

Compañeras y compañeros: Salud.

As the author of this paper which is being presented for discussion at the Anarchist Summer Gathering in Brisbane I must clarify that I am neither conveying anything new nor original. Everything I am expressing in the following paragraphs is the product of an accumulated experience in the struggle to promote the anarchist ideal based on what I have learned from books and compañeros as well as my personal experience from within the exiled libertarian communities through the course of my life initially in the North African territories, in Australia and in Spain during the reconstruction period of the libertarian movement.

My main concern however is to ensure that no one misconstrues the following paragraphs as an intention on my part to glorify certain events I have personally lived and experienced or, the memoirs of compañeros I have been fortunate enough to share my life with. It is not my intention to transcribe a historical document, instead I shall endeavour to convey as truthfully and as modestly I possibly can my impressions of a popular revolutionary social transition which was also exported into exile, and has been misrepresented disfigured and intentionally twisted by so many of the so called "classical historians".

There is a very old Spanish proverb which says "the conveying of historical events should be written after all the central characters of the said event have passed away". In other words, this is the only way the writing of history can be impartial and yet it is a difficult objective to achieve when the subjective passion dictates the flow of the pen. Regretfully, this proverb has failed miserably because many academic historians that have written on accounts from the past have littered their pages with errors, lies and deception.

I now hope to be able to put into words the valuable significance on the development of the "Ateneos Libertarios" that is "The Libertarian Community Houses" or "The Libertarian Centres".

The word "Ateneo" is derived from the Greek goddess of wisdom Athena. According to this terminology, the "Ateneo" is a community centre from which culture spreads. In Spain since the mid-19th century a tradition evolved towards the establishment of such Ateneos (community houses) within which cultural activities would be engaged, with the motto being "culture as a means for the emancipation of the people".

These Ateneos were given many different names depending upon the members that were involved in setting them up as well as the activity proposed for the Ateneo to follow, thus the various names as identified hereunder:

Ateneo Libertario - *Libertarian Community House*

Ateneo Popular - *Popular Community House*

Ateneo Anarquista - *Anarchist Community House*

Ateneo Sindicalista - *Trade Unionist Community House*

Ateneo Racionalista - *Rationalist Community House*

Ateneo Obrero - *Workers Community House*

Universidad Popular - *Popular University*

Many of these cultural centres were from their inception strongly linked to anarcho-syndicalism and could be considered as its cultural branch, one of the founding militants of the CNT, Anselmo Lorenzo, insisted that the first task to be completed by the federation of each locality was the setting up of a libertarian Ateneo.

Throughout the first four decades of the 20th century libertarian "Ateneos" spread throughout the peninsula, and the number of participants dramatically increased. In many of them, schools for the children of workers were established incorporating the most advanced teaching methods (following the "racionalista" program of the Escuela Moderna). Some, due to their worth and the number of constant participants, have cemented a place in the Spanish history pages of education, an example the "Escuela Natura del Clot" in Barcelona which operated until the end of the Civil War.

One could therefore easily assume that these libertarian “Ateneos” represented the ideal popular university for the working class of all ages, where they would acquire the cultural formation that had been denied to them by their social status. They also served as a meeting place for the people of the neighbourhood, where they would; debate, get to know each other; develop further links within the “sindicato” (union) and discuss with others -in an endeavour to resolve- the difficulties and problems they confronted daily both at work and within their residential neighbourhood.

It was also the first time that many working women found a place where they were treated as equal to men, where they went to learn, and where they were exposed to the libertarian ideals. The success of the libertarians “Ateneos” was overwhelming, contributing to the development of a caring and compassionate working class culture, in many ways it could be said that the “Ateneo” replaced both the State and religious orders in the role of education.

