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What military victory could not measure: Libertarian Barcelona and the ethnography of revolution in 1936

Ibrahim Halawi[1]

Abstract

This paper approaches the libertarian experiment in Barcelona in 1936 as a lived alternative modernity. Using memoirs and archives, I apply a historical ethnography method to scope the experience of radical reorganisation of the economy, education, healthcare, and gender. In doing so, this paper shows how, despite overwhelming odds, anarcho-syndicalists built a different world the size of their city. An ethnographic take on Barcelona, in that space and temporality, challenges sweeping and fatalistic conclusions on radical libertarian revolutions. If what was lived and re-organised there and then is historically relevant, then its military defeat against fascism does not necessarily make it an unworkable alternative to capitalist modernity.

Keywords

Anarchism, Barcelona, revolution, historical ethnography, Catalan history, anarcho-syndicalism, radical politics

A new beginning

Only 2 days after a fascist coup against the democratically elected republic whipped through Spain's southern regions, and in the scorching sun of a July morning in 1936, seventeen-year-old Sara was heading to El Prat beach with her mother, two brothers, and

[1]Department of Politics, International Relations & Philosophy, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, UK

Corresponding author:
Ibrahim Halawi, Department of Politics, International Relations & Philosophy, Royal Holloway, University of London, McCrea Building, Egham Hill, Egham TW20 0EX, Surrey, UK.
Email: Ibrahim.halawi@rhul.ac.uk

boyfriend. As they were strolling down Tarragona Street, a young man sprinted towards them and began a passionate announcement at an unusual distance: “They are shooting, it’s the revolution!” It is not the sort of message that can be considered true using only these words, particularly coming from a distressed stranger. Another man, less overwhelmed by his knowledge, assumed that they were heading for a hike and intruded: “there are no buses in *Plaça d’ Espanya*. They’ve set up a cannon and it’s firing in the direction of Sants Road”. After they shared a silent stare, Sara and her family turned around and calmly walked back home (Berenguer, 2004). Her father’s disappearance for the following two nights was her first convincing sign that something not yet comprehensible but grave was happening.

Two days later, her father arrived at their house with two of his friends. Each of them carried a rifle. As they entered the house, a volley of gunfire riddled the entrance. They wasted no time going up to the first floor, and Sara followed them as if she was called upon for back-up. Positioned by each window, they fired in the direction the shots were coming from across the sidewalk. Sara stood still by her father’s side, attentive to his every gesture. Unaware yet of her revolutionary zeal, she couldn’t resign herself. She felt an extraordinary strength and a predisposition that if one of the men fell, she would be the one to wield the weapon (Berenguer, 2004). Not that she understood what the fight was about. But she carried a sense of solidarity with her father and his comrades which would translate later to comradeship across her neighbourhood.

The shooting lasted several minutes before it stopped abruptly. Not yet willing to explain to his daughter what was at stake, and perhaps unsure himself, he went straight into training Sara on the use of a rifle. He showed her how to load and unload, and Sara indulged with patience and interest despite her mother’s protests. For a seventeen-year-old, it felt like the revolution was her own, even if she did not yet understand its libertarian call. But this call was promptly heeded by tens of thousands of workers across Catalonia who have long organised through libertarian organisations, mainly the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), the largest national confederation of unions in Europe at the time (Peirats, 2001; Smith, 2007). Before the start of the war, the CNT had already established anarchist organisations designed to cater for the various needs of the working class in Spain (Ealham, 2016; Preston, 2016). On the eve of the revolution, they boasted a membership of approximately 850,000 members across Spain, including Sara’s father. They organised in non-hierarchical unions and federated both by industry and by region. Its anarchist cause and ideological consistency were overseen by the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI), a partner organisation which aimed to guard against reformism within the CNT, as well as to maintain its opposition to any ‘infiltration’ by other political forces – particularly the more liberal wings of the republican front (Ealham, 2016). In this paper, I argue that what followed was a lived alternative modernity. The alternative eventually succumbed to greater military powers, and it was riddled with opportunists and strategic contradictions as it grappled the Spanish civil war. But, for what concerns us here as an ethnographic take on revolution, it was an alternative modernity, and it was lived.

This paper approaches Barcelona 1936 through historical ethnography, which is a practice that reconstructs embodied social experience from memoir and archival sources rather than direct fieldwork (Palmié and Stewart 2016). The primary sources that I rely on – mainly Sara Berenguer's and Manolo Gonzalez's memoirs and archives – are studied in the complementary spirit of Ann Laura Stoler's "ethnography of the archive": to be read along their grain, not seen through as transparent windows onto events (Stoler, 2009). Indeed, both accounts were written decades after the events they describe, shaped by exile, defeat, and the politics of anarchist memory. Sara Berenguer's memoirs were written in exile in France and published in 2004, nearly seven decades after the events it describes. Gonzalez's account appeared in an anarchist journal in 1993. Both were composed at a distance – temporal, geographic, and political – from the revolution they recall, shaped by the long afterlife of defeat and the particular commitments of anarchist memory in exile. Indeed, they cannot offer unmediated access to events as they unfolded. However, through their recollection, I will trace what it meant to participate, to lose, and, then, to remember, a radically different modernity. In other words, accounting for the retrospective nature of memoirs makes them all the more useful and telling when the objective of the study is precisely to question the politics of the present. To ask what quality of life the experiment made possible is, by definition, a question that retrospective accounts are better placed to answer than any contemporaneous bulletin.

Having said this, a significant portion of the data derived from Sara Berenguer's archives at the International Institute of Social History are not memoirs. They are her own archival collection of newspapers, pamphlets, letters, meeting notes, minutes and other important documents from that period. These archives underwrite the structural and institutional claims, the numbers, the organisations, the material facts of collectivisation. The memoir and the archive are thus doing distinct analytical work. In the act of writing this, these two types of data are intentionally weaved together throughout. I offer ethnographic accounts through vignettes from Sara and Manolo's memoirs, which are then backed up by primary archival accounts thanks to Sara's archives as well as secondary sources. This is meant to capture the scope of the alternative and how it was lived and remembered.

