divided urban public. *From Cotton and Smoke* takes readers on a fascinating journey through Polish urban history. It is recommended not merely for scholars and students of Poland and Eastern Europe, but also for those generally interested in urban studies and the discourse about modernity.

*Jan Claas Behrends*

Leibniz-Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung  
Am Neuen Markt 1, 14467 Potsdam, Germany

E-mail: [behrends@zzf-potsdam.de](mailto:behrends@zzf-potsdam.de)

doi:10.1017/S0020859021000626

HERRERÍN, ÁNGEL. *The Road to Anarchy. The CNT under the Spanish Second Republic (1931–1936)*. [Sussex Studies in Spanish History.] Sussex Academic Press, Brighton [etc.] 2020. xi, 300 pp. £85.00; \$99.95.

In July 1936, the anarcho-syndicalist trade union the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) was instrumental to the suppression of a military coup in several of Spain's major cities and towns. As this abortive coup gave rise to a civil war, the division of Spain was accompanied by a revolution in which the CNT was prominent. This was the “anarchy” to which the present title by Ángel Herrerin, which focuses on the history of the CNT during the Second Republic (1931–1936), refers.

The title is misleading, however, since the author does not present the CNT on the road to anywhere but nowhere in the years preceding the civil war. Presenting a top-down political history of the organization, which will be familiar to specialists in the area, Herrerin depicts the CNT as dominated by a bitter factional dispute that left it beholden to an unrepresentative minority of doctrinaire fantasists, who, “despite having taken the CNT to the edge of extinction, still controlled the organisation” on the eve of the civil war (p. 239). The constructive role it was able to play in the conflict was, therefore, accidental. Herrerin accounts for this apparent contradiction with a single sentence at the end of the book: “The CNT, which had sought via every means possible to bring about the revolution, would see how a military rebellion paradoxically cleared the road to anarchy” (p. 249).

Insofar as *The Road to Anarchy* narrates a pre-history, it is not that of the Spanish revolution, but of the collapse of republican democracy, of which the CNT's infighting and radicalization appear as symptomatic. Born in 1931, amidst widespread jubilation, the young regime, anomalous in the Europe of the 1930s, was unable to consolidate itself. In its early years, under a liberal-social democratic coalition, it failed to rein in the violence of the police in response to strikes in the cities and unrest in the countryside, with fatal consequences. In this context, according to Herrerin, radical anarchists in the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) were able to enact an opportunist takeover of the CNT, unseating

the moderate leaders who had been prepared to give the Republic a chance to stabilize. Consequently, the radicals led the CNT into two poorly supported and doomed attempts at insurrection in 1933, which left the organization greatly weakened and divided. Both the first republican government and the CNT were thus guilty of failing to establish the pact that hindsight judges to have been the more intelligent option for both parties (pp. 250–252).

In this and other judgements, the author's common-sense approach to working-class politics is projected back to a time in which even the moderate CNT leadership of 1931 considered that "Spain was immersed in an 'intense revolutionary tendency'" (p. 55). Herrerín provides ample evidence to establish that, in their bid to remove these more moderate currents, radical anarchists in the CNT resorted on occasion to unsavoury methods based on a misapprehension of their own power. What is missing is any attempt to understand their perspective or the constituencies with whom it resonated.