The most common activities within the libertarian “Ateneos” during those years were: theatrical performances with the performing groups evolving from within the “Ateneo”, poetry recitals, lectures and debates on different topics (some were political and confrontational, others only reflected a cultural and educational content in a neutral way and without trying to moralize: giving much importance to hygiene as a preventative to illness; conveying the value of contraception and sexuality; some were about geography, history, as well as so many other topics.) The majority of the “Ateneos” also had a “Grupo Naturista” (a naturalist group) encouraging vegetarianism, nudism, promoting campaigns against bullfighting, tobacco and alcohol as well as organising hiking trips to the mountains. The “Ateneos” that had established schools for the children of the neighbourhood also made sure that the teachers were remunerated by organising fund raisers. Literacy classes for adults were also held at night. One of the main goals of each “Ateneo” was also to establish a magnificent library, which in quite a number of localities ended up being larger than the Civic Public Libraries. This phenomenon of cultural diffusion was more

than justified, one only has to recall that in 1930, it was estimated that between one third and one quarter of the Spanish population was illiterate. And of course what they achieved was only possible with the co-operation of other libertarian “Ateneos”. They were very much aware to the need of solidarity and regularly helped each other initiating a multitude of Federated projects between “Ateneos”.

The heyday of the libertarian “Ateneo” took place before and at the beginning of the civil war, with hundreds of them blooming in all the suburbs, districts, towns and villages of the Republican Spain. The city of Valencia had 15. In Madrid, there were 30. Whilst in the region of Catalonia there were 200. Unfortunately they always suffered from fiscal scarcity; they witnessed and saw their young members being progressively recruited as the war advanced and their membership being reduced to non-combatant men and women. When the war ended the “Ateneos” were abolished. The most famous “Ateneo” of that period was the “Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular” in Barcelona, which came to have 26,000 associates, all the books from its library were burnt in the Ramblas by the falangists as soon as Franco's troops occupied the city.

Three of the Spanish anarchist refugees that settled in Melbourne in the 1960's were involved in establishing libertarian centres in the peninsula during the 1930's.

José Robert - participated in establishing the “Ateneo de Sants” in Barcelona.

Juan Beneito Casanova - participated in establishing the “Ateneo Obrero de Alcoy” and was a member of the Naturalist Society of Alcoy.

Vicente Ruiz Gutiérrez - was involved in establishing the “Ateneo de Divulgación Social” and the “Ateneo Libertario”, both located in Málaga.

A multitude of books have been written regarding the activities of the spanish refugees in exile. Unfortunately not too many pages have been transcribed regarding the sacrifices and dedication by the nucleus of libertarian families exiled around the globe with their endeavours in establishing within their new

environment libertarian centres. Following the end of the Second World War these “Ateneos Libertarios” flourished throughout France, Belgium, Holland, the various Latin American countries as well as the North African countries of Algeria and Morocco.

Within the next few paragraphs I shall endeavour to reflect my recollection of the establishment of such an “Ateneo” in the coastal city of Casablanca-Morocco.

Devoted to the principles of developing a cultural centre with very restricted economic means but with a lot of drive, the exiled libertarian community found the appropriate premises, located in the basement between 47 and 55 of the Rue Claude Bernard - Casablanca, at the beginning of 1959.

Five compañeros had to sign an agreement with the Moroccan authorities accepting responsibility for the premises. They were Jimeno, Fernández, Congost, Valles and Laborda. In addition a group of fifty libertarian families undertook to contribute an additional 50 francs a month to assist with the payment of the rent as well as other unforeseen expenses during the process of setting up the centre and opening the doors. It was agreed that the “Ateneo” would be called “Asociación Cultural Armonía”. I can still recall that first opening night (following quite a few months of going to the centre every evening with my parents and all the other families to ensure that the premises were painted, cleaned, class rooms built, a stage was also built as well as a café counter) for which we had to hire folded chairs because the grouping could not afford to purchase them.