Additionally, for this paper, historical ethnography began, in the most literal sense, in the field. Much of it's notes were written in Barcelona's politically charged cafes that outlived their libertarian clients, in spaces physically disfigured by decades of fascism and gentrification yet still standing as mute recognition of the alternative that once filled them. Walking around the neighbourhoods where anarchist assemblies were shaped, particularly in the city's working-class districts at the time of Les Corts and Poble Sec, is itself a form of ethnographic attention. Paul Stoller's insistence that the ethnographer's own body is an instrument of knowledge, that sensory experience in a place, even if after the moment under study, generates analytic insight irreducible to archival recovery alone, also inspires my practice (Stoller, 2010). To sit in a century-old cafe in Barcelona and write about the workers who debated this alternative at its tables is a method of temporal attentiveness. It is a way of staying close to the lived quality of what is being examined.

A further word on the concept that organises this paper. "Alternative modernity" is used in the precise sense that Dilip P. Gaonkar gives it: as one of a plurality of genuinely distinct ways of being modern, each internally coherent, irreducible to a deviation from a Western original (Gaonkar, 2001; Barcelona 1936 was modern on different terms. It prioritised collective self-determination over accumulation, horizontal federation over vertical centralised hierarchy, and the dignity of labour over the productivity of capital. In doing so, it did not reject modernity's promises and insisted on actually delivering them, not least in its explicitly modernist-scientific pedagogy that I will examine later. To do so, I rely on the concept of prefigurative politics, originally coined by David Graeber (2004) and then aptly developed by Paul Raekstad Sofa Saio Gradin (2020). The anarchist-libertarian project did not defer its vision of a better world to a future after a military victory, to the dismay of the communists at the time. They built that world in the present tense, through their schools, syndicates, neighbourhood committees, and maternity hospitals. The means were the ends. To evaluate it only by whether it survived is, as this paper argues, to apply the wrong measure entirely. What it was, not merely what it became, is the subject of the pages that follow.

A few days after Sara's shooting encounter, tens of thousands of organised militant workers, mainly the CNT but also communist, anti-Stalinist Marxist and republican units, successfully fended off a fascist offensive on the city of Barcelona, after the fascists gained momentum in a swift takeover of South Spain (Lloyd, 2026; Peirats, 2001; Preston, 2016). Barcelona's factory owners, large property owners, clerical elites and many bourgeois families fled the city overnight, fearing that an armed and emboldened working class would seize the opportunity for revenge. They were not wrong. Armed local committees seized properties and assets of the city's wealthy families. This seizure was not always clean or orderly. The *Patrullas de control*, the neighbourhood armed patrols established by the CNT and FAI in the first days of the revolution, took on policing functions that included the detention, and in documented cases the execution, of perceived class enemies, fascist sympathisers, and informers (Preston, 2012: 106). Churches were burned. Scores were settled. But the *Patrullas* were gradually absorbed into more formal security structures as the revolutionary committees gave way to the *Generalitat*'s institutional order, and their worst excesses belonged, overwhelmingly, to those first convulsive weeks.

Church properties and hotels transformed into offices, schools, hospitals and headquarters for the various revolutionary factions. What unfolded in those first days was not the "chaos" of revolution, as traditionally perceived, but the rapid and indeed violent assembly of an alternative social order; one in which a modernity's promises of dignity, equality, and self-determination were being enacted not deferred.

In Barcelona, a revolutionary working class resisted a fascist state project and, simultaneously, reoccupied spaces from which it had been expelled earlier through bourgeois government marginalisation and exclusion (Ealham, 2016). On the rural front, hundreds of years of exploitation and misery were concluded by the insurgency of the peasants in arms. Dozens of small towns and villages were in control of committees of sharecroppers and nomadic farm workers. Together, they took over large estates, collectivised regional farms and sent delegations to the city to coordinate with proletarian delegations from different sections of industries, who, in turn, took over their workplaces *en masse* (Maura, 2015; Preston, 2012). Together, they formed an economic council with four departments: industry, agriculture, foreign and internal relations. The Economic council proceeded with formalising the radical transformation of social and economic order across the region of Catalonia.[1]

On the short-term, or the year that matters to us, success of the collectivist experiment relied on an ever-expanding network of syndicates which coordinated economic activity mostly under the CNT umbrella or the Unión General de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de *España* (UGT), which, despite significant rural and industrial working-class membership in other parts of Spain, had a stronger white-collar profile in Barcelona (Bernecker, 1982; Bookchin, 1977). In the city of Barcelona alone, there were over 50 CNT syndicates, which covered all aspects of economic and artistic life.[2] Below I elaborate on this economic transformation both structurally and as a lived experience, before delving, in a similar manner, into other aspects of this alternative: education and healthcare.

Economic transformation

The first and most immediate test of any libertarian alternative modernity is economic. Can a working class, armed and emboldened but without a state, reorganise the material conditions of daily life? Barcelona's answer, in the summer of 1936, was tangible. In other words, it was administrative, spatial, and logistical. It was also happening in real time, under bombardment, against the accumulated logic of capitalist property relations. What this section documents is a functioning, if imperfect, alternative economic order, one that subordinated profit to community need. It did so by federated self-organisation from below. This also meant total CNT control of international commerce. City housing, out of reach for typical Barcelona workers before, saw rents lowered sharply, while unused rental units faced taxation. Vacant buildings, especially those deserted by the escaping upper class, were repurposed into communal facilities focused on healthcare, schooling, and community meals (Bernecker, 1982). Local committees set up a shared distribution network for essentials like groceries and medicine, tailored to area demands. The pricing of farm goods pricing was overhauled to match the updated system and priorities. Banks largely stayed operational if they complied, but their management incorporated employee input aligned with group goals (Blanch, 2014). The oil sector, formerly overseen by banker and official-led boards, underwent collectivisation with a fresh six-person CNT directorate.[3]

Breaking away from the fiscal monopoly of the central state, the CNT issued large numbers of vouchers, "people's Pesetas", which people exchanged for essentials in cooperative shops. As the city, and much of its periphery, was getting pounded by Italian fascist warplanes, and its modest resources redirected to the war effort, its neighbourhood committees went above and beyond to avoid mass hunger. Bread and milk were distributed to the sick and needy, mostly through *people's Pesetas* (Gonzalez, 1993). In many instances, neighbourhood committees resorted to bartering and exchanges with other committees short on other resources to facilitate the acquisition of food products. At one point, the *Generalitat* of Catalonia – the regional government formed through an alliance of anarchists, socialists, communists and republican liberals in the wake of the war – took responsibility for exchanging vouchers for cash to make distribution and access to goods easier, especially after vouchers proliferated and, inevitably, became less effective (Gonzalez, 1993).

