

## Memories Concerning the Career of Joan Martinez-Alier

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Andaluces de Jaén.  
Aceituneros altivos,  
decidme en el alma, quién,  
quien levanto los olivos?  
No los levanto la nada,  
ni el dinero, ni el señor,  
sino la tierra callada  
el trabajo y el sudor.  
Unidos al agua pura  
y a los planetas unidos,  
los tres dieron la hermosura  
de los troncos retorcidos.  
Cuantos siglos de aceituna,  
los pies y las manos presas,  
sol a sol y luna a luna,  
pesan sobre vuestros huesos?  
Jaén, levántate, brava,  
sobre tus piedras lunares,  
no vayas a ser esclava  
con todos tus Olivares.  
Andaluces de Jaén (Miguel Hernandez).

My mother tried (unsuccessfully) to become a volunteer nurse on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and prompted me at an early age to read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. In my fifteenth summer, before the tourist boom, she took me for a week to Tossa del Mar, partly in the hope that I would learn a little Spanish. I remember on the beach meeting another teenager, a couple of years senior to me, and enquiring (inarticulately) what he thought of Franco. At first he looked all round, then led me to a quiet spot. "Odio a Franco." I tried to understand why, but the barrier separating us was more than linguistic. No-one I knew in London was as intense as this. "After the war he killed my father, he killed my two older brothers. The only reason I survived was because I was so little."

Such antecedents shaped my reactions when, 8 years later, I first met Joan Martinez-Alier – at the Latin American Centre in Oxford University, where I was beginning my academic career. My spoken Spanish was still shaky, but I had learnt to read quite well. Joan had just published his first book with *Ruedo Iberico*, an ethnography of olive growing in southern Spain, and he needed someone to help him translate into grammatical English. After a few months I became remarkably proficient in the specialized vocabulary of olive planting, hoeing and harvesting, even though I had never knowingly clapped eyes on an olive grove, and was still barely capable of a social conversation in Spanish on more familiar matters. What did penetrate my consciousness was the spirit of the Miguel Hernandez poem quoted above.

Little by little I became acquainted with more of Joan's work and outlook, and over the ensuing half century, our paths have crossed from time to time, although only rarely and fleetingly. Since the great hinterland of his life is closed to me, all that I can contribute here are the following fragmentary and episodic recollections. They concern his impact on me, rather than the overall arc of his existence.

Reading about his *oliveros* reinforced one of my early professional biases. Whatever grand theory or social science orthodoxy happened to absorb my attention at any particular time, Joan (like my mother in this respect) always reminded me of the need to listen to ordinary people, to value close observation of real conditions, to resist the intellectual's temptation to substitute a fancy generalization for the granular texture of actual human practices. I was more of a welfare statist than Joan (always the anarchist at heart). But Joan's encouragement of patient ethnographic enquiry, informed by a genuine openness to humanity's strange diversity of "really existing" conditions, beliefs and practices, has proved a vital antidote to the "ivory tower" distortions of a lifetime spent in Oxford Colleges.

Oxford's Latin American Centre has always needed some capacity to monitor and explain the course of the Cuban Revolution, and (unlike in Spain) there is almost no-one in British academia who has the opportunity to pursue that thread of enquiry. On a modest scale that task has normally fallen to me, and in the early days, Joan played a creative role in strengthening that project. The core problem has always been that the Fidelista lobby can tolerate no critical commentary, while the massed weight of US (and therefore English language) scholarship on Cuba is suffused with anti-fidelista and Miami-centric bias to such an extent that little in-between can get a hearing. But a few of us could listen to both sides without being captured by either orthodoxy, and the mandate of the Latin American Centre was to pursue the evidence that both camps distorted and disvalued. In particular, my problem has always been that although I could easily access both Havana and Miami, I lacked the face-to-face contact needed to reliably bypass the clashing ideologies. In this regard, at an early stage in my career, I recall making some approximate and unfounded guesses about peasant life in communist Cuba. Joan quietly but firmly informed me of the sad and sorry realities, at least as he had observed them firsthand in one small community in the neglected eastern interior. Since then I have I have been more careful to remember what I did not know about the island.

My early lived experiences of Latin America came from Bolivia (later also Chile and Argentina) rather than the Caribbean. In due course, Joan also undertook fieldwork in the Andes, and again he saw from the bottom-up realities that I was mainly aware from the top (the capital cities) down. In particular, I recall that he taught in the Universidad de Huancayo (in Central Peru), around the time that it was becoming the epicentre of what would soon become known as *Senderismo Luminoso*. From my privileged vantage point it seemed credible to believe that these "Maoist" intellectuals were indeed true believers in the doctrines then being exported from Beijing, but again Joan provided a sobering corrective. I recall learning two points in particular. His students came to his courses suffering from malnutrition; and they did not need to believe that a Maoist seizure of state power was really attainable. It was worthwhile to join the revolutionary struggle so that at least those with

enough to eat would find out what it was like to suffer, even if the prospect of emancipation was just a fantasy serving the ambitions of their leaders. Again, Joan's anarchism proved closer to reality than my welfare statism. (I should have known better from the Khmer Rouge.)

A decade or so later, when I edited the *Journal of Latin American Studies*, I got the chance to publish Joan's ideas on "the environmentalism of the poor". This was a highly controversial piece, which I believe *Past and Present* declined on the ground that it romanticized the attitudes of the peasantry towards the natural environment. My impression was (and remains) that this was an ideal rather than a strictly empirical argument, and as such it provided a much-needed corrective to the then prevailing cult of the market.

However that may be, Joan then progressed to a deeper level of social science theorization. Other contributors can say more about his work in the theory of ecological economics. My comment here only reflects a distant personal impression. When I first went to Cuba I recall enquiring in one of their economics departments about how they could calculate national product in the absence of a price mechanism. "We are Marxists, so we use the labour theory of value" came the reply. It seemed that the more labour they put into production, the greater the value it must generate. Trained as a Keynesian I took price signals as the markers of social value, although like the Cubans I distrusted exploitative property relations (and I overrated the physical outputs of commodities, while downgrading the importance of financial services). By the time Joan was developing his challenge to economic orthodoxy both the Cuban and the Keynesian approaches were being displaced by what can be briefly summed up as "neoliberalism". All those who thought that something essential was missing from the new calculus of society's measurement of economic optimization needed to develop a workable method of precise aggregation other than that underpinning the prevailing orthodoxy. It was a bold and truly radical idea to measure the worth of production in terms of its energy content and environmental impact. Since neither the labour theory of value, nor the physical commodities perspective, could meet this challenge that left a void that ecological economics could endeavour to fill.

My two most recent encounters with Joan were both occasioned by his return visits to Oxford. He played a leading role in an informal 1-day seminar that I organized in Nuffield place. At that time what most struck me was the impact his ideas were having outside their initial audiences in southern Europe and in Latin America. Again on his latest visit (only last year), it was clear that ecological historians and contemporary radical policymakers in Asia, as well Europe and the Americas, were developing his insights. I also know that he continues to play a lively (and provocative) role in Catalan academia and politics. Perhaps my original informant from Tossa del Mar has rallied to his banner? And maybe there are still Andaluces de Jaen who honour Miguel Hernandez and who cultivate their olive groves on Joan's principles of ecological soundness.