

Premature anti-fascists

Talk at the Memorial to Australians who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic. Canberra, 4 December 2016.

As you might not be able to read the words on my anti-fascist T-shirt, which I bought in Barcelona, they are 'IF YOU CAN'T CONTROL YOURSELF – CONTROL OTHERS.' I needn't name any current manifestations of that condition.

We are here to keep the memory of the volunteers alive in an era when amnesia about past struggles is a cultivated forgetting. How then might we best arouse interest among people who would be pleased to learn about the volunteers but who might not even know that the Civil War happened or have heard Franco's name?

Since our minds are inhabited more and more by a visual culture, one way of engaging attention could be through screens large and small. To that end, I'm going to mention six films, four features and two documentaries. There is a roughly chronological order to their subject matter.

The first is *Belle Epoque* (1992) which took the Oscar for Best Foreign Film next year. Set in 1931, with the end of the de Rivera dictatorship and the fall of the monarchy, its mood expresses the hopes of a middle-class family sheltering a deserter from the Royalist Army. It is a reminder that the Republic established that year was not the exclusive possession of workers, peasants and anarchists. As a film, it is warm and funny, though with shadows of what we now know will follow.

Second is the documentary *Spanish Earth* (1937) directed by the Dutch Communist Joris Ivens¹ and narrated by Ernest Hemingway, which is on U-Tube. It presents the war through the efforts of a village to provide irrigation, a collective effort which can be taken for the wider campaign to water a culture dried out by centuries of repression.

The third film is another documentary, *The Mexican Suitcase*, made in 2011, but dealing with the war years through the lenses of the photographers Robert Capa, David Seymour and Gerda Taro, the last of whom died when she fell from a truck into the path of an oncoming vehicle. We see the terrible situation of the refugees on the beach in France, and follow some of them to Mexico, where we learn that a suitcase holding 4,000 of their negatives has been 'lost' for nearly seventy years with the family of a Mexican General. In a sense, its rediscovery parallels the efforts in Spain to bring into the open the crimes committed during and after the war.

Now to contrast two feature films set in the fighting, Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995), and *Libertarias* (1995). Many more Spanish films are set in and around the war than most Australians are ever likely to know about – including those made to glorify Franco and the Falange.

¹ Ivens came here and directed *Indonesia Calling* (1946) for the Waterside Workers Federation. See Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I*; and the eponymous documentary from John Hughes in 2011 about the making of *Indonesia Calling* and more.

The Loach one is more familiar to Anglophone audiences than the Spanish one. They make a sharp contrast.

Libertarias centres on a platoon of Barcelona women, including a young nun, who go into battle against some of Franco's Moorish command. What happens to them is a bitter lesson in why the male commanders were reluctant to send women to the front line. Loach's depiction of that issue is typical of his romanticised version of the war. *Land and Freedom*, like Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, is the view of an outsider. Indeed, the script could be taken as an adaptation of that reportage into fiction.

Wars are won and lost by killing and being killed. Slogans and songs play their part in sustaining morale but they are no defence against tank regiments and flights of fighter-bombers. Antony Beevor's *The Battle for Spain* should have quieted those, including Chomsky, who imagine that putting politics in command would have turned the tide. Franco ground his way across Spain, never leaving a flank exposed in an inexorable drive sustained by equipment from Hitler and Italy while the appeasers denied the legitimate government access to arms under the deceit of 'non-intervention'. Only early support from Blum's Popular Front in France and the supply of such weapons as could be shipped from the Soviet Union kept the Republic from an even earlier defeat.

When Amirah Inglis² and I talked about *Land and Freedom* she too was critical of its assumption that Franco could have been defeated if only everyone had been armed with the correct political line – Trotskyism or anarchism – and a .303. We talked about the sequence where the villagers are debating not so much whether but how to join together as a cooperative. One old man is holding out. He has no intention of surrendering his patch of Spanish earth. Amirah asked me what I thought the other villagers should have done about him. With the benefit of hindsight and from the comfort of Canberra I could say that, rather than force him to be collectivised, they should have let him go his own way but with the offer of admitting him to the co-op later.

Finally, we come to a feature film set some twenty-five years after the defeat of the Republic, Alain Resnais' *La guerre est fini* (1966) with Yves Montand as a veteran who slips back and forth across the border keeping the resistance flickering. In one sense, the war was over by 1966 and the exiles, as is so often the case, had lost touch with reality in their desire to turn back the floodtide of defeats. Yet in other senses the struggle was about to begin afresh. 1968 was near. Perhaps without intending to, Resnais put this future on screen by what has been credited with being the first use of 'flash forwards'. Even so, the war was still going on in the sense that the regime was relentless with prosecutions and garrotings of its opponents, including workers organising outside the sanctified union structures. In addition, the persecution of gypsies, to which David Boyd bore witness in his 1964 series of paintings. 'Church and State'.

The gulf between watching films from the comfort of a padded chair and the torments of the garrote remind us of the vast difference between the lives most of us can lead in Australia, and did even in the 1930s, and the disasters of war, to apply Goya's

² Amirah was one of the forces behind the creation of the memorial in 1993 and the author of *Australians in the Spanish Civil War* (1987).

phrase to a later havoc. Those differences should chasten the armchair strategists who have never heard a shot fired in anger yet never to tire of laying down the law on how the war should have been fought and won – had only everyone filled their heads with this or that political programme.

