

# **Abraham Guillén, Between Bakunin and Marx**

**Anarchism, Socialism, and the Economics of Self-Management**

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Abraham Guillén's name is not well known in the Anglosphere, but this CNT partisan and exile turned journalist, economist and theorist of guerilla warfare is an often unsung hero of the libertarian movement.

## A Brief Biography

Guillén was born in Guadalajara, Spain on March 13, 1913. While a young man he would join the Libertarian Youth (FIJL), the youth wing of the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI) and the CNT. Never pinned down by dogmatism, he even carried a UGT card for a period, arguing for the organisation of workers across political factions.

Guillén was often derided in the anarcho-sindicalist press for his defense of the POUM (Party of Marxist Unification). On the other hand, he was a pain in the side of the POUM and the Spanish Trotskyists, denouncing their refusal to participate in the CNT over dogmatic adherence to Marxism. He believed the CNT was the only potentially revolutionary vehicle in Spain. Later, he would state his belief that if the POUM and Trotskyists had not been so dogmatic, they could have contributed alongside the Friends of Durruti to the overthrow of the CNT leadership and the bourgeois government, in order to establish working class power.

With the outbreak of the Spanish revolution, Guillén joined the militias and found himself on the front lines during the siege of Madrid. After the dissolution of the anarchist militias into the regular army, he fought in a column commanded by the anarchist bricklayer, Cipriano Mera. Fighting right until the end of the war, he was eventually captured by Franco's forces and imprisoned. He was sentenced to death, but this was later commuted to ten years in prison. He managed to escape in 1941, but was recaptured before he could flee Spain. He attempted escape again in 1945 and this time he was successful, making it to France.

By 1948 Guillén emigrated to Argentina. During the Peron era, he worked as an editor for the magazine 'Economy and Finance' using a pseudonym. His dissident writings on economics would become famous after they influenced the Argentine Congress to vote against the policies being pushed on the country by the USA. Guillén would write tirelessly on economics, even ending his career as an economics lecturer at a university in Madrid, Spain.

In 1962 he left Argentina and made his home in Montevideo, Uruguay. While in Uruguay, Guillén would make contact with the Anarchist Federation of Uruguay, or FAU — the longest standing anarchist-communist group in history, who articulated the 'especificismo' school of anarchism.

While Guillén is famous for his association with the armed Marxist group the Tupameros of Uruguay, he was actually very critical of their strategies and tactics. In 1966 the *Strategy of the Urban Guerilla* would be released, and to this day is still illegal across most of Latin America. The only English translation existing is in the Defence Studies department at the Australian National University in Canberra.

According to FBI reports, Guillén had a hand in the development of armed revolutionary groups in Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Though he worked with revolutionaries from Marxist tendencies in these countries, his main association was with the OPR-33, the armed wing of the FAU.

Unlike the Marxist guerillas active in South America, the OPR-33 had a complete focus on working with and defending mass movements. Their main focus was the protection of wild-

cat strikes, factory occupations and demonstrations. In this, they were influenced by the mass-politics roots of the Spanish CNT and the model of the Defense Committees. The OPR-33's most famous act would be the kidnapping of a major Uruguayan capitalist during an industrial dispute.

During Guillén's career as a journalist, he would even come to interview Che Guevara on guerilla strategy. However, the meeting quickly took a bad turn, with the pair arguing about the importance of the urban proletariat and methods of leadership. Despite his significant differences with Che, and his harsh criticisms of the Focoist strategy, Guillén wrote the introduction to the Uruguayan edition of Che's *Guerrilla Warfare*.

Guillén's revolutionary life would span from the defense of Madrid against Franco's fascists to organising with the Tupameros and to arguing with Che Guevara, all the while leaving a legacy of over 50 books on the economic emancipation of the proletariat, anti-imperialism, libertarian military strategy, and the philosophical concept of praxis. As likely to quote Marx and Lenin as Bakunin and Durruti, Guillén is a figure of the libertarian left worthy of remembering.

