



# *The search for Green Freedom*

*Ecological concerns and contributions of  
the Spanish Anarchism (1870-1937)*



*Environmental History. Research proposal  
by Rubén Ferrer Velasco*

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**Abstract**

*This research is trying to identify the main ecological actions inside the Spanish Anarquist Movement between 1870 and 1937, as well as its main concerns and their consequences towards the Spanish environment and the environmental movement itself. The main purpose is expanding the limited historiography about the topic, while studying the possible relevance of the commonly seen as out-dated revolutionary ideas in such an actual concern as ecology. An historical-philosophical approach to the topic will be conducted, while analyzing significant events and discourses around the nature and environmental issues. The final result aims to be an innovative holistic and integrative study on all the relevant Spanish Eco-Anarchism manifestations, that links the philosophical and social movements inside the contemporary green anarchism political theories (such as Anarcho-primitivism, Eco-socialism, Deep Ecology, or Social Ecology) with the last century actions and ideologies. The research will be also innovative in the sense that it will treat previously studied events, but also others which will be analyzed for the first time from an environmental point of view [for instance, the collectivisations of natural resources (crops, water services), the notion of sustainability through the building of cooperative socio-economic networks and the spreading of naturist ideology through Libertarian Schools, such as La Escuela Moderna].*

**Key words**

*Eco-Anarchism – Spain – Environmental History – Libertarianism – Ecology –  
Philosophy - Naturism*

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**1. Introduction & Scientific Background**

In Eduard Masjuan's<sup>1</sup> "*La ecología humana en el anarquismo ibérico*"<sup>2</sup> foreword, Joan Martínez Alier<sup>3</sup> asks:

*“Will there be an open debate? Didn't they decide, a long time ago, the rightists and even more the leftists with access to power, that Anarchism was a primitive rebelliousness, with no actual political interest? How is it possible that the anarchists (or some of them) were also ecologists, something that is so actual?”*

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<sup>1</sup> Eduard Masjuan is Professor of History at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

<sup>2</sup> **Masjuan, E 2000.** "*La ecología humana en el anarquismo ibérico*"; Barcelona: Icaria Ed. 504p.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Martínez Alier is Professor of Economics and Economic History at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and past-president of the International Society for Ecological Economics.

Following Martínez-Alier and Masjuan's misgivings, the present research considers that eco-Anarchism is such an unprecedented topic in our historiography that needs to be revised and approached from a new theoretical framework. There are plenty of books about political and social history of the Spanish Anarchism in the last century<sup>4</sup>, as Spain, and more concretely Barcelona, have been considered the international core of the Anarquist movement by many relevant intellectuals, like Murray Bookchin, George Orwell, or Noam Chomsky, for instance<sup>5</sup>. But Masjuan's book (2000) was probably the first one that treated this key part of our history from a rigorous ecological perspective, focusing basically on the urbanism, the neomalthusian concerns and the naturist ideologies of the Spanish Anarchism. Since it, few scholars such as Josep Maria Roselló (mainly philosophers and sociologists), have been conducting interesting studies on the topic, remarking the importance of it<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Description and objectives of the project

The present research aims to expand and complement Masjuan and others' previous views.

*Firstly*, analyzing the political actions carried out by the Anarchists during their intend to build a new socioeconomic order in the last century (specially during its first half<sup>7</sup>); obviously, only actions which could have ecological/environmental concern or repercussion will be treated. The research will focus on the less studied events (from this environment perspective), with the natural resources/agrarian collectivisations<sup>8</sup> as main area of study, but also in the anarchists' plan to build cooperative socio-economic networks, the design of new ecological urban patterns, and the diffusion of naturist ideology in libertarian schools like "*La Escuela Moderna*"<sup>9</sup>.

The *second aim* of the project is identifying, analyzing and classifying the main concerns/ideas that were present behind these actions, thoughts which could also be considered as part of the eco-anarchist ideology.

<sup>4</sup> On the history of the Spanish Anarquism, see (for instance):

**Peirats, J, 1971.** "*La CNT en la Revolución Española*"; París: Ruedo Ibérico. 3 vol. **Nettlau, M. 1935,** "*Anarchy through the times*". London: Gordon Press.466p.

<sup>5</sup> **Bookchin, M. 1977** "*The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*"; New York: Harper and Row. 316p. **Orwell, G. 1938.** "*Homage to Catalonia*"; London:Mariner Books. 232 p. **Chomsky, N. 2005.** "Chomsky on Anarquism"; Oakland:AK Press. 256 p.

<sup>6</sup> Other previous interesting books on the topic: **Roselló J M, 2005;** "El naturismo libertario en la Península Ibérica (1890-1939)". Bilbao:Ed. EZ. **Roselló J M, 2006;** "La idea naturista. Desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días",Barcelona: Ed.Cedel. **Ortega C 2005;** "Anarquism, Nudism, Naturism". **Diez X 2006;** "La insumisión voluntaria. El anarquismo individualista español durante la Dictadura y la Segunda República (1923-1938)"; Acracia,Geminal 1.

<sup>7</sup> It is assumed that, after the "Jornadas de Mayo" and subsequent events, the anarchist influence in Spain declined substantially.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance: **Souchy, A. Folgare P, 1937;** "Colectivizaciones. La obra constructiva de la revolución española". P.de Indio.192 p.

<sup>9</sup> About La Escuela Moderna and its founder, see for instance: **Archer W, 2001;** "The Life, Trial, and Death of Francisco Ferrer" University Press of the Pacific. 380p. **Ferrer y Guardia F, 1900;** "La Escuela Moderna"; Barcelona: Tusquets. 150p.