As for factories themselves, they became more than just workplaces. The very nature of work became less alienating and, importantly, a "workday" was also about communal growth. Creches were founded in big factories, allowing women to emerge from the domestic sphere and participate in the workplace. In some workplaces, ambitious educational programmes were introduced, including day classes during breaks. Libraries were also established inside factories, permitting workers to broaden their intellectual horizons while at work and further harmonising the social and economic aspects of everyday life (Ealham, 2016: 23). The CNT also introduced a new compensation mechanism for industrial accidents, including death benefits for widows and orphans – the first of its kind in Europe coming from a union. Many years later, scholars would note that the industrial output of Catalonia lost very few hours of production under the collectivised system (Thomas, 2003).

This should not be taken to suggest that collectivisation was frictionless or uniformly embraced. Michael Seidman's meticulous reading of factory records and syndicate minutes documents widespread absenteeism, go-slows, and resistance to collective work discipline among Barcelona's workers, including, pointedly, CNT members themselves (Ealham, 2016; Seidman, 1992). Similarly, Antoni Castells Duran's detailed account of the collectivisation process traces persistent disputes between CNT and UGT workers over industrial control, the uneven pace of collectivisation across sectors, and the friction generated by wage equalisation among skilled workers accustomed to differentials (Durán, 1993). In this sense, the experiment was not a choreography of unanimity. However, these were workers in a city under aerial bombardment, caught between a civil war on one side and internal political warfare on the other, building an entirely new economic and social order with only a vague blueprint, in real time. That productivity held at all under those conditions is itself remarkable. This is why what Seidman documents as evidence of collectivisation's limits, Ealham reads as evidence of its extraordinary resilience (Ealham, 2016). Yet the two readings are not mutually exclusive. What I insist on is that the tensions, the absenteeism, and the arguments on the shop floor were a natural outcome of the pace, scope and radicalness of the transformation, rather than a sign of its failure or absence.

After-work life changed too. What were exclusive features of bourgeois life – culture, arts, and leisurely socials – became accessible to the working class. Local cultural spaces, known as *Ateneus*, became the symbol and indeed the actual spaces within which libertarian culture and education flourished across the city. All of this took place in the 1930s, at the peak of dehumanising industrialisation. Measured against the standard of what capitalist modernity had actually delivered to the working class – not its promises, but its practice, the collectivised economy of Barcelona was a potential correction of capitalist industrialisation.

Education

Anarchist pedagogy enacted the same horizontal logic that organised the syndicates and the neighbourhood committees: Instead of knowledge from above, it sought to cultivate the capacity to generate it from within (Ackelsberg et al., 1990). School programmes – free for everyone – followed *Escola Moderna* (Modernist school) of Francisco Ferrer. Ferrer's "modernism" is grounded in reason, dignity, self-reliance, and scientific observation, as opposed to the ecclesiastical and dogmatic standard Spanish curriculum of the period (Bluestein et al., 1990). In most of these schools, children participated in organising the curriculum. This pedagogical experiment led to a generation raised in non-hierarchical, self-directed learning.

Students despised militarism and religion, as one of the accounts of a student at the time recalled (Gonzalez, 1993). Art and culture, as libertarian parents had taught their kids, were their most intense passions. They sang, wrote reports on the classics, acted revolutionary plays and demanded films: Chaplin, American westerns and French melodramas. They wanted history: the Napoleonic wars and especially the organisation of the American federation. Federation, after all, was a national aspiration for the libertarian project. And thanks to free transport, students travelled all around Barcelona and beyond. They went to factories to be near the workers and learn how to run machines. They went to farms to help the collective with the crops. They visited museums. In those excursions, students carried vouchers that were honoured in restaurants which were part of the collectivised food industry (Gonzalez, 1993).

Influenced by French cinema, a student organised a petition for sex education. The socialists and the communists were opposed. Some parents came to protest, "It will encourage promiscuity," and they reminded everyone of "family values." The communists quoted Stalin about the "sanctity of the family" and, in strange intersection with the Catholics, denounced the kid's interest as pornography in the schools. This strange intersection merits another example. Carlos Lizarraga, son of a Communist politician, piously requested morning prayers, "for our heroes at the front." He was embarrassed by the collective rejection of his innocent plea. Still blushing, he was given a lesson by his mates in war strategy: "whoever wins does not depend on God, or Virgin Mary, you ass!" When Carlos tried to explain: "My father told me I could go to the workers' paradise, to the Soviet Union," libertarian kids educated him about the dictatorship, the trials in Moscow and the murders of the old Bolsheviks (Gonzalez, 1993). He never came back to that school. One of his classmates then saw him in the May 1st parade wearing a Pioneer uniform. Meanwhile, Manolo Gonzalez, a libertarian kid at the time, was dressed as a native American. His face and chest painted in red, white and black tribal colours. He had eagle feathers war bonnet and brandished a 'tomahawk'. Another libertarian kid, conveniently named Libertad, was dressed as a French revolutionary, with a pike and a black flag (Gonzalez, 1993).

On an ordinary day at school, the anarchists' children distributed among themselves duties, like cooking, kitchen cleaning, and recreation with chaotic inefficiency: "but it was we who decided!" They changed duties almost every day. The socialists and communists tried, in a typical fashion, a vertical organisation with pint-sized commissars, salutes with clenched fists and even a minuscule bureaucracy with a secretary general and a treasurer. They tried a trumpet call to announce meals. When, 1 day, the communists appeared with a big portrait of Stalin, the anarchist kids hooted them down: "We are free, you scum." Indeed, the differences within the republican project were simultaneously mundane and stark, and, as we shall see later, they did eventually subdue the libertarian experiment (Gonzalez, 1993).

As for the sex education petition, it led to a course with voluntary attendance. Yet all kids attended. They even brought their friends from other schools. Sex education turned out to be classes in sexual ethics, birth control, sexual violence with specific condemnation of rape and incest. To the delight of ex-nuns, there was a romantic defence of free love. Some enthused girls designed big posters: “No state, no church can rule in our hearts and bodies”; “Menstruation is freedom and a privilege of women” (Gonzalez, 1993). Federica Montseny, a prominent anarchist intellectual and the first woman minister in Spain, visited the school. She gave the kids chocolate bars as a gift from the French syndicalists. They gave songs and flowers in return.

