

# Interview with Octavio Alberola

Translated by Paul Sharkey (20/05/10)

“I think we stand at a crossroads in history that may well open up a promising pathway to human self-emancipation”

*[Octavio Alberola is an anarchist. He was born in Alayor in the Balearic Islands in 1928. These days he lives in Perpignan, France. In 1939 he arrived in Mexico with his parents. That signalled the start of his anarchist activism. He was active with the Libertarian Youth (FIJL) and Spanish CNT in Mexico. In 1962 he joined the clandestine Defensa Interior organisation set up by the Spanish Libertarian Movement following its 1961 congress. He is currently active with the ‘Granado-Delgado Trial Review Group’ which has been lobbying since 1998 for the overturning of Franco-era convictions, and he is also a member of the GALSIC (Support Group for Libertarians and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba). Indefatigable, he is also a contributor to other libertarian ventures around Europe. He is a man with tales to tell of an eventful, intense life as a libertarian. He touches on some of these during the following interview, granted to the ANA (Anarchist News Agency). But even when the conversation ends there is a lingering impression that much more has been left untold. But on to the interview.]*



**ANA:** How did anarchism first come into your life?

Octavio Alberola: Well, through the living of it of course .. and through my parents and the events they lived through. To be more specific, through dealings with other comrades, male and female, through their teaching efforts as rationalist schoolteachers and through bearing the consequences of the repression they endured and. In all likelihood, through the discussions, readings and propaganda meetings which I gradually came to share with them and with their CNT comrades in Spain as well as exile, first in France and later in Mexico. As well as through my discussions with fellow students on different political, social and cultural issues and through having to grapple with the authoritarian discipline of education in secondary and preparatory schooling in Jalapa, the capital of Veracruz state in the Mexican Republic. Although it may well have been with my move to Mexico City to begin my university course that anarchist ideas percolated through more, in that I was involved in the organising of the Mexican Libertarian Youth and within days was having to share a (clandestine) cell with another three young comrades. The Mexican authorities held us there for a month after we were caught while putting up a libertarian manifesto on the walls of Mexico City.



Octavio Alberola (right - standing) at a conference in the Ateneo Español in Mexico City, 1959

**ANA:** Was yours an anarchist family?

OA: My father's parents were Aragonese peasants who had moved into Barcelona in 1899-90. As a boy he attended Francisco Ferrer y Guardia's Modern School. He met my mother in Olot in



José Alberola Navarro, Clara, his partner and pupils.



Other rationalist schools founded by José Alberola were in: Barcelona, Olot, Eida y Jativa, Alaior and Viladecans



Anarchist militant and rationalist teacher José Alberola Navarro (1895-1966) with some of his pupils at the Aurora Cultural Society, Fraga, Aragón, 1933. His son, Octavio, is standing in front of him (right of picture)



Left: José Alberola Navarro, Mexico City, 1966 (shortly before his murder). Above, Octavio Alberola with his mother and father (early 1950s)

Gerona province during a strike in which the 48 hour week was achieved for the very first time. He was deported and by 1928 was a rationalist schoolteacher at the Escuela Laica in Alaior in Minorca in the Balearic Islands. That's where I was born. Come the army revolt in 1936 he was Fraga in Aragon, teaching at the CNT's rationalist school and when the Council of Aragon was formed after 18 July 1936, my father was put in charge of the Cultural Department. At the end of the (civil) war we crossed into France and later went into exile in Mexico. Over there he was head of the Colegio Cervantes in Jalapa city in Veracruz state. My mother always helped him with his rationalist teaching work.

*ANA And what career did you train for at university?*

OA: I trained as civil engineer at the Engineering Faculty of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). And I studied theoretical physics at the Science Faculty.

*ANA: And your family today. Is it anarchist?*

OA: I have four children, all born in Mexico and, given that I was leading a



Octavio Alberola Surinach

clandestine existence between 1962 and 1975, I have only been able to stay in touch with them since they became grown-ups. None of them is active in any anarchist organisation, but they are of a libertarian, secular turn of mind.