How different were the volunteers from around the world who put their lives on the line to do more than preserve the Republic. By 1936, it was clear that another war was inevitable across Europe. The open questions were when, where and between whom? The volunteers hoped to spike the guns of the militarised Right regimes and to stymie the plans to ‘save bourgeois democracy’ by giving Hitler a free hand against the Bolshevik menace and turn Mussolini lose against the Abyssinians.

The Australians whose names are on this memorial were not the only ones who wanted to be on the front line. Many more offered to go. But the leadership of the Communist Party told them to stay at home to combat war and fascism here. So here we are to honour those Australians too. They struggled against fascism in the 1930s only to be persecuted in the 1950s for having been ‘premature anti-fascists’.

At least until prime minister Menzies had the melancholy duty of telling the Australian people that the British Empire was at war with that nice Mr Hitler, ‘Pig Iron’ Bob was not the only one to find consolation in the New Order being imposed across Europe and on the Chinese.

This afternoon is not the time to dredge through the roll-call of Mussolini’s admirers from Brisbane’s Archbishop Duhig who welcomed local blackshirts into St Stephen’s Cathedral to the viciously anti-working class Florence Taylor, now esteemed as the country’s first woman architect.

Instead of reading out a catalogue of such scoundrels, we need to interrogate the significance of ‘fascism’ during the inter-war years. The term is from the Italian for a bundle of sticks bound together, the *fasci*, an emblem that unity is strength, allowing no room for class divisions. What the regimes in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, Rumania, Japan and Latin America had in common was that they were all overt dictatorships of the bourgeoisie to hold back the tide of proletarian revolt that had erupted in the decade before the Bolshevik coup of November 1917. Some of their leaders were modernisers: others reactionaries.

That distinction among the Rightists leads to a ticklish question: in what sense was Generalissimo Francisco Franco a ‘fascist’? We have already given one part of the answer since he was in the forefront of the worldwide class war. But when we burrow into Franco’s mindset, who did he suppose the Communists to be? To him, they were the Freemasons, inheritors of the Illuminati, agents of the Enlightenment against Catholic Spain. The Civil War in Spain did not begin on 17 July 1936 but from the around 1,100 and the *Reconquista*, through the expulsion of the Jews after 1492, the Holy Office of the Inquisition, the Peninsular Wars against Napoleon, the Carlist wars and the regional splits enflamed by the loss of Cuba and the Philippines to the U.S. imperialists after 1898. The alliances on both sides in 1936 make sense only in light of those entanglements. Black Spain was alive beyond the frames of Goya’s final paintings

If Mussolini sets the standard for Fascism, then Fascism is far too modern for Franco ever to have considered himself a Fascist. The Sawdust Caesar was anti-clerical, an erstwhile socialist, an enthusiast for Futurist art, a man addicted to extravagances in politics as in his private life – everything that Franco loathed. For these reasons, B.A. Santamaria was more a devotee of Franco's Spain than of Mussolini's Italy where the Concordat was a political deal, not the breathing heart and soul of a crusading church.

During the 1950s, Opus Dei emerged as the driving force to rescue the Falangist regime from Franco's backwardness. They were the modernisers, the technocrats, who sought to preserve the Falange by ensuring that while everything changed it would once more remain the same.

We all gain a certain satisfaction from shouting 'fascist' at the television. That innocent pleasure is no substitute for a scientific analysis of fascism then and now. This much is clear: if we were living under fascism today, or anything like it, we would not be able to meet like this. Gatherings of more than three would be banned, as Florence Taylor urged in the 1920s. If the Gaudia Civil did not swoop to arrest us, Flagantist Blueshirts would disperse us, to put it politely.

So how are we to understand the recent anti-terrorism laws, the anti-union laws, the attacks on the ABC, on the Human Rights Commission? If that's not creeping fascism, what is it? The answer should be obvious. We are faced by the normal workings of a covert class dictatorship, otherwise known as bourgeois democracy. By contrast, fascism was one species of overt class dictatorship. Bonapartism was another. Each form serves the needs of the exploiting classes at specific times and places.

As the target of both overt and covert dictatorships, activists have a duty to be able to tell the difference. In addition, we owe it to our class to remain alert to how the agents of capital respond to its shifting needs. Since 2007-8, those needs have centred on the blockage to expansion at the economic level with the concomitant social and cultural disorder at the political level. Far from mounting an attack on the excess capacity that is at the root of the economic implosion, governments and corporations have, in the judgement of the Bank for International Settlements, postponed the day of reckoning only to make its inevitable arrival so much the worse. The agents of capital are not game to launch a full-scale purge debt and excess capacity because they fear that the electoral cover for their covert dictatorship will shatter completely. Syriza, Podemos, Brexit, Italy's 'NO' and now Trump are signs that the centre cannot hold in the old way.

The second last thing that the agents of capital want is to have to replace their covert dictatorship with an overt one. The last thing, of course, is to lose control of the means to exploit the rest of us. That prospect drove them to the fascisms of the Twenties and Thirties. Today, proletarian revolution leading to socialism is not a prime concern. Rather the fear is the splintering of the social, cultural and political orders on which their rule has relied since the 1940s. The future is not under their control. The economic smash cannot be postponed indefinitely. As that crisis erupts, the Masters of the Universe will juggle between the present covert dictatorship and installing forms of an overt dictatorship the exact impress of which is as yet unknown both to them and to us. The actualities of their response will not be those of Mussolini or Franco. New things happen. The blows to be inflicted on working

people will not be lessened by allowing the past forms of repression to weigh 'like a nightmare on the brain of the living' by crying 'Fascist' when a novel form of overt dictatorship appears.

Humphrey McQueen