These episodes illuminate how profoundly this anarchist experiment understood modernity’s cultural terrain. Science, sexuality, anti-clericalism, and international solidarity were central to the alternative being built.

Sara was a particularly busy person at the time. She jumped on many roles, proactively filling gaps in her neighbourhood committee, volunteering to educate the youth, sewing clothes for the resistance, initiating acts of solidarity with resistance fighters on the front, and making up for her comrades’ shortcoming. As she reflected on her experiences in the collective, she described her role “like that of an ant making its way through the bushes, where the sickle passes every moment. Filling in the gaps here and there…” (Berenguer, 2004). Mainly, Sara’s day involved work at the committee during working hours. Then, she would head to her neighbourhood’s *ateneu* in *Plaça de la Concòrdia* to teach kids on culture. But these enthused kids got into the habit of standing in front of the committee’s office waiting for her. They would then end up walking together to class. After class, and without dinner, she would go to Les Corts academy for her own educational pursuit. On the way back home, she would stop by the office of the Libertarian Youth (JJ LL) organisation on 106 *Carrer Provença* – an anarchist organisation led by young group of activists. There was always something going on in the evening at the JJLL: a talk, a debate, or a group reading session (Berenguer, 2004).

Sara only went to school until she was 12. At 13, she began working at a market stall, before quitting in protest at the sexist behaviour of her coworkers. Later, she began working at a sewing factory, which, aged 14, she was forced to leave after defending her colleagues in a wage dispute. When, in the wake of the revolution, she was asked to teach at her local *ateneu*, she was both a student and teacher. “I taught what I knew to those who were less knowledgeable than me”, she recalled (Berenguer, 2004). She did not find it difficult to embrace the principles of the Modernist School, which were organically in line with her own. She believed in education that empowers and gives agency to the students themselves. Each night, she organised topics together with the students. The children intuitively felt the desire to know and learn, especially when they felt they shared ownership of the learning process. Sometimes, Sara couldn’t give exact answers to certain questions. She admitted that some students were ahead of her. In some cases, she had to find ways to escape the answer: “we’ll leave this for tomorrow.” When she got back home around midnight, she would study hard to answer the next day (Berenguer, 2004).

As Graeber argues, anarchist practice has never been primarily about seizing power but about “building new institutions within the shell of the old”, whose participatory character enacts the future rather than wait for it (Graeber, 2004). The Escola Moderna classrooms were prefigured and thus experienced radically different pedagogy by both, Sara and her students.

Healthcare

Healthcare was, in the libertarian project, a political statement as much as a practical necessity. To collectivise medicine was to declare that the body of the worker was not a private problem but a collective responsibility. Care, like education and labour, could be organised horizontally, financed mutually, and delivered without hierarchy. The contrast with what preceded it is the measure of what the alternative modernity achieved. In Catalonia, as in the rest of Spain, syphilis and other venereal diseases were a curse on the working class. The church carried much of the blame for ignoring the plight of women infected by husbands and boyfriends, not least because nuns and priests managed hospitals and clinics. These struggles then informed the transformation of maternity hospitals. The one in Sara's neighbourhood was run by ex-nuns who soon after the revolution abandoned their religious attire and, under the direction of the neighbourhood committee, transformed the very culture of care (Berenguer, 2004). They humanised interactions between carers and care recipients, and centred the pain felt by women in strategies of care-providing and prioritisation of medical resources. Four pavilions were established: maternal, breastfeeding, weaning, and infants. Some newborns, children, and young people never left the hospital. It became, on its own terms, a maternal community. Anarchist intellectual powerhouse, Emma Goldman, visited Barcelona twice during this period. In her second visit, she dropped by the maternity hospital. Stunned by the experiment, she noted:

> it was, of its kind, the most perfect thing I had seen in Europe. New practices revealing a new, more rational and more humane spirit. This establishment deserves an exemplary status given that the nun-like style management that preceded made it odious. Great credit goes to Áurea Cuadrado, Director of the Barcelona Maternity Home (Berenguer, 2004).

Goldman's astonishment is analytically significant, because she had seen much of Europe's political landscape. Yet, what she encountered in Barcelona struck her as rational and humane organisation, which is precisely what modernity had promised and so rarely delivered.

The maternity hospital was part of an anarchist philosophy of health best captured by Jorge Molero-Mesa and Isabel Jiménez-Lucena, who describe it as the principle of "good birth and good living" (Jiménez-Lucena and Molero-Mesa, 2012). It is the conviction that bodily health, sexual autonomy, and collective wellbeing were inseparable, and that the state and the church had systematically denied all three to the working class. This philosophy found its most consequential institutional expression in the *Departament de Sanitat i Assistència Social* (SIAS), directed by the anarchist physician and sexologist Félix Martí Ibáñez. Ibáñez pushed for a fundamental reform of psychiatric care: the deinstitutionalisation of patients, the humanisation of asylum conditions, and the replacement of custodial psychiatry with community-based mental health, care organised from the neighbourhood rather than administered from above (Lee, 2010).

More broadly, the *Sindicato de la Sanidad*, the healthcare syndicate, was one of the greatest achievements of the revolution. It changed, and saved, the lives of tens of thousands of initially impoverished working class families. Once medical assets were collectivised, the syndicate took charge and ran healthcare facilities in the service of their own city. Prior to its establishment in September 1936, some doctors, nurses, and pharmacists were affiliated with the CNT and constituted a section of the Liberal Professions Union. But, in the wake of the revolution, and in accordance with the new anarchist order, 1020 doctors, 3206 nurses, 130 dentists, 330 midwives, 203 practitioners, 180 pharmacists, 663 pharmacy assistants, 153 herbalists, 335 health assistants, 71 radiologists, 10 health assistants and 220 veterinarians joined the new healthcare syndicate. Five months later, it had over 8000 members.[4]