*ANA: Was it in Mexico that you first came into contact with the Cuban anarchists? When did your relationship with ALC (Cuban Libertarian Association) begin and when did you start helping libertarian exiles fleeing from the Batista dictatorship because of their clandestine activities? Could you say something about that period? Those were very turbulent times, weren't they?*

OA: In 1956 I was contacted by Cuban exiles in Mexico and in particular by people from M26J (26 July Movement) and from the DRE (Revolutionary Student Directory). I worked with them right up until the collapse of General Batista's dictatorship. Those were indeed very turbulent times that raised a lot of hopes as to the possibility of mounting an experiment in marrying socialism and freedom, but as the Cuban revolution became institutionalised as state capitalism I let my ties with the Castroists drop. In 1961 I met a number of Cuban libertarians who had fought in the Sierra Maestra but it was only many years later that I began to correspond with the MLC (Cuban Libertarian Movement) comrades. Those contacts were solidified with Frank Fernández's trip to Paris in 2000. Shortly before that I had helped launch the GALSIC (Support Group for Libertarians and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba). But from the early 1990s on, I was very involved with left-wing Cuban dissidents arriving in France and towards the end of the 1990s I made a trip to Cuba myself to being aid to the so-called independent trade unions and bookshops which wanted to organise a demonstration by prisoners' wives (the fore-runners of today's 'Damas en Blanco/Ladies in White' on the occasion of the Ibero-American gathering of the heads of state in Havana. I secured assistance from the (Swedish) SAC for the shooting of a documentary about trade unionism in Cuba.

*ANA: What age were you at that point?*

OA: In 1956 I was 28.

*ANA: You said that in 1962 you met lots of Cuban libertarians who had fought in the Sierra Maestra. Are there any Cuban anarchists from that time still alive?*

OA: Of the three that came to Mexico, one went back to Cuba (he having come on an official mission) the other two moved on to the USA.

*ANA: Were there many women among the libertarian exiles who fled the Batista dictatorship?*

OA: No. There were no women among the very few libertarian exiles I met in Mexico.

*ANA: Was there any episode from those days that stands out above all the rest in your memory?*

OA: One incident I have never forgotten and which was very ominous for the future was the clash I had at a meeting organised in 1958 at the Ateneo Español in Mexico City, with some 26 July Movement members who were trying to stop a young black guy from the Revolutionary Student Directorate (who had just been smuggled off the island) from finishing his contribution after he denounced the dangers of *caudillismo* in the fight against the Batista dictatorship. Since I was chairing the meeting, I saw to it that the young black guy was able to hold on to the microphone and complete his remarks. There was a kick-up that in a way was a foretaste of what the struggle for power was going to be like after Batista's downfall.



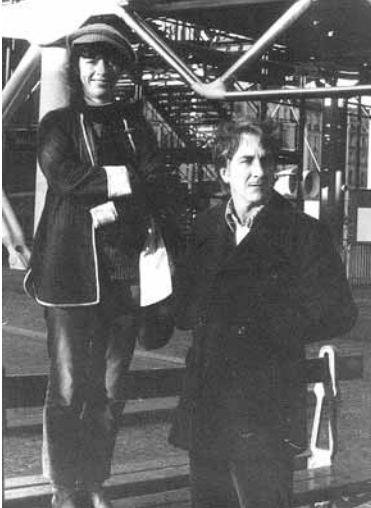
Top/below/overleaf: Octavio and other anti-Francoist guerrillas training in Mexico in 1959 after the Castroite victory





*ANA: What was your hairiest moment from that time?*

OA: The hairiest moment came when the Mexican authorities kept me under surveillance (I was followed by a number of policemen in a car), on the grounds that I might be the target of an attack (on the part of Trujillo supporters), in the wake of the attempt on the life of the Venezuelan Betancourt. Obviously, it was confirmation that I had been under surveillance for some time past .. Later, while in Europe, the hairiest moments came during my three arrests (the first time at the hands of the Belgian authorities and then – twice – by the French)



*ANA: What was behind the arrests in Belgium and France? Did you spend much time in jail?*

OA: I was arrested in Belgium in February 1968 along with my partner, Ariane, at the instigation of Franco's police. The charge was possession of two handguns and phony papers .. well, the initial charge against me (planning to kidnap a Spanish diplomat attached to the EU) was dropped. I was inside for five months and my partner for two months. In France, we were arrested in May 1974 after the release of Banco de Bilbao director in Paris, he

Octavio Alberola and partner Ariane Gransac Sadori, Paris, early 1970s (photo Stuart Christie)

having been abducted in order to highlight the execution in Spain of the young Catalan anarchist Salvador Puig Antich and prevent the execution of a further two other MIL (Iberian Libertarian Movement) militants. They arrested ten of us comrades (Spanish and French) and they accused me of having orchestrated the abduction (though they were never able to uncover or arrest the comrades who did it). I was the one detained longest: 9 months. Later we were freed on bail and assigned residence in Paris. In 1981, by which Franco was dead, they gave us a criminal trial that lasted for a week and we were all acquitted as the police could not make the charges stick.

