

In the Spirit of Anarchist Illegalism

The Man Who Robbed Banks With A Fountain Pen

Thomas Martin

2025

a review of

To Rob a Bank Is an Honor: Lucio Urtubia, (translation Paul Sharkey) AK Press, 2024.

Lucio Urtubia's name is not well known in anarchist circles. He produced no philosophical or polemical writings, and is mainly remembered for a successful scheme to rob—not with guns, but with fake checks—one of the world's major banks.

While Urtubia and his colleagues were not much interested in classical anarchist philosophy, we can discern resonances with Stirner and Reclus, and he took literally Proudhon's axiom "Property is theft." That was philosophy enough. Illegalism, broadly defined, has been around as long as "legal" has been.

As a form of anarchist praxis it dates from the early 20th century, when the anarchist Bonnot Gang was robbing French banks, inspired by activists like Ernest Bertran and Renzo Novatore.

After World War I such expropriation activities, often combined with various direct actions including attempted assassinations, were continued by anarchists like Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso, operating in Spain, France and Latin America in the 1920s and '30s. They were almost always associated with the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), Spain's alliance of anarchist labor unions and, after the defeat of the Spanish revolution, with anti-Franco activities.

Lucio Urtubia continued this illegalist approach and refined it. The Italian anarchist Alfredo Bonanno (who died in 2023) rejected most forms of organization in favor of the small affinity group, and in practice returned to the basics: armed robbery.

As late capitalism grows ever more efficient in its oppressive tactics, illegalists are emboldened. However, this autobiography is not an essay on expropriatory anarchism. Urtubia did what he thought needed doing, and didn't theorize much.

In *To Rob a Bank*, he doesn't prioritize among the many diverse events of a fascinating life. We learn as much about his childhood and family life as about his notorious career as a bank robber and activist.

The title of his book is a bit misleading as he was rather more than a bank robber. He was born in Spain's Basque country in 1931 to a family involved in smuggling as well as in radical politics, mostly in opposition to Franco's regime which began in 1939.

Conscripted into the Spanish army in the early 1950s, Urtubia was able to steal military food supplies for redistribution to the poor. He worked with, but did not formally join, either the CNT or with the Grupos de Acción Revolucionaria Internacionalista, GARI (Internationalist Revolutionary Action Groups), organizations opposed to Franco. His smuggling activities being detected, Urtubia fled to France in 1954.

As a refugee in Paris, where he spent the rest of his life, he worked as a bricklayer and broadened his activities with anarchist and labor organizations in both France and Spain.

Not much is said about French politics, but a great deal about construction and bricklaying techniques, his marriage and daughter, and the occasional kidnapping and bank robbery. Like many anarchists, Urtubia learned

the printing trade and used his new skill to produce a variety of anarchist broadsheets and newsletters. He also became an expert forger, producing all manner of documents from passports to drivers' licenses over a period of some thirty years starting in the mid-fifties. The profits mostly went to anti-Franco fighters.

The chapters on the revolutionary events of May 1968 in Paris give us the perspective of a proletarian participant, rather different from that of the students and academics—many from privileged backgrounds—who led the strikes. Urtubia worked with several different groups of strikers, where he was needed. He printed posters, introduced speakers at rallies (he was never a main speaker himself). “I felt very far removed from them all, but I can tell you that I was excellent at using my pick to dig up the cobbles and tarmac from the streets.”

The author's most noteworthy undertaking, which brought international notoriety, was the Citibank escapade of the late 'seventies and early 'eighties. He calls himself “the dunce in the pack” of conspirators who came up with the idea of counterfeiting traveler's checks.

None of the money went for personal gain, but to radical and humanitarian causes as well as the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, the Basque separatist group) in Spain and the Black Panthers in the United States. He paraphrases Elisée Reclus to the effect that theft is moral when the proceeds go to social causes. “[S]tealing a poor old lady's handbag is one thing and robbing one of the world's major banks is quite another.”

The scheme was so successful that it brought Citibank to the verge of collapse until one of the conspirators betrayed his comrades. However, anarchist decentralization paid off; the police were never able to find Urtubia's plates, and he eventually made a deal that got him out of prison. Connections with high officials in France's socialist government helped. That seems rather un-anarchist, but he never claimed ideological consistency. Throughout the book, Urtubia comes across as a happy man, comfortable in his work, and a talented storyteller. He knows the victory may never come, but it's the effort that matters.

In 1991, he opened L'Espace Louise-Michel, named for the great anarchist activist in the Paris Commune of 1871.

He did much of the physical work of renovating the dilapidated building himself. This community center is still in operation on anarchist principles, offering, according to its website, “information, orientation, games, a library, community activities, residents' projects, leisure activities.”

See ville-meaux.fr/ then Chercher Louise Michel.

Urtubia is the subject of the documentary *Lucio* (2007), available on YouTube in Spanish, and the more recent Netflix film *A Man of Action* (2022). Both focus on the Citibank scheme, while not denying his anarchist motives. The last section of *To Rob a Bank* explains how the documentary came about.

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