This large apparatus operated through geographically articulated parts and according to the different activities. Catalonia was divided into seven zones: Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida, Reus, Berga, Ripoll, and High Pyrenees. These were the centres around which small communities and towns were grouped. Out of a total of 27 small cities, there were about 36 health centres, distributed throughout Catalonia on the basis of the coordination of efforts so that no one lacked assistance and access. Each of the nine zones had a trade union centre whose health services were controlled and directed by a committee. In turn, the committees of the surrounding areas were coordinated in Barcelona. Medical specialist groups were autonomous within the union, but this autonomy was not synonymous with isolation. Once a week, the Barcelona committee, appointed by the congress, met with a delegate from each specialist group. So, both from a technical and geographical point of view, the activities were organised and planned.[5]

On top of existing infrastructure, the healthcare syndicate founded 6 hospitals in Barcelona: the *Proletario*, the *Del Pueblo*, the *Pompeya*, two military hospitals and the Romanian Pavilion. In addition, 7 new clinics were opened in Catalonia: the Maritime of *Cadafell*, the Model Pavilion of *Vallvidrera*, the *Bonanova*, the Hospice of *Montserrat*, the *Terramarin Sitges*, the Sanatorium of *San Andrés*, and the one in *Florida*. One of them specialised in bone tuberculosis and orthopaedics, and it was considered one of the best in the world in this specialty. Most were founded in sumptuous aristocratic buildings and in luxurious hotels built between the Pine trees and the mountains. But it was not easy to deliver, not least given the war demands. Improvisation was key, within the organisational framework. For instance, in some villages, polyclinics were established. They provided all the medical specialties of the time and were equipped with all kinds of sanitary and medical tools. This reduced the waiting time for the sick and wounded in smaller towns, which, due to the difficulties of transport, often caused avoidable deaths.[6] This is a healthcare system in an anarchist order.

In this new system, inhabitants of a region asked for a doctor. Then the syndicate inquired about the healthcare conditions of the locality – statistics on the most frequent diseases and accidents – and then chose a doctor who, by his specialty, better responded to the needs of this region. To refuse to go, weighty reasons had to be presented. Otherwise, the doctor ran the risk of not being able to practice his profession. Indeed, some private doctors remained. But the abuses so frequent in this profession were curbed. The costs of medical surgeries were controlled. The workers paid the syndicate, which gave the money to the surgeon and took note of everything. In the new clinics built by the syndicate, it was free of charge, even tooth extractions were free.[7] In the previous order, senior doctors did very little and cashed in most of the bill. Younger professionals had to do most of the heavy lifting for years before they were eligible for a living wage. So, for years, senior doctors who were waged almost never went to the clinics, while younger doctors worked for free waiting for the death or retirement of their seniors in order to fill their waged positions.

With collectivisation, all hospital doctors earned 500 pesetas for 3 hours of daily work. They could also work privately if they wanted to. In comparison, an average worker earned 350-400 pesetas per month for 7 hours of daily work. With this levelling, the expenses could be paid. Wage differences were eliminated and many worked for free and without coercion after paid hours.

The *Sindicato de la Sanidad* was a demonstration, built under conditions that would have defeated most states, that healthcare organised from below by the people who needed it and the professionals who provided it, without the mediation of profit or ecclesiastical charity was both possible and, potentially, superior.

The stickiness of patriarchy

No account of Barcelona 1936 as an alternative modernity is complete without reckoning with what it failed to transform as thoroughly as it transformed everything else. This section asks a harder question than the preceding ones: what happens to gender hierarchy inside a revolution that explicitly committed to ending it? The answer is not comfortable, and I do not intend it to be. What Sara's trajectory reveals is that patriarchy is sticky even when there's a political will and new institutions to dismantle it. It persists in gestures, in assumptions, in the everyday reorganising of decision-making powers. This revolution exposed the contradiction without fully resolving it.

Some progressive laws were passed by the central Spanish state in 1931 upon the electoral victory of the republican alliance. Maternity insurance plans, education reform, civil marriage laws, and rights to divorce were granted to women across the Spanish state. But most were, at best, partially enforced. The church was still unhinged, and cultural practices were sticky (Ealham, 2005; Preston, 2016). Even progressive labour laws which the republican government passed to keep the working class on its side against the monarchy were shrugged off by the bourgeoisie. The vast majority of working-class women were disappointed by the outcome. Only when the city was taken over by the working class, only when it became a libertarian field of experimentation, did women from lower classes manage to push for and indeed experience these freedoms and rights (Ackelsberg, 2005). The legalisation of abortion under the SIAS in 1936, mentioned in the previous section, was the sharpest institutional expression of this. No prior Spanish government – republican, monarchist, or otherwise – had delivered it. The libertarian project did, briefly, and it took the fascist victory 3 years later to fully reverse it.

But the war dictated the nature, scope, and longevity of this progress. As focus increasingly shifted towards the war, leftist organisations across the spectrum enticed women to join the workforce for war-related reasons. A front-page slogan in the Catalan communist newspaper *Treball* proclaimed, "Women must be urgently prepared to replace the men who have to go to the fronts." Another front page of anti-fascist publication *Mujeres* (women) depicted a woman working and proclaimed female professional training to be "the most pressing need of the time" (Nash, 1995). In tandem, unions organised programmes for professional training that would allow women to occupy skilled jobs.

Indeed, women stepped in. They participated in making clothes for the soldiers, driving trams, ploughing and carrying coal. They replaced men in countless tasks when they had to join the front lines (Mangini, 1995). As Sara reminisced, “it was an obligation we imposed on ourselves willingly, and if we had continued the life of the past, we would never have thought we could assume such responsibilities” (Berenguer, 2004). It was a source of pride, and a meaningful intervention in public life.

It seemed, for Sara, that her father and the revolution were one and the same. Her altruistic father held her hand and literally dropped her off at the neighbourhood’s revolutionary committee before heading to the front. When he was away at the front, the world around her represented him and his ideals. In her writings, she often referred to comrades firstly based on whether they knew her father. Much like Sara, thousands of women understood both, the contribution of revolutionary men to breaking hierarchies, and, simultaneously, the *stickiness* of patriarchy (Ackelsberg, 2005). At home, and in the absence of her father, Sara gradually took a paternal role. She would skip meals so that her mother and sister get her ration. When needed, she would step up for them in local altercations.