*ANA: And were you able to enter Cuba without a hitch? Weren't you afraid of being jailed, given that you were certainly in the sights of Cuban Intelligence over your criticisms of Fidel and his regime ...?*

OA: I didn't go back to Cuba until the early 1980s .. But then it was a stop-over on the way to Peru and Bolivia in connection with the retrieval and preservation of popular memory in Latin America under the sponsorship of the Institute of History in Amsterdam, the Feltrinelli Library in Milan, the Contemporary International Documentation Library in Nanterre (Paris) and the CIDA in Spain. Later, in 1989 and 1992, in preparation for a display on the influence of the French Revolution in Latin America and another display connected with the 500 years of struggle for human rights in Latin America, on the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French Revolution and the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of America. On those trips I had the backing of European universities. My last time there was towards the end of the 1990s at the time of the Ibero-American Heads of State Summit in Havana. I went over to organise contacts with the dissident groups so that an MEP might attend a demonstration by prisoners' wives. We had no problems getting into the country nor with making the contacts for the regime at that point had no desire to spark any sort of a scandal .. But the previous night they had placed the women and a number of dissidents under temporary arrest, so the demonstration could not go ahead and the MEP made do with holding a press conference for the European reporters present in the island. At the airport I was held for a few hours by State Security who let me know that I had been under surveillance throughout my three days on the island. They told me they were aware of my past and the days when we had fought Batista together .. and in the end they let me board

the flight back to Paris. Plainly they had no desire to trigger a scandal whilst all the Ibero-American heads of state were on the island.

*ANA: Did you ever come under physical attack by some fanatical Castro supporter?*

OA: No, not myself. The only physical aggression I ever saw from the Castroists came from members of Cuban Security outside the Cuban embassy in Paris during a demonstration organised by “Reporters Without Borders” shortly after the round-up of “independent journalists” in Cuba in March 2003.

*ANA: Your critics have it that you are funded by the Cuban bourgeoisie in Miami. What do you think of that?*

OA: They’ve never said it to my face for they are very well aware that as far as the Miami bourgeoisie is concerned, they have only one worse enemy than a communist, and that’s an anarchist.

*ANA: What’s your take on the Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez?*

OA: My opinion is based only on what I’ve read about her, including information from comrades on the island and on what she has written, as I do not know her personally. And in that regard my view cannot be definitive, as I know nothing of her real motives in espousing a stance of public dissent within Cuba. That said, it strikes me that Yoani’s dissent has been shaped by her having had to live in the context foisted by the Castro regime on all Cubans and that her experiences have prompted her to rebel in order to show her unhappiness with and repudiation of such a regime. I just hope that her high profile is dictated by the conditions in which dissenters are obliged to operate thanks to the regime and that, when push comes to shove, she will champion for others the sort of freedom of expression that she claims for herself in dealing with the Castro dictatorship.

*ANA: At present is there scope for libertarian debate and activities within Cuba? How do you see the libertarian scene in that country?*

OA: There is “scope” to the extent that Cubans are losing their fear of being outspoken and the regime (as in the dying days of the Francoist dictatorship) can no longer be as open in its repression as it once was. This is what we are finding with the ‘Ladies in White’ and other opposition groups .. I am quite optimistic about the prospects for libertarianism in Cuba for the comrades with whom we are in touch (members of the Observatorio Crítico) strike me as very capable and appreciative of the chance for anarchists to expose Castroism’s sham socialism and demonstrate the revolutionary potential of libertarian socialism.



Meeting following the re-unification of the CNT in 1961



*ANA: Is it true that you were behind two attempts on Franco’s life in the 1960s? How did that come about?*

OA: It’s a very long story that I mean to sum up as briefly as I can. In 1961 at the CNT congress held in Limoges (France) the MLE (Spanish Libertarian Movement) which had been riven into two factions ever since 1945 was reunified. In secret session that congress resolved to set up an underground agency to plot against the Francoist dictatorship. Its name was Defensa Interior and it was to have been made up of seven militants from the CNT, FAI and FIJL. At the start of 1962, the MLE’s Defence Commission appointed seven people to the DI and I was appointed to represent the FIJL on it. Which is the reason why I left Mexico and joined the DI operating underground in France and Spain. The DI decided to embark upon operations to harass the Francoist dictatorship as a means of exposing brutal Francoist repression and affording solidarity to those behind bars in Spain. It also decided to