Finally, as the *third* and probably most interesting purpose of this project, the research will try to study how these past actions/ideas have influenced the schedule of other more contemporary movements with actual relevance or interest. This would show that these old revolutionary voices of the anarchists, which are commonly seen as “out-dated”, perhaps still do have importance at the present, as they could have anticipated and shaped many of the actual ecologist concerns. And maybe, who knows, someone is even able to find points in the last century Spanish eco-anarchist agenda that can be still applicable to the construction of new socioeconomic or ecologic models.

Although the present research will expand and complement the previously cited books and studies it is important here to emphasise the originality of it, which will be innovative in two senses: form and matter. On the one hand, it will be new in the form, because the results will be presented in a general holistic and integrative way, trying to compile all the relevant manifestations of the Spanish Eco-Anarchism in the twentieth century, previously studied by others or not, and link them directly with the contemporary environmental philosophical and social movements. But, on the other hand, the research will also be original in the matter, as it will analyze relevant events and actions that have not been reviewed yet from an historical perspective that integrates philosophical and environmental approaches: the collectivisations of natural resources (crops, water services), the notion of sustainability through the building of cooperative socio-economic networks and the spreading of naturist ideology through Libertarian Schools, such as La Escuela Moderna.

### **3. Methodologies and sources**

The study will focus on the Spanish Anarchism, and will cover the time frame between the first tumults of anarchist reactions in the 1870s and the drop of the Anarchist influence after the “Jornadas de Mayo” in 1937. This chronological framework is optimum as it suits with what could be named “The Golden Age of the Spanish Anarchism”. In order to achieve the three main objectives of the project, an historical approach to the presence of ecological/environmental concerns in the anarchist actions/ideology will be conducted. While doing the research, consequently, environmental history will simultaneously feed and be fed by other more common historical approaches, like the social, the economic or the political ones. Moreover, a philosophical approach will be implemented, necessary to understand the nature and evolution of the studied ideas and discourses. Of course, the research will be done through different kinds of available written sources, mainly primary, but also secondary and tertiary. In order to improve the quality of the study and control the possible bias, I will intend to use a wide range of sources, not only broad in number or in variety, but also sources coming from different stakeholders, not necessarily pro-anarchists. I will work keeping always in mind that it is a scientific job what is being done here; but, as being objective is impossible by definition when writing about anything, even when doing science, all the information used and given will be contextualized and analyzed from a critique and crisscrossed point of view.

The “Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation” (Madrid) possibly holds the largest archive of anarchist books in Spain (more than 5000) but also documents, pictures, stickers, posters, movies... of unquestionable interest. There are also other archives in Spain where useful information is available, like some other local libraries belonging to the CNT, the Spanish National Archive of Salamanca and the National Archive of Catalonia, both of which possess much relevant data from the Spanish Civil War and previous periods. Several newspapers, books, and other printed materials can be found in the mentioned libraries or in many other ones all around Spain. Of course, secondary and tertiary sources will be powerful background support, specially scholarly and grey literature<sup>10</sup>. Iconographic materials (photographs/maps) can also be used, if available, in order to compare spatial distribution/organisation of concrete urban/rural areas, for instance. A key point here is talking about local information. Despite the fact that the research aims to reach global conclusions, it could also be interesting and useful to focus some points of the study in villages where anarchist local action achieved success (like collectivisations in Franja de Aragón, for example). Local archives from town councils can therefore be of our interest, too. Even also some data can be found in some of the collectivised companies’ private archives. Moreover, oral history will also be useful. I will try to contact people who directly or indirectly participated in the analyzed events (CNT members, students of la Escuela Moderna, citizens of villages under anarchist control, or even other relevant actors such as priests, members of other leftist or rightist parties, workers at collectivised companies) and transfer relevant questions to them, with the intention of having a more complete picture of the studied themes.

### 3. Research plan and results

The main results of this research will be, first, a book called: “The search for Green Freedom. Ecological concerns and contributions of the Spanish Anarchism (1870-1937)” and, second (if the deal is accomplished), the homonymous documentary film. I hope they can be both published in English and Spanish. While staying at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, it will be possible for me to perform the previously described research, focusing on the next planned list of themes.

#### *“The search for Green Freedom. Ecological concerns and contributions of the Spanish Anarchism (1870-1937)”*

1. *Introduction.*
2. *Building a new ecological socio-economic order.*
3. *Agriculture and anarchy in the rural areas.*
4. *Collectivisations. Resources, Equality, and Distribution*
5. *Procreation, neomalthusianism and the issue of population.*
6. *Urbanism. Anarchist view of the city.*
6. *Philosophy of life. Naturism in Anarchy*
7. *Spreading the Idea. Libertarian schools and ecologism.*
8. *Main classification of eco-libertarian ideologies*
9. *What about today?*
10. *Conclusions*

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<sup>10</sup> A brief summary of this bibliography is provided at the end of this proposal.

Of course, the chapters and their organisation will be revised and changed during the realisation of the research, depending on the obtained results. I expect, as it is particularly an ambitious and serious project, and in general the historical job is methodologically slow, that this research plan will take at least two years to be performed, with one more year for the possible elaboration of the documentary. It will also be promising to present the results globally through Internet, building a proper webpage, or presenting concrete and clear results through shorter articles. For local achievements and results, it will also be possible to inform and collaborate with the helping institutions.

I imagine that you, as a researcher, have a deep interest in environmental thought/history and are also concerned about its implication with other social and political issues. I also hope that you find attractive (or perhaps just useful for your current research areas), the idea of studying the perception of Nature from this historical notion of freedom.

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*Provisional Introductory Bibliography*

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