As the revolutionary fervour waned, and the best of men were sacrificed in battle, it is sticky patriarchy that seemed to have kept Sara going. In many instances, she was left behind – uninvited, uninformed, or unrecognised – in neighbourhood committee politics. But the straw that broke the camel’s back, the incident in which Sara allowed herself, for the first time, to “separate men from women in the common struggle”, was witnessing the mockery and ridicule of libertarian men against the local federation of *Mujeres Libres* (free women). This enormous anarchist women movement boasted 25,000 members at its peak and shared a building with the Libertarian Youth. So, naturally, Sara was aware of their activities and often ended up in cultural events and war-related solidarity initiatives organised by them. However, she didn’t become a member nor actively participate in their work until she witnessed incidents of misogyny that “made the heart pound” (Berenguer, 2004).

One day, she entered the shared building when a bunch of boys from the Libertarian Youth were reading a poster for a talk being given that morning by Conchita Guillén, a delegate from the Local Federation of Free Women. When they read that the speaker was a woman, they laughed and mocked the idea of a women giving a political talk, “as if we had no other duty than to wipe children’s bottoms and cook” (Berenguer, 2004). A “dormant emotion”, as Sara described it, was awakened. It was dormant precisely because the revolutionary project overshadowed everything else. In that moment, memories of sexist actions that preceded the revolution came back to her, not as memories but as disruptive experiences, almost as *déjà vu*. Those sarcastic grimaces struck a chord particularly because of the resemblance of one of the young men to the market butcher she worked for at the age of 13 (Berenguer, 2004).

Back then, Sara had to open the stall and prepare the butcher’s tools on the counter – scales, knives, etc. – so that when he arrived, everything would be ready to serve the first customer. She started by taking the keys to the cold storage room located outside the market, on the corner of Mallorca Street and Villarroel Street, to collect the pieces of meat that had been left unsold the day before in large bamboo baskets. Inside the cold storage room, each owner had a wooden cabinet with a locked iron grate (Berenguer, 2004). After collecting the pieces, she had to act quickly, as it was intensely cold inside the room. Once outside the cold storage room, she walked through a long, narrow corridor. Since it wasn't possible for a 13-year-old to carry the entire weight at once, Sara usually made several trips. A young market butcher with heavy baskets on both shoulders would often show up suddenly in the narrow corridor as she passed. "With the brutality of a wild beast", he would approach her and push his hands onto her breasts (Berenguer, 2004). It was difficult to fight against such brute force, loaded as he was with the baskets. One day she found the courage to defend herself by biting his arm, "with a fury as savage as his". She left that job there and then.

Sara did not attempt to bite the libertarian boys. Armed with more than teeth by then, she fought back through the collective. The talk took place, and it was well attended. At the end, there was a debate, and some young comrades countered the speaker "with a certain disdain" (Berenguer, 2004). When Sara heard derogatory comments about women, she responded with great passion. So much so that, at the end of the debate, the women at *Mujeres Libres* asked Sara to be their delegate at the Local Federation. "I can't accept your proposal, comrades," she told them. "You know I am not a member of *Mujeres Libres"*. "It doesn't matter," they replied, "you've defended us like none of us could have, and we believe you're the best person to represent us at the next meeting" (Berenguer, 2004). As they insisted, Sara accepted and, for the first time, she went to the Local Federation of Free Women as a delegate for her neighbourhood, Les Corts. She was then delegated on other occasions, until she told them to formally accept her membership, since she wasn't going to continue to defend the views of *Mujeres Libres* without being officially affiliated with the group (Berenguer, 2004).

Women's movements had been organised within the different political parties to prepare women politically. But *Mujeres Libres* went further. It sought to affirm their libertarian status as workers, women, and mothers. A combination of charismatic, unrelenting women leaders, strong organisational commitment, and indeed a real need for it, made the group grow exponentially. Neighbourhood branches were organised across Barcelona. They educated, agitated, empowered, and supported one another. *Mujeres Libres* was the evidence that the alternative modernity being built in Barcelona's factories, schools and hospitals was ambitious but would remain incomplete until the authority exercised over women's bodies and voices was as thoroughly democratised as everything else.

Military defeat

The previous sections have documented what the libertarian experiment built. This one confronts what unmade it. I do so not to rehearse a familiar story of defeat, but to insist that the manner and causes of that defeat tell us something the defeat itself is often used to obscure. This ethnographic approach to studying the revolutionary altenative in Barcelona suggests that its alternative modernity fell because it was targeted, from within and without, by forces whose interest in its failure was structural and deliberate.

Understanding how it ended is the final piece of the argument for why it should not be measured by that ending.

"The most enlightened were getting themselves killed on the battlefront", Sara bemoaned (Berenguer, 2004). And many military accounts lamented the amateurism of anarchist militias. Idealistic men threw themselves into the fire, with little training or precaution. They were not only ready to sacrifice their lives for their ideals. They were, as a Republican fighter who shared the trenches with them observed, "pursuing it with a passion that sometimes was a source of envy, other times a source of frustration".[8]

However, well before the military defeat in 1939, tensions between the Stalinist wing and the anarchist wing of the popular front culminated in a violent confrontation that trimmed the wings of the libertarian experiment early on (Beevor, 2001). There was the enemy that the anarchists knew: the fascist alliance. It wasn't long before they encountered a more elusive enemy: Stalinist Marxists and Soviet commissars. Those lived amongst them and would soon conspire to take over most of the strategic assets of the city. Stalinists were, first and foremost, communists who disagreed fundamentally with the libertarian system of anarchists and, crucially, followed a rigid hierarchy of command that reached Moscow. Naturally, this meant that their politics even in the local context of Catalonia was dictated by Stalin's geopolitical calculations. As it is with all imperial calculations, Stalin did not have the best interests of Catalan working classes at heart.

In May 1937, the republican-liberal central government and Stalinists acted upon their shared interest in containing the libertarian experiment. Hundreds of Stalinists descended on Catalonia. A few CNT battalions rushed from the Aragon front to help counterbalance the offensive. In a few hours, street barricades mushroomed thanks to neighbourhood committees, and their sight was described by George Orwell, a war volunteer at the time, as "strange and wonderful" (Orwell and Symons, 2009). The Libertarian Youth were roaming Barcelona in lorries distributing arms and food. Manolo Gonzalez, still a schoolkid at the time and unrelated to Sara, was told to report to a column of children to help with messages, carry ammunition and be on the look-out (Gonzalez, 1993). Sara's friend, Coco Puig, was in charge of passing orders from the FAI-CNT command post to the combat units. Pilar Palou, her classmate, was with her father guarding with a machine-gun the offices of the CNT newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera* (Berenguer, 2004).