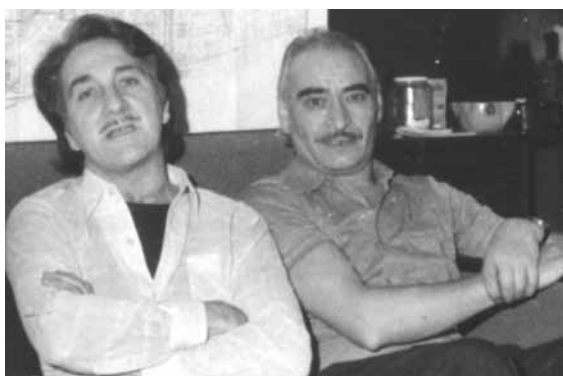


To clear the names of Joaquín Delgado and Francisco Granado

assassinate the dictator and to that end laid the groundwork for an initial anti-Franco operation carried out in the summer of 1962 in San Sebastián; it failed for technical reasons (relating to the life of the battery of the receiver equipment) and intelligence failings (Franco postponed his trip there). The operation created a great stir and the press talked about an abortive attempt on Franco's life. The Francoist police carried out lots of arrests among the Basque independence supporters but they had to let them go because they could not trace the libertarians from the DI who had actually carried out the operation. In the summer of 1963 another anti-Franco operation was ready for mounting in Madrid along the route that Franco took from the El Pardo Palace to the Oriente Palace when receiving the credentials of newly appointed ambassadors arriving in Madrid: but circumstances yet to be completely explained led to the arrest of two comrades from the team that was laying the groundwork for the attempt on Franco's life and the loss of all the gear earmarked for the operation. The Francoist regime responded with brutality and within 17 days had tried and executed those two comrades, Francisco Granado and Joaquín Delgado as well as carrying out many indiscriminate arrests of libertarians in Spain and, indeed, within France, where the French authorities, acting on information received from the Francoists, arrested about a hundred younger libertarians and a few older militants in a range of cities. This crackdown brought the DI to a standstill and from that point on, the FIJL went it alone in carrying out actions against the Francoist dictatorship. For further information, see the book *El anarquismo español y la acción revolucionaria (1961-1974)* and the documentaries made by TVE and the European ARTE channel on the attempts to kill Franco.



The March on Bayonne, 1975 (photo S. Christie)



Octavio Alberoa and Antonio Tellez, Paris 1973 (photo S. Christie)

*ANA: Moving on to another subject, what's your take on the fact that the financial crisis in recent years has not*



Octavio Alberoa and Stuart Christie, Paris 1970 (photo Ariane Gransac)



Octavio Alberoa, José and Gracieta Peirats, French/Spanish frontier, 1962

*triggered huge protests in Europe?*

OA: The recent financial 'crisis' has not triggered huge protests across Europe even though it has had a significant impact on employment, for the simple reason that most European workers had achieved enormous purchasing power and the economic system has not drastically reduced their purchasing power and, as a result, their consumer capacity. I don't see this situation changing in the near future, so it seems to me that the balance of power in capitalism's favour is going to carry on .. until another crisis, an ecological crisis worsens and opens the eyes of most workers to the danger that the persistence of the capitalist system represents for their very survival. An eye-opening that might encourage the emergence of a planet-wide self-managerial movement to save the planet and the human race from all of the threats posed by the capitalist and authoritarian management of human societies.

*ANA: How does anarchism stand in France? There's an anarchist bookshop where you are now living in Perpignan, isn't that right?*

OA: Yes, I live in Perpignan and there are several bookshops in the town, but there is one in particular where we lay on book launches and debates from time to time. Anarchism in France is in fine fettle since relations between all of the organisations subscribing to the libertarian ideal are good. And there are several intellectuals of renown – Michel Onfray, in particular – who support anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism and that is helping to make anarchism relevant to the wider public.

*ANA: Is 'Radio Libertaire' still broadcasting from Paris? You have a programme on Latin American matters.. How did that experience go?*

OA: Not me personally, but I help out by sending information to the comrades (the Chilean Nestor Vega and the Frenchwoman Lise Bouzidi) who are still driving the broadcasts on. It was and still is a fine experiment which has also enabled us to contact lots of organisations active in the Latin American context.

*ANA: Are you active with any French organisation or do you work alongside lots of groups? What form does your activism take these days?*

OA: I work with various French anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations (the CNT, the FAF and other libertarian groups that bring out reviews or publish books, etc.) and Spanish counterparts (the CNT and the CGT and non-aligned anarchist groups). I also help out with the People's Universities, especially in Perpignan. But in addition to contributing to the libertarian press in terms of articles, I am involved in campaigns for the recovery of libertarian historical memories in Spain through the "Granado-Delgado Trial Review Group" (Granado and Delgado being the two young anarchists executed in Madrid in 1963) and with the GALSIC (Support Group for Libertarians and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba) which issues the *CUBA libertaria* Bulletin which is supporting the Cuban libertarians from the Observatorio Crítico in Havana.