*A revolutionary commander should not be subject to the myths of the classic [military] strategy, in which all else is secondary to the conquest of space. In the case of the revolutionary, the fundamental strategic objective is not space.*

*The positive force is the will of the people."*

## A Philosophy of Praxis

If one were to sum up Guillén's philosophy in a single word, it would be "praxis." In the *Theory of Violence* he writes: "*A dialectical philosophy must anticipate the revolutionary changes in society not to contemplate, but to change the world. Philosophy is not everything, without action it serves for nothing.*"

From here, everything he writes and does is an effort not only to understand the world, but to change it by action. In the same book he elaborates on this, stating that "*Ideas do not produce revolutions. These emerge at a given historical moment in response to new productive forces which are not assimilated by the existing mode of production. Almost invisibly, material conditions generate the seeds of the new society within the womb of the old.*"

Guillén was, if nothing else, a materialist. His writing was deeply influenced by Marx and he would often advocate Marx's philosophy with Bakunin's practice. Guillén's writing is interspersed with the term "anarcho-marxist." This might seem odd to those of us in the anglosphere today, especially anarcho-communists who are as familiar with Marx as any anarchist theorist, but it is probably a legacy of his earlier life in Spain. Anarchists during the Spanish revolution equated all Marxism with the bureaucratic degeneracy of the Comintern. Nonetheless much of books like *Neo-Marxism and Direct Action* represent a synthesis of Marxist economics with anarchist practice.

Armed with the conception of praxis described above, he also went to immense effort to locate when and where to employ strategies and tactics to develop revolution: "*A revolution is ripe when the objective conditions are supported by subjective ones.*" (*Theories of Violence*, 1965) Books such as *The Agony of Imperialism*, *Imperialism of the Dollar*, *The Economic Dilemma of Latin America*, *Challenge to the Pentagon* and many others would be efforts to analyse the conditions in South America and trigger "*the detonator that sets in motion the majority*" and "*a revolutionary strategy combining all forms of struggle in a total [class] war.*"

Not only was the matter of how to trigger the social revolution key, but the revolutionary content and structures built after the insurrection also mattered: “*if daily life is not transformed, the social revolution has not been made*” (The Dialectics of Politics, 1967) and “*the perpetuation of the old is reflected in daily life: as long as a woman is tied to the kitchen she will remain a slave*” advocating collective forms of organisation and social programs “*without a change in daily existence there is no socialist revolution: bourgeois praxis has not been superseded.*”

Socialism would be democratic, or it would not be at all:

*For a revolution to be true, in the sense of emancipating working people from the oppression and exploitation of the dominant classes, it has to establish a new mode of production, exchange, distribution and consumption and create new social relationships; new and more powerful productive forces; new political forms of popular direct participation; new legal institutions having as their basis the popular jury, new universities and technical schools integrated with industries, agriculture, mining, energy, fishing, the forests and other sectors; new philosophic, political, social, artistic, and cultural doctrines; new conceptions of national and social defence based more on the people in arms (than on a bureaucratic professional army, expensive and wasteful) in order to defend the society, as much inside as outside of it. It is necessary to affirm the system of popular self-defence, since without which there couldn't be a guarantee that self-management will be accepted by a professional army, the latter always having tendencies to stage a “coup” in order to take Power.” (Principles of Libertarian Economy)*

Key to analysis, action and reconstruction was a fundamental concern with economics. In terms of analysis, it is simply honest to say that Guillén is a Marxist: “*Marxism, separated from Leninism, is a theory of capitalist development, its economic laws and contradictions. It is thus a continuation of capitalist economics, since without a self-managed socialism all the rest is capitalism or neo-capitalism. Marx, in Capital, his greatest work, does not say what socialism would be like, only what capitalism is like.*” (Principles of Libertarian Economy) Guillén’s economics focused on the concept of working class economic self management. Perhaps even overly optimistic, he believed in the transformative praxis of democratic participation in workers.