Meanwhile, on the night of the offensive, Manolo was given a whistle and sent to the belfry of a half-burned church. The night was cold. He had a military blanket and a wool sailor's hat. A girl came with ham, bread, and a revolver. "You need a gun?" she asked. "Yes, better a machine-gun. From here I can wipe out a regiment," Manolo answered cockily. She smiled, "Let me see what I can do." (Gonzalez, 1993).

About three in the morning, Manolo was munching the ham and bread left by the girl when he saw some metallic reflections under the weak light of a lamp post. He reacted "like a madman". He blew his whistle, rushed down the tower, screaming, "They are coming…to arms…to arms!" He then desperately looked for a weapon but was told to "shut up and cover your ass" (Gonzalez, 1993). Men and women started to shoot at the shadows. A young woman with a canvas bag full of hand grenades slipped out from the church in the direction of the attackers and blew up their machine-gun. She came back smiling. Manolo and the more adult comrades roared with pride. His voice was drowned in the hubbub, but still Manolo was screaming, "death to the fascists!" A broad-shouldered man pushed him behind a wall. To calm him down, he gave him a revolver without bullets. But Manolo kept on mouthing and shouting. "Bang…bang. Boom! There, you bastard, we got you!" (Gonzalez, 1993).

Street fights lasted a couple of days. The heaviest of fighting took place around Hotel Colon and the strategic Telecommunications building in *Plaça* de Catalunya (Preston, 2016). Several floors of the building were occupied by Stalinists. From there onwards, the momentum was against the libertarian project. And from there onwards, all first-hand accounts agree that the war took a cruel and confusing turn. Stalinists cracked down on the libertarian movement from within, while Franco, Hitler and Mussolini continued to kill, torture and maim at an industrial scale (Beevor, 2001).

Manolo elicits that the intentions of the politicians in Madrid to stop the collectivisation of the economy of Catalonia and Aragon were clear to everyone (Gonzalez, 1993). His father was angry with the tendency of the CNT to compromise and turn all attention to the war. He recalls his father saying to him at the time: "we will lose both the war and revolution. The middle classes won't fight for a libertarian society." (Gonzalez, 1993). Indeed, these concerns reflect a central tension for the experiment: the demands of warfare – hierarchy, centralisation, strategic coordination – were structurally incompatible with the libertarian alternative being built in the streets and factories below. This is why many anarchists thought it was better to fortify their control of the city (Evans, 2016). Alas, for reasons decided on in cold rooms by men, none of which are within this paper's scope, the CNT compromised and eventually militarily lost to the liberal-Stalinist alliance and, a couple of years later, to fascism. James Scott's analysis of high modernism helps name what the Stalinist and liberal Republican project was doing when it moved against the CNT (Scott, 1998). The neighbourhood committees, the federated syndicates, and the horizontally organised militias were all forms of what Scott calls *metis*: practical, local, embodied knowledge that resists the state's need for legibility and central command. The May offensive was not simply a political betrayal. It was the collision of two fundamentally incompatible visions of social organisation: one that trusted the grid of the state, and one that trusted the street.

This collision peaked when Hitler and Stalin sealed their "friendship" in a pact soon after. All Republican offensives had to stop due to the lack of ammunition, planes and tanks previously supplied by the Soviets. So, even after communist takeover in the aftermath of the May offensive, the entire republican front was stretched and defeated in less than 3 years (Beevor, 2001; Thomas, 2003; Blanch, 2014; Preston, 2016). This is also despite tens of thousands of working class men and women from all over the world flocking into Spain, taking up arms and over 20,000 of them sharing their last breath with their Catalan comrades (Lloyd, 2026; Preston, 2016). It proved impossible, even for an organised international working class, to sustain a radical social reorganisation of the city while committing enormous resources and some of the most devoted men to a war against the combined firepower of fascist Spain, Germany, and Italy, and the manipulation and co-optation of Stalin.

On November 15 of 1938, and under the colours of many nations, the International Brigades bid farewell to Barcelona in a crowded parade (Thomas, 2003). But not all of them left. About 6000 Germans, Austrians, Czechs and other men without a country to return to stayed to "die in Barcelona." Manolo made an entry in his diary: "[we] went to say goodbye to the I.B.s [International Brigade]. Threw geraniums. I went with Libertad." (Gonzalez, 1993). They did not have to wear uniforms this time. It was not the symbolic spirit of May first parade. No need to impersonate a native American or French revolutionary. Manolo, Libertad, and most probably Sara, witnessed an unprecedented once-in-a-lifetime parade in which Catalans stood in awe and gratitude to ordinary people from over 50 countries who heeded their call for an egalitarian alternative. They did not protest in their hometowns. They did not plead to their respective states or send petitions to central authority to deliver aid to Catalonia. They took it upon themselves to show up and action their solidarity. The Brigades' arrival and departure is a telling feature of this alternative: that its appeal was not national or ethnic but universally human. It was an answer to modernity's atomisation and exploitation that people from over 50 countries were willing to die for.

Well before the last bullet, Sara and her comrades recognised that their social revolution was heading towards a military defeat (Berenguer, 2004). The inherent friction of anarcho-syndicalism and central authority, which, in peace times, might have been less existential, did not help either. Many anarchist syndicates did not end up practicing genuine direct democracy anyway, and many delegates often attained their position due to the respect they enjoyed among the community, rather than through recognised formal procedures of accountability (Ealham, 2016). Even CNT orders were not effectively followed.

Like all wars, cynicism and opportunism creeped in. From a traditional state-centric perspective, this was a failure on the part of the revolution. Yet, for what concerns alternative modernity, it delivered an ambitious egalitarian experiment even in the darkest hour. And even if we are to entertain the sentiments of disappointment, the libertarian project did not take the easier route of denouncing the war. Nor did it turn its back on working class comrades across the nation. To the contrary, it gave everything, its best men and its most strategic resources, for the republican war effort. It compromised its own libertarian essence to keep republican ranks intact after the Stalinist purge in May 1937. For what concerns us, both its triumph and defeat were more dignified.

