

The Life of Anarchist Octavio Alberola

From the Spanish Revolution to today

Rui Preti

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a review of

The Weight of The Stars: The Life of Anarchist Octavio Alberola. Written and illustrated by Agustin Comotto. Translated from Spanish by Paul Sharkey, AK Press 2022

“These notions of Marxism and anarchism have shown themselves not to be serviceable enough, as circumstances have changed and so they need re-elaborating, amplification, or amendment.”

—Octavio Alberola

The Weight of the Stars is the biography/autobiography of Octavio Alberola, a highly articulate and energetic anarchist. At age 94, he continues to participate in a variety of anarchist projects, as well as giving talks and writing books and articles, including for this publication.

Argentine writer and illustrator Agustin Comotto relates how Alberola chose him to help write this autobiography in the form of “a stroll through the events that shaped his life and the chances of a dialogue about them.” They both make clear that Alberola participated in the writing and gave Comotto strong guidance on the topics covered every step of the way.

So, it is more of an autobiography, with a collaborating editor, than a biography that might have been read and approved by the subject after completion.

The result is a rich memoir of events, personal opinions and interpretations of what occurred during his long life, some of which may contradict the memories of other participants or the perspectives of anarchist historians and scholars.

There are several topics open to debate, including how to contextualize and understand the use of violence and its shortcomings. For example, given the absence of large-scale anarchist organizations after the defeat of the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939, young anarchists were searching for new ways of confronting government attacks on anarchists and other radicals. The narrative invites debate about the meaning of revolution and collective solidarity, as well as ideas and choices of how to be an anarchist in the current world.

Some, including Alberola, were involved in various attempts to assassinate the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco from the 1960s on. In the 1970s, Alberola and other young anarchists in his circle, kidnapped prominent celebrities as a way of pressuring European governments to treat radicals better. There was ongoing debate among anarchists about whether this was an appropriate strategy.

This book’s greatest strength is that it leaves the reader with more questions than answers, more challenges than solutions.

Octavio Alberola was born into an anarchist family in 1928. His father, José, was a member of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, CNT (National Confederation of Labor) and actively involved as a speaker at rallies and discussions at social centers. He was trained as a teacher devoted to the ideas and methods of Francesco Ferrer i Guardia’s Modern Schools, including encouraging students to learn based on their interests rather than through fear of physical punishment or social coercion.

Octavio's mother participated with his father in the schools established by CNT members in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s. They were both active in the Spanish revolution of 1936–1939.

When the Republican government fell to the Francoist forces in 1939, the Alberola family fled into exile. Octavio was only eleven when they were able to find refuge in Mexico.

In the late 1940s, while studying at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City, Octavio participated in Mexican anarchist circles as well as the Libertarian Youth and the CNT in exile.

Cubans opposing the regime of the island's dictator, Fulgencio Batista, during the 1950s often congregated in Mexico to plan resistance. As a child of revolutionaries, it seemed natural for Alberola to be among those who helped several groups, including the July 26th Movement led by Fidel Castro and the Student Revolutionary Directory. They also supported the dissident Cuban anarchist movement that was cooperating with the other groups in opposing the Batista regime.

Alberola remembers that he and the other young anarchists generally understood that the July 26th Movement had strong authoritarian tendencies. They recognized both Castro and Ernesto (later known as Che) Guevara as demanding obedience. Even at this early stage, they saw Castro's striving to become a caudillo, a military dictator or strongman. His organization reflected this in its military structure with officer ranks.

However, Alberola believes that Guevara could be understood in a more nuanced way, as "a revolutionary inspired by authoritarian ideas, but with a passion for consistency between means and ends." He believes that this trapped Guevara in a contradiction between his desire for a liberating revolution and his expectation that it could be achieved through the apparatus of the state.

Alberola admired Guevara's striving for "revolutionary authenticity through action, a consistency between ends and means and therefore it was and is a valuable experience when it comes to delving more deeply into reflection on the contradiction between authority and liberty."

Alberola and other young anarchists were hoping that together the various groups would be able to overthrow Batista and establish a democratic republic in which a range of political tendencies, including radical ones, could participate. They were deeply disappointed when this did not come to pass.

In 1959, after the overthrow of the Batista regime, Alberola and his comrades expected the Castro government to be consistent with their revolutionary propaganda, end Cuba's cooperation with Francoist Spain, and help to reawaken the struggle against the Spanish dictatorship. But "Castro did not break the relationship with Franco, and Che Guevara strolled through Spain protected by the Francoist police. Franco and Castro became friends."

Throughout his life, his acquaintances included Garcia Oliver, Federica Montseny, Felix Guattari, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Regis Debray, Stuart Christie, and Rigoberta Menchu.

In the early 1960s, Alberola and other anarchists formed *Defensa Interior* for attacking the Franco regime inside Spain and later he was among those who created the First of May Sacco and Vanzetti Group to engage in anti-Franco actions outside of the country. They found some support in the CNT in exile and the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth for their activities throughout Western Europe and the Americas, including circulating criticisms of the regime as well as offering solidarity for opponents and prisoners.

The clandestine group Alberola and his comrades formed also made some attempts to assassinate Franco. However, despite several tries, they were not able to achieve this goal. Franco died in his bed in 1975.

Alberola notes that the clandestine activities of the 1960s and 1970s "triggered and accelerated joint crackdowns by the Spanish fascist state and Europe's democracies—especially France—out of their fear of possible revolutionary replication" that might be inspired in the youth of Europe.

By the 1980s, Alberola had been arrested a few times in France and imprisoned in Belgium. He decided to end his clandestine life and become engaged in publicizing anarchist ideas through talks, articles, books, and films.

He is currently active with GALSIC, the Support Group for anarchists and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba, and with the Cuban Libertarian Movement in Exile (Spanish acronym MLCE) as well as continuing to write on many topics.

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the Fifth Estate and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning and challenging the status quo.



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