

Agustín García Calvo in our time

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The Spanish philosopher and writer Agustín García Calvo, who died in 2012, was a thinker who tried to provoke people into thinking about the problems posed by neoliberal globalisation. He thought that this global ideology was made to appear self-imposed, a kind of *hyper ouranos topos* (or ideal realm) pervading everything and from which everything emanates, and his works represent and raise awareness of the experience and effects of its absolute ideological hegemony. His political thought was inspired, in this respect, by the Presocratic thinkers, whom he had studied deeply.

Yet this raises an obvious question: how could a group of thinkers apparently concerned exclusively with theoretical aspects of reality offer the basis for a political agenda for the Left? I think they might, as Engels argued a long time ago¹ – for the Presocratics attempt also to untie the slipknot of cultural and religious prejudices and to challenge power relationships, exposing, among other things, unconsciously assumed ideological positions that contribute to submission and dispossession. Certainly Heidegger's hermeneutical work – reading the Presocratics in terms of 'power', 'struggle' or 'strength' – problematises any simple appropriation of their ideas for the Left.² But Heidegger's is not the only possible analysis: García Calvo offers an interpretation of the Presