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Emergency Anarchist Dictionary

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At a time when dissent is deemed suspect, coming across an Emergency Anarchist Dictionary in a bookshop or library, let alone in the hands of a reader, is an incitement to freedom. During the recent Bogotá International Book Festival we chatted with Juan Manuel Roca (JM) and Ivan Dario Álvarez (ID) the authors of the Diccionario Anarquista de Emergencia.

Why a dictionary? And specifically why an Emergency Anarchist Dictionary?

JM: There is a wide variety of dictionaries .. stamp-collectors', etymological, body language .. so why not an anarchist dictionary? We had two reasons for doing it: one, to give the lie to those who reckon that anarchism is caught up with terror and nothing more; and, secondly, for fun. We spent many a happy hour sifting through the "fragments" we were gathering from our reading, re-reading and random discoveries, for randomness is anarchistic too. And why 'emergency'? Because whenever there is an historical bottleneck, when we come to a social crossroads as serious as the one we are facing not just here as Colombia but also, more essentially, as private individuals, it is one of the most terrifying times we could ever experience, in essence because of the extent of intellectual stupefaction that has the majority voting for its own executioner, without a murmur from the minority. Then again, when there is no escape, as when fire breaks out inside a building, one always looks for some emergency exit. Hence this Emergency Anarchist Dictionary.

How did the dual authorship work out when it came to deciding what would and would not go into the dictionary?

ID: There was no set plan, it was more a question of wanting and obsession and the dialogue we were engaged in with the texts. The unforeseen was defining the boundaries of the book and we were bumping into a libertarian language, because, first and foremost anarchist is a subversion of language. It was a real delight working alongside Juan Manuel because, not only is he a poet, but he has an extraordinary sense of humour. The dictionary is a collective work because it gathers together the voices of a range of anarchists and anarchist tendencies, as well as people who, whilst not professing to be anarchists, do have the anarchist spirit.

There is an indissoluble connection between art and anarchism. In this regard, who would the crucial figures in the 19th century anarchist movement have been?

JM: Talk about the links between anarchism and art would take us on to a history of the very best that human thought has to offer. Federico García Lorca said that every poet is an anarchist and I reckon every artist is too. In the early days of 19th century anarchist thinking, there is one figure that I find moves me, namely, Louise Michel, one of the most extraordinary heroines mankind has produced, a woman with a capacity for commitment found only in anarchists, but at the same time, she wrote poetry in praise of anarchy, without ever stooping to the simplicism we associate with the pamphleteer. I reckon that in terms of talent she is very close to Rimbaud, a contemporary of hers. And then there are the figures such as the impressionist Pissarro, some of the surrealists, plus, of course, Antonin Artaud, Benjamin Péret, the poets of the Beat Generation and theorists of aestheticism like Herbert Read. Viewed through a rearview mirror, the path of art is awash with the disgruntled.

ID: They say that political anarchism began in the 19th century with Proudhon and Godwin, but we could trace a pre-history of anarchism. The histrionics of Diogenes, 'The Man in the Tub', prefigures what we today would refer to as the 'happening' and comes close to a strand of anarchist thought known to us as anarcho-individualism which is a repudiation of power and which employs words to de-mystify the sacred cows of the day. Diogenes delighted in mocking Plato. Godwin was on close terms with the romantics and was an influence on poets like Shelley, Blake and

Coleridge. Proudhon was linked to painters of the calibre of Courbet. Baudelaire was an admirer of Proudhon. Bakunin was great friends with Wagner, Turgenev and George Sand. Kropotkin had ties to poets such as Mallarmé and the symbolist writers who contributed to anarchist publications such as *La Révolte*, run by Jean Grave. The expressionists, impressionists, surrealists, dadaists, the Situationists, the Provo movement and indeed demonstrations that linked art and politics in the student unrest of the 1960s - people like Abbie Hoffman .. all drank from the fountain of anarchism.

You speak of a contemporary anarchism. Is that possible? What remains of anarchist thought?

ID: I think it is possible. Deep down the prickly, rebellious character lingers on in many facets of contemporary life. Look at the ecology movements; they all have an anarchist strand and swim against the tide of the hypnotic efforts of the great powers who are the very ones who are poisoning the air we breathe. Their roots may go a way back but they have not been forgotten. Henry David Thoreau was undoubtedly the godfather of an attitude to the environment through his book, *Walden*, about living in the woods.

But, looking past the context of a programme in which they try to pigeon-hole anarchism, life is awash with anarchist elements. For instance, chance is anarchistic, we are never really in control and chance bestows great freedom upon us: the cat is an anarchist on a rooftop. A police officer cat (let alone a detective one) is unimaginable [laughter]. The breeze is entirely anarchist, going where it will and needing no visa to slip overnight from one country to the next. And so is time, even if man has invented the mechanical time of the watch. Luis Vidales who would be shocked to find me involved with the anarchists - he having been an orthodox communist - said once that watches let time slip away and the fact is that time will not countenance any government over it. And of course there are the emblematic characters created through the artist's gift - take Don Quixote, whom I see as a great libertarian knight.

JM: Unfortunately, I think that here in Colombia the political imagination has killed its own child. Back in the days when there was a political imagination, for instance, in the early days of the Communist Party in Colombia, through the mighty, lyrical imagination of Luis Tejada, who was misunderstood because the spiritual and mental silence from which Colombia suffers is stunning. In the degree dissertation he wrote on socialism, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán said something brilliant, that our people close their eyes to reality, not so much from fear of what they might see but from fear of what they might not see. Which shows that there is a lack of imagination in our politicians, be they rightwing or leftwing. I believe that what political life in this country needs most is imagination. Imagination means the conjuring up of images and what we need are powerful, collective, meaningful visions. Which a left here that is shallow, obtuse and very often bullying (and therefore overlapping with the right) falls well short of providing.

This being an anarchist dictionary, what room did you leave blank so that the book would be open and susceptible to reinvention?

ID: Take it from me, lots of entries and biographies were left on the editing-room floor. Take, for instance, the words: devil, loneliness, silence .. which could be read in a libertarian light.

JM: Héctor Rojas Herazo said that dictionaries ought to be read as if they were novels. He has an essay about love of the living tongue that is generally speaking not to be found in dictionaries. Dictionaries are like a sort of a taxonomical listing, like entomologists might use, with the word fixed with a pin just the way they might butterflies, though not dragonflies [laughter]. The good point about this dictionary is that we take a lot of liberties by coining new words and playing with the language, but making sure that their roots are not whimsical. One word leads to the next and they might be thought of as opposite shores but they also facilitate the discovery of a third - the imaginative reader. This is a dictionary that raises more questions than it answers. It is not a dictionary designed to dispel anybody's doubts like Corominas's *Etimological Dictionary*, which I adore - I reckon it's the best there is, or the second best, for there's also a splendid little book called the *Emergency Anarchist Dictionary* [laughter].

Emergency Anarchist Dictionary

ANARCHIST: The onlooker who sees what he sees and not what is habitually seen. And is moved to ponder that. - Paul Valéry

BOMB: These days the bomb is the symbol not of anarchy but of totalitarian power. - Herbert Read

WARS: The only sport of kings in which peoples can participate. - Jules Renard

POWER: No power. As little learning as possible and as much taste as possible. - Roland Barthes.

PRINCIPLES: Those are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others. - Groucho Marx

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