Barcelona would fall to the fascists at the end of January of 1939. The revenge on Catalonia is telling of the cruelty of the world that followed. In the first week of the occupation, the fascists executed over 10,000 men and women. Mostly anarchists (Preston, 2016). Hundreds of thousands became refugees, including Sara, Manolo, and Libertad. Although the military defeat is precisely the angle that this paper is attempting to overshadow with the triumph of what was lived and delivered, the way in which Sara and her comrades participated in the military effort, and the way in which they received their fate, are also telling of the impact that this alternative had on the people that lived through it. It reflects the significance of the case beyond its brief temporality. In other words, its aftermath persuades its significance as much as its peak.

Aftermath

One night, Sara and her family heard the whistling of bombs. The roar of the explosion came from a glass factory close to their home. Sara hurriedly went out into the pitch-dark and empty street, vaguely following the direction of the smoke. Crackling sounds amplified the closer she got to the factory, and the rising smoke increasingly irritated her eyes and ears. When she got to the factory, she found no one and faced her own powerlessness, "in that darkness, perhaps death" (Berenguer, 2004).

Initially, she thought that she might be able to save a helpless soul injured by the explosion. Potentially, she thought, it could be someone she worked with in the neighbourhood committee, or broke bread with in one of the many moments of solidarity and mutual aid initiatives. She returned home to find everyone asleep. She went into the kitchen, took some bread she saved, as she always did, for her mother and sister, and began eating it savagely. "Was I hungry?", she reflected, "No! It was the instinct to live in the face of emptiness. Or, perhaps unconsciously, at that moment, nature was taking revenge for the deprivations I voluntarily inflicted every day", by giving away her bread to the needy along the way home, and whatever is left to her family upon her arrival (Berenguer, 2004).

Cynicism kicking in, one might say. But Sara did not sleep that night because of the shame she felt and had to confess to her mother as if she had committed a crime. The shame is data. It tells us something about what the experiment had made of her, someone for whom bread given away was the norm and bread eaten alone in the dark was a transgression. That is not the psychology of defeat. It is the psychology of an alternative modernity that, even in its ruins, had successfully remade what it meant to be a person in relation to others.

Indeed, the limits of the revolution were real. Some were internal, as discussed earlier. Most starkly, the CNT's democratic informality was generative in peacetime and fatal in war. The stickiness of patriarchy, alive even amongst libertarian boys, showed that the transformation of economic life did not automatically reach into the sediment of gendered habit and stereotypes. Additionally, persisting labour tensions and political fractures mentioned earlier were the friction of an experiment building itself in real time, without a ripe blueprint and under fire.

But the limits that ended the experiment were not all of these internal challenges. They were external, deliberate, and heavily armed. The military defeat made the continuation of the project impossible. Against a combined military and political forces of states, the neighbourhood committees and the federated syndicates were outgunned and structurally targeted. The collectivised industries were renationalised. The *Sindicato de la Sanidad* was dismantled. The abortion decree was reversed. The modernist schools were closed. Over 10,000 people were executed in the first week of the occupation.

Conclusion

Gaonkar's framework of alternative modernities insists that we do not measure one modernity by the standards of another. What appears as failure from within the logic of capitalist modernity may be, on its own terms, something entirely different (Gaonkar 2001). Barcelona 1936 was not an incomplete version of the modernity that defeated it. It was a different version, one that delivered on promises that the other had deferred indefinitely. Its schools were free and self-directed. Its hospitals were collective and humane. Its factories were organised largely without hierarchy. Its women, however incompletely, were pushing at the walls of patriarchy through Mujeres Libres, the abortion decree, the sex education classes, and the right to hold the podium that no previous order had given them. Measured by Gaonkar's terms, and through an ethnographic lens, I argue that, in 1936, Barcelona was a triumphant demonstration of what modernity could have been had different political forces prevailed.

The *Escola Moderna* classroom where Sara taught what she knew to those who knew less and studied at midnight to answer what she did not yet know, was an alternative modern world, in miniature, already inhabited. Similarly, the collectivised maternity hospital was humane healthcare, prefigured, without waiting for state permission. This is what makes the military defeat so costly and what makes measuring it by the defeat so perverse. To say Barcelona 1936 failed is to adopt the perspective of the forces that destroyed it.

Sara understood this, and, in the process of examining her life and thoughts, made me understand it too. Her poem, written in exile 50 years after the events, is indicative of the lessons overshadowed by military defeat. The rose with crushed petals and fainted perfume, left in the corner of a porcelain vase, has not lost its freshness:

Ya ves, como estoy ahora	You see, as I am now
mis pétalos estrujados	my petals crushed
mi perfume desmayado…	my perfume fainted…
es triste, -digo la rosa-	it is sad – says the rose –
yo humilde y sin color	I, humble and colourless
me quedé arrinconada	have been left in a corner
en el jarron de porcelana	in the porcelain vase
mas guardo la lozanía	but I keep the freshness
y mi delicado perfume.	and my delicate perfume.
Pero consuélate amigo,	But console yourself, friend,
mañana, otro día, los dos	tomorrow, another day, the two of us
nos encontraremos en el	will meet
estercolero del Vecino	in the neighbour's compost heap
y luego nos llevarán	and then they will take us
en algun campo de trigo	to some wheat field
y seremos las particulas	and we will be the particles
de una tierra fertile	of a fertile land
y el inicio de amapolas	and the beginning of poppies
o de espigas doradas	or of golden spikes
y del sol, luz	familiar, and from the sun, familiar light,
tendremos calidas miradas.	we will have warm glances.
El sol que nos da la vida	The sun that gives us life
y ello, a cambio de nada;	in exchange for nothing;
¡Para qué queremos más¡	what more could we want!

A poem by Sara Berenguer, written in 1992.[9]

What victory could not measure is what survives the military defeat. The experiment happened. The world it made, however briefly, was real. And real things, once shown to be possible, cannot be made impossible again by force. That is what the compost heap knows, and what the porcelain vase does not.

Only recently has this episode been given adequate room in official memory. The current socialist government in Spain conceded to decades-long campaigns for exhuming and identifying mass graves. Over 114,000 people remain missing: over 8000 in Barcelona alone. The dead have not yet been fully counted.

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ORCID iD

Ibrahim Halawi https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9200-8197

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Notes

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Author biography

Ibrahim Halawi is a Lecturer in International Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research interests focus on revolutions and theories of revolution, social movements, states, and identity politics, with a particular interest in the Middle East and North Africa. He is the Book Series Editor of Routledge Studies in Global and Transitional Politics and a member of the editorial board of the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.