*Marxist and anarchist forms of socialism are reconciled in the socialism of self-management, when organs of production and administration are based on direct democracy and not on the bureaucratic state disguised as an illusory dictatorship of the proletariat.*

*In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marx says that communism constitutes the negation of private property, and, to that extent, human alienation. He believed that with the disappearance of bourgeois property, man would reappropriate his alienated human powers. However, public property managed by the state through a bureaucracy as the dominant elite does not put an end to alienation; it perpetuates it in another form. In order for man to recover his integrity as a non alienated subject, he must manage his own products through organs of direct socialist democracy and an administration of things rather than of man.” (Neo-Marxism and Direct Action, 1967)*

Inspired by the self-managed collectivism he saw during the Spanish revolution, he consistently advocated that this was far more efficient and productive than capitalism or bureaucratic

state planning. Guillén was extremely sympathetic to Lenin and Trotsky as revolutionary figures, and at every step highlighted the material conditions foisted upon them as revolutionaries. Nonetheless, it was in their handling of questions around economics and democracy that he departed ways, believing that their decisions to abandon workers' control for management by the party set the stage for the later culmination of Stalinism.

## Beyond Leninism

[All quotes in this section are from Neo-Marxism and Direct Action, unless otherwise specified]

Guillén professes a profound admiration for the early seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, agreeing that they appropriately led the struggle to sweep away the bourgeois state and implement a new regime of workers power. His tracing of the story of the Bolsheviks coming to power in Neo-Marxism and Direct Action is virtually the same as most Trotskyists. *"During the period of 'war communism' from 1918 to 1920, there was little practical difference between Bolsheviks and anarchists in their revolutionary aspirations. The Bolsheviks had given more than lip service to workers-self management and had broken with European social democracy. To many revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks had become a species of anarchist."*

However, he departs from the Leninists on the occasion of the First Congress of Economic Councils in May to June 1918, where *"it was decided that two-thirds of the directors of enterprises should be appointed by regional councils or the state council, leaving only one-third to be elected directly by workers in each enterprise."* After this, despite previous co-operation, the antagonism between the Left Communists and Anarchists on one side, and the majority of Bolsheviks on the other, had already come to represent different class interests. The new state already marched in retreat from socialism towards state capitalism. Guillén quotes Kropotkin: *"Russia teaches us how not to impose communism."*

While he disagreed with them, Guillén differentiated between what he saw as genuine socialists following in the better footsteps of Lenin and Trotsky and those of what we could today call Stalinists: *"Leninism has suffered most from those who have proclaimed it as revolutionary praxis. It has been reduced to an expression of power politics, planned economic development and techno-bureaucratic authority."*

Regardless, he believed there were theoretical flaws in Lenin's concept of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat that allowed themselves to be exploited by the new bureaucracy of the Soviet regime: *"Any conflict, difference or opposition between the masses and the party, between society and the state, and between factions or dissimilar groups within the party is interpreted as expression of the class struggle. This makes political repression necessary in the name of socialism, but in the actual interests of a bureaucracy or new ruling class."*

Guillén praised Trotsky for his insights in the theories of permanent revolution, and his recognition of the class forces Stalin represented. However he was critical of Trotsky's real failure to break with key mistakes of the Bolsheviks:

*The Left Opposition challenged bureaucratic methods and demanded greater equality and direct democracy at the level of local soviets and individual enterprises. However it was mainly verbal, ideologically weak and incapable of maintaining a coherent position on economic problems until 1927. Owing to the low volume of production and the*

*scarcity of investment capital, the opposition then focused on the absence of “primitive socialist accumulation.” But it delegated the task of socialist accumulation to the state instead of society, which led to replacing the factory councils with a general director ver-  
tically appointed from above. In failing to counterpose the socialism of self-management to the regime of state capitalism, the opposition challenged Stalinism with words instead of deeds. Thus it fell into a trap, leaving the political apparatus of the state free to develop a Bonapartist bureaucracy with the virtual consent of the opposition.*

*In accepting centralised economic planning, Trotsky had no objective, coherent, political and economic alternative to Stalinism. Far from precluding a dictatorship of the bureaucracy, centralising production tends to generate one because the state plans everything, and society nothing. Moreover, centralised economic planning is not the most efficient way to stimulate economic growth. State capitalism can be out-produced by self-managed socialism.”*