More than half a century has elapsed and I can still close my eyes and visualise the lay out of the premises in front of me. The entrance at ground floor level was a respectable sized foyer with wide stairwells descending into the basement which we as a community had converted into our “home away from home”; as you entered the basement immediately on your left stood a brick counter decorated with colourful tiles with an espresso coffee machine at one end and a refrigerated display cabinet. Sandwiches, tortilla (potato

omelette), cakes and biscuits, coffee, mineral water and fruit juices and the fruits in season could be purchased at more than reasonable prices. (It was unanimously agreed during one of the initial meetings for the establishment of the “ateneo” that no alcohol would be permitted on the premises). As you looked away from the colourful counter doing a 180 degrees sweeping view you could see the wall on your left covered floor to ceiling with book shelves as well as a few large tables at which one could sit and read or chat. The rest of the floor space within this immediate area which by the way was quite sizable could easily accommodate 500 people sitting on fold away chairs facing a large stage which was to your right. As you walked past the stage and turned down a corridor on your right you would find 10 rooms, 5 on either side which were used for the evening classes. Upon exiting this corridor to your right you had the storage rooms and the toilets.

The activities undertaken by the members of “Asociación Cultural Armonía” ranged from, evening courses (which included History, Philosophy, Mathematics, Motor Mechanics, Sowing and Knitting, Languages -French, English, Classical Greek and Arabic, Esperanto-, Cooking, Typing, Literature and Drawing to only mention a few); Theatre; lectures and conferences; meetings and discussion forums with topics ranging from social, economic to scientific issues; buses were hired and picnic trips were organised to either the beach or the country side; children's festivals; movie nights; at the ground floor foyer the display of a monthly mural newspaper was prepared by the grouping of the libertarian youths; an annual bulletin was published; a library with more than 1,000 books; annual literary presentations encouraging members to write essays on any topic as well as regular family evenings with the motto “do not have dinner at home tonight”. By 1961 this libertarian centre had a membership of 200 families and almost the same numbers of families were made welcome during different activities held within these walls reflecting the words that were painted above the newspaper mural in the foyer which said: “Welcome, this is the house of the exiled and the wind.”

Unbeknown to me at the time, this was a place that I would cherish for the rest of my life. For it was in this basement, where I attended and experienced a libertarian pedagogic environment and where I began my involvement towards the libertarian ideal. It was in this basement where I gave my first talk, and where I first met the compañeros Miguel Celma, Ramon Liarte, Federica Montseny and Germinal Esgleas.

Following the death of Franco in November 1975 quite a number of libertarian “Ateneos” began to re-emerge throughout the peninsula. Although their principle function no longer was that of educating the population or school age children as before the eruption of the social revolution.

Regrettably new issues had emerged which are still very relevant now a days, such as social, urban, and labour related problems within the neighbourhoods that can be dealt with and debated at the assemblies/gatherings of the “Ateneos”, often in collaboration with the Neighbourhood Associations or the “sindicato” CNT-AIT. Thus people are coming back to the libertarian “Ateneos” which are re-surfacing as community meeting centres, cultural centres and locations from which strategical action can be planned. The concept was gradually re-introduced in conjunction with the Neighbourhood Associations, during the period that has come to be known as the “period of disenchantment”.

In closing, what must be understood is that the Libertarian Ateneo is not only a centre for culture and leisure but a space within which debate and development of social awareness have always been encouraged in an endeavour to do away with the attitude of apathy and indifference. Its activities have always been orientated with the aspiration of reaching society at large not by preaching the libertarian catechism, but by putting into practice the ideology we as libertarians have embraced.

And yes, the establishment of Libertarian Ateneos have undoubtedly been carried out by anarchists, for when compiling the constitution by which these libertarian community

houses would operate they would ensure they maintained their financial independence, by organising fund raisers, community kitchens etc., thus avoiding any political influence or manipulation. Upon opening the doors, the community would not be excluded from the decision making process if they were not libertarians, to the contrary, they were encouraged to participate in the self management of the centre. The reason for the success and continued relevance of the “Ateneo” is that its functionality is determined during an assembly of its members with everyone contributing to the debate, determining the path and activities to be implemented for the next agreed period, allocating the task to be completed by each individual and thereby putting into practice the concept of horizontal democracy.

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