*ANA: You wrote a book called Miedo a la memoria: historia de la ley de reconciliación y concordia (Frightened to Remember: The Story of the Reconciliation and Concord Law) and another called El anarquismo español y la acción revolucionaria (Spanish Anarchism and Revolutionary Action). Have you any others in the pipe-line?*

OA: I am working on a 'life' of my father who worked in Spain and in Mexico as a rationalist schoolteacher trained in the methods of the libertarian educationist Francisco Ferrer y Guardia. That biography is due to be published by the comrades from CGT Menorca (in Spain). I am also writing a book about *The Dogged Quest for Utopia* .. But unfortunately, the campaigns to recover historical memory in Spain and my efforts in solidarity with the Cuban comrades leave me very little time to progress both those projects.

*ANA: And are there other, more pressing commitments?*

OA: As I have just stated, the most pressing plans relate to my activities on behalf of those

campaigns as I move around giving talks in France and Spain, bringing out the *CUBA libertaria* bulletin and writing articles, making notes and corresponding, etc. Now we are trying to mobilise all of the individuals and groups which have mobilised right across Europe on behalf of Judge Baltasar Garzón, denouncing the Spanish socialist government's responsibility for the judicial survival of Francoism through the institutions of the "Democracy" that the transition hatched in Spain.

*ANA: As a veteran anarchist and active Internet user, do you reckon that medium helps spread anarchism?*

OA: The Internet strikes me as a great tool, not just in terms of the potential for making democratic information accessible to the vast majority of human beings, but also in terms of its technological potential (in terms of democratic management and self-management of information). It seems to me that the Internet may encourage the emergence and operation of egalitarian, non-hierarchical social practices that may make a rational abundance a possibility along with an end to wage slavery and the spread of freedom without hindrance to the functioning of the collective. Obviously all of that is going to depend on mankind's ability to prioritise the survival of the species over capitalism's tendency to prioritise a destructive and competitive individualism.

*ANA: Humanity recent history would seem to place us in a perpetual present. Do you see marked differences between the turbulent times you happened to live through and current times? What might those differences be?*

OA: No, I get the impression ... True, Power is still with us; but equally it is true that new forms of challenging, anti-authoritarian behaviours are forever emerging. The differences from the previous era are many whether in terms of human relations (there unexpected strides forwards having been achieved there over the past half century) and in public life, with Power losing its cachet and more and more questions being raised about the nonsensical, irrational, unfair and downright dangerous (for the survival of the species) character of capitalism. I reckon we stand at a crossroads of history which may well open up promising paths to human self-emancipation. A prospect that was never before quite so real. Obviously, it will all depend on our ability to pursue that and make it a reality.

*ANA: Is there anywhere where you see more anarchist hopes, a more vibrant, inspiring anarchism? Is what has been going on in Greece lately likely to spread?*

OA: Right now what I reckon is most hopeful is the agreement between so many libertarians and marxists in their critique of authoritarianism and in their prizing of autonomy and self-management. A spontaneous, planet-wide phenomenon which is interconnected thanks to the Internet and through networks of solidarity, dialogue and reflection. A resolutely non-dogmatic anarchism which has found in the French philosopher Michel Onfray (whose books have been translated into 15 languages and sold by the hundreds of thousands of copies) its number one spokesman outside of like-minded anarchist circles proper. The Greek events do not strike me as a particularly consistent manifestation of anarchist thinking as I reckon they place undue stress on confrontations with the forces of order without actually questioning the authoritarian order. Although that impression may well be due to the difficulty of my gaining access to their writings.

*ANA: And to conclude our interview, in the light of your activism to date, what were your greatest anarchist delights?*

OA: My greatest joy was seeing that all of the efforts and sacrifices made between 1962 and 1967 by young libertarians (Spanish, French, Italian and British libertarians were targeted for repression in Spain as well as in France, Italy and Britain) to relaunch anarchist revolutionary activism were not in vain. And their having decisively helped the events of May '68 in France and elsewhere to bear the anarchist imprint of questioning power and dogma in all their guises. A questioning which, it seems to me, is a crucial contribution to have made to that dogged quest for an egalitarian and libertarian utopia such as humanity has always had in its sights ever since

the friction between command and obedience first turned into the locomotive of human history.

*ANA: Is there anything else you'd like to add? You must be weary. Thank you.*

OA: There is a lot that has been left unsaid .. but we have to take care lest we weary potential readers of this interview.