Herrerín depicts the CNT's membership as falling into three categories: anarcho-syndicalists; anarchists; and the broader mass of workers. Somewhat implausibly, and without reference to how individuals thought of themselves, these categories are presented as largely non-porous and clearly defined (pp. 6–7). This is because, in the present work, "anarcho-syndicalist" and "anarchist" serve as synonyms for, respectively, moderation and radicalism, rather than complex and overlapping ideological descriptors, while workers are thought to be unconcerned with ideological questions. We might wonder, in that case, why during the CNT's anti-electoral campaign of 1933, at the apex of radical control of the organization, "Bullrings, like those of Barcelona or Zaragoza, were filled with tens of thousands of people who came to hear [Buenaventura] Durruti or [Francisco] Ascaso shout out slogans in favour of abstention and march towards 'libertarian communism'" (p. 141). Herrerín's simplistic depiction would be further complicated by acknowledging that radicals such as Durruti and Ascaso were accompanied during the abstention campaign by relative moderates such as Benito Pabón and Valeriano Orobón Fernández. A similar lack of nuance is noticeable in the collapsing of anarchism as a tendency and the FAI as an organization, which leads to a replication of contemporary syndicalist denunciations of the FAI despite the acknowledgement, much clearer in the light of recent research, that several of Herrerín's key "anarchist" actors were not in fact members of the organization during the crucial years of factional dispute (p. 26).

The author's sympathies are with the moderates because they came closer to his own position that "the CNT was a trade union, and its essential goal was the improvement of workers' social, economic and labour conditions" (p. 112). The historical novelty of a mass membership trade union committed to the revolutionary transformation of society and installation of libertarian communism is not explained by recourse to structural or other factors. Instead, any attempt to increase anarchist influence in the organization is considered a duplicitous attempt to drag the CNT away from its true principles. Even the banal advice provided by CNT Regional Secretary of Catalonia Alejandro Gilabert, that anarchists should organize themselves in groups and "undertake common action that is popular with the masses", is presented as part of a broader plot (pp. 106–107). When workers themselves appear to break with the image presented of an economically motivated and ideological neutral mass, as at Figols in 1932 or La Felguera in 1934, such experiments in libertarian communism "from below" are given far less attention than the rhetorical excesses of better-known propagandists, which are assumed to be of greater consequence than concrete experiences.

This is not to say that Herrerín ignores the anarchist (or anarchistic) revolts that took place, which are read through their relationship to the CNT's internal politics. His interpretation of the Republican-era insurrections forms the centrepiece of the book. Contrary to the "historiographical assertion, repeated over and over again [...] that the CNT led three uprisings during the days of the Republic" (p. 72), Herrerín is careful to establish that the revolt of 1932, which led to the declaration of libertarian communism in mining towns in Catalonia, should not be ascribed to the CNT, but to the escalation of a localized strike, while his analysis of the uprising of January 1933 covers the confusion of responsibilities between the CNT's defence committees and national committee. We might dispute the novelty of these findings, particularly given that, in the first case at least, Herrerín is building on the nearly forty-year-old work of Borderias and Vilanova. Yet, insofar as the above assertion remains a common misconception, *The Road to Anarchy* draws on a substantial range of primary sources in providing an effective rejoinder.

Likewise, Herrerín's narration of the struggle for control of the CNT is largely based on primary material, much of which is newly uncovered or underused. It is a pity that some of the more suggestive findings, for example regarding the precise relationship of the confederal defence committees to the unions and to the FAI (pp. 38–39, 79), are not put into dialogue with recent research in this area. Indeed, the thinness of the bibliography is a recurrent problem in establishing Herrerín's contribution to the historiography. When the author delves into less familiar episodes, he is let down by the English translation. For example, the passage explaining the expulsion of the moderate syndicalist Ricardo Fornells from his union is rendered unintelligible by what appears to be an unproofed machine translation of the original Spanish, the pronouns of which are confused in various places (pp. 90–91).

Eschewing both extended analysis and engagement with recent contributions to the historiography, the book's strength is in its use of primary sources, several of which help to shed new light on the CNT's factional disputes and the resources that different actors were able to draw upon. Specialists wishing to follow up on these questions would be advised to consult the Spanish edition, while the more general English-language reader could perhaps look elsewhere. Few concessions are made to the non-specialist in terms of introducing concepts or individuals, while the translation makes for a challenging and occasionally misleading read.

*Danny Evans*

Department of History and Politics, Liverpool Hope University  
Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD, United Kingdom

E-mail: [evansd3@hope.ac.uk](mailto:evansd3@hope.ac.uk)

doi:10.1017/S0020859021000638