While praising Lenin’s grasping of revolutionary strategies, he also believed there were severe limitations to basing South American strategies on the Bolsheviks of 1917; *“At this moment Lenin cannot tell us how to make the Latin American revolution. Our world is different than his.”* The new world was fundamentally different, deeply divided not only by class but by different competing imperialisms. Unlike many Marxists of his era, Guillén made no concessions towards the USSR, China or any Comintern party — *“peaceful co-existence under the mystic symbol of the dove of peace... has replaced the hammer and sickle of the Communist Parties of the West.”* (Dialectic of Politics, 1967)

Instead, he insisted on analysis of the material conditions and class contradictions of each society. To Guillén, the USSR was specifically State Capitalist, *“Under the statist mode of production, whose real expression is the soviet model, the State, a monopoly of the totalitarian bureaucracy, imposes state ownership; dictates wage and price policy; is employer, merchant, banker, police, making laws according to the convenience and interests of the totalitarian bureaucracy”* (Principles of Libertarian Economy) and this was proven by turning to Marx, *“For Marx, the prevailing ideas at any given time reflect the interests of the dominant class — and the Soviet bureaucracy is no exception to this general tendency. The struggle against the bureaucracy represents a new form of the class struggle distinct from the antagonisms inherent in the regime of private capitalism.”*

Though he considered the ruling classes of the Socialist Bloc to represent a bureaucratic capitalist class, he thought that the way Soviet (and Chinese) society were organised by these states would require different strategies and tactics than those under western capitalist regimes. In fact, he believed the development of global contradictions had undermined the classical Leninist model, and that the development of forces meant anarchisms time had come:

*On these matters [the next revolutionary wave] the social and political philosophy of Bakunin complements and completes that of Marx. For our part, we are obliged to explain the present epoch without making a fetish of the past. Neither Marx nor Bakunin can explain contemporary developments in response to nineteenth century problems, even though their works and deeds embody a coherent revolutionary theory applicable to the twentieth century. What survives in ‘anarcho-marxism’ which unites Marx and Bakunin, the philosophy/economist with the professional revolutionary.”*

In fact only the synthesis of the best of both theories could challenge the contemporary development of capitalism:

*In the struggle against the state, Marxism-Leninism is less effective than anarchist-marxism. Without defining carefully the powers of self-managed workers against the bureaucratic apparatus, Leninism is bound to vacillate or fail in its struggle against state capitalism, which is defended with greater tenacity and cruelty than semi-liberal capitalism in the West.”*

While Guillén’s writings on the libertarian model of warfare are interspersed with reflections on anarchist organisation, he never wrote an explicit text on the topic. Recalling his proximity to the FAU and the OPR however, we can reasonably infer that he would have endorsed the especifist model.

## Conclusion

Contrary to popular understanding, much of anarchist-communist analysis has been underpinned by Marxist conceptions of economics and materialist analysis. Famously when Bakunin discovered Marx’s *Das Kapital*, he dropped every other project he was working on and began to translate it into Russian, believing it was the most important contribution he could make to the revolution at the time. Similarly the Italian anarchist Carlo Cafiero wrote a *Compendium to Capital* in 1879 — the only one, in fact, that Marx ever said he liked!

Guillén’s open employment of Marx’s name and theories doesn’t actually mark a break in anarchist-communist politics, except in the explicit employment of the term “anarcho-marxist.” However, what he does represent is a progression of analysis, identifying the particular “state capitalist” features of the USSR and Communist China, and arguing for specific strategies in working class struggle under these regimes.

Guillén’s writings on anti-imperialism are certainly novel in the anarchist canon, though anarchist anti-imperialism itself is not. The attention he paid to military matters reflects the course of his life — fighting in the Spanish civil war then finding himself swept up in the broader wave of armed rebellion against brutal dictatorships in South America. In Australia today these writings might seem abstract and irrelevant, but the world is changing swiftly and libertarian engagement with questions of the defense of revolution and military matters are matters that may become surprisingly relevant again in the future. Perhaps that is an article for the future.

## Books and Pamphlets Quoted;

*Neo-Marxism and Direct Action*, 1967

*Dialectic of Politics*, 1967

*Theories of Violence*, 1965

*Principles of Libertarian Economy*

The only book of Guillén’s works available in English is titled “*Philosophy of the Urban Guerilla*.”



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