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Review of Matthew Kerry, Unite, Proletarian Brothers! Radicalism and Revolution in the Spanish Second Republic, 1931-1936

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Kerry, Matthew, *Unite, Proletarian Brothers! Radicalism and Revolution in the Spanish Second Republic, 1931-1936*. RHS New Historical Perspectives Series. London: University of London Press, 2020. pp. 249.

Unite Proletarian Brothers represents a new generation of labor history that revisits familiar topics with fresh frameworks and insights. In this case, the book re-examines the origins and consequences of the October 1934 insurrection in Asturias, one of the most important labor uprisings in Europe since the Paris Commune. The event was the subject of a classic study, *The Road to Revolution in Spain: the Coal Miners of Asturias, 1860-1914*, published in 1987 by Adrian Shubert, who served as the external examiner for Kerry's doctoral thesis. In addition, the October 1934 insurrection remains a touchstone in the polarized debates about responsibility for the Civil War. In the right-wing master narrative, October 1934 was the beginning of a slide into chaos and disorder, propelled by the left's abandonment of democracy. For the left-wing historical narrative, October 1934 was a response to the rightward tilt of the Republic in the context of fascist victories in Germany and Austria. Kerry aims to transcend this left/right blame binary and delve into what he calls the relational dynamic of politics at the local level in the coalfield communities. In charting the "how" and "why" of this dynamic process of radicalization after the establishment of the Second Republic in April 1931, Kerry also diverges from the classic labor history approach of Shubert's book, which focused on the long term process of class formation and trade unionism, in the mode of classic "red city" and mining community local studies.

Instead, Kerry analyzes the roots of radicalization in the shifting everyday politics of defending and defining local communities, which include trade unions and political parties but also municipal city councils, parishes, informal neighborhood groups, and individuals. The basic unit of the community is defined as an "imagined collective group" whose boundaries are linked with a geographical space but are fluid and contested (13). Likewise, Kerry emphasizes radicalization as a process of growing militancy and confrontation as opposed to a fixed radical position or ideology. One of the ongoing themes of the book is how the perceived need for a more confrontational stance was usually justified in the name of the protagonists' version of the local community. At the same time, the book situates the local story in the national and international context of interwar politics, with references to parallel local studies of radicalization in other European countries from the post-WWI period to the early 1930s. Following a trend of much of the recent Spanish historiography on the 1920s-30s, the book puts the Spanish case squarely into a comparative framework that identifies

common themes as well as distinctions, in contrast to older narratives that framed the Civil War as a culmination of uniquely Spanish domestic tensions.

Within this local and comparative framework, the first two chapters establish the parameters of heterogeneous mining communities and their initial engagement with the new democratic Republic. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the complex political map of the mining communities before 1931, divided by ideological rivalries but also sharing common spaces from bars to Catholic schools. There was a dominant left wing culture based on class and anti-clericalism, but also a minority Catholic and conservative community vision. Chapter 2 provides a bottom up portrait of how the Republic was actively constructed out of the specific configuration of local political culture in the coalfield towns. Petitions to city governments, meetings of city councils, labor strikes and rent disputes are all mined to articulate the range of expectations, demands, and desires that people hoped the Republic would address. Framed as a point of departure, the chapter asserts that the language and practices of this initial period are defined by a moderate political style, which then sets the stage for explaining the shift to radicalism over the following years.

The third and fourth chapters unpack the key factors of anticlericalism, economic crisis, the fear of fascism, and the politics of policing that drove radicalization in the coalfields from 1932 to 1934. In illustration of Kerry's relational approach, he analyzes how Catholics and anti-clericals responded to perceived provocations in an escalating process that made religion a key feature of grassroots radicalization. On the one hand, anti-clericalism increasingly became a marker of left-wing authenticity in the struggle within the left, while on the other hand the defense of crucifixes in classrooms became a symbol for the revival of right-wing politics. Rather than take the religious cleavage as a structural given, as many studies have, Kerry argues for an evolutionary dynamic that emerged from everyday community practices and struggles.

Similarly, in analyzing how "fascism" came to embody the threat of a right-wing takeover of the Republic after the November 1933 election, Kerry focuses on how and why the concept came to carry such symbolic weight in the left-wing political culture of the coalfields. Finally, the discussion of police tactics provides a compelling complement to recent studies on the problematic role of the militarized police in delegitimizing the democratic Republic. While there have been analyses of specific events, like the Casas Viejas debacle, chapter 4 makes the case for an unfolding dynamic between a more aggressive everyday police strategy, which included random street frisking of workers for arms and more security forces at strikes, and a growing left-wing narrative of a persecutory state which in turn reinforced the fear of fascism.

Chapter 5 analyzes the October 1934 insurrection as a culmination of this short-term process of radicalization in the mining communities. At the same time, Kerry resists framing the uprising as an “event” with a singular identity that was either “defensive” or “offensive” to fit the competing master narratives. Instead, he treats it as an unfolding, ambiguous, improvised, and heterogeneous process whose dispersed center of gravity lay in the local committees of each community. Not surprisingly, he finds conflicting narratives, with some rhetoric aimed at restoring the “social” Republic of the first Bienio and others imagining a revolutionary rupture and new social order.

The final chapters follow the process of radicalization from the insurrection to the Civil War, now fueled by the impact of the repression of the insurrection during the “long 1935” and the competing left- and right-wing narratives of the event. In evaluating the role of ongoing radicalization during the final months of the Popular Front, Kerry rejects the narrative that blames left-wing disorder as the primary cause of the Civil War. At the same time, he acknowledges the internal tension between the defense of a specific vision of the “social” Republic and the implicit undermining of state authority exemplified by left-wing militias imposing their own form of public order. Instead of a tidy new interpretation that could be summarized on the back of a napkin, Kerry has crafted a nuanced, empathetic, and layered account of the radicalization of the Asturian coalfields that also serves as a model for re-visioning the history of “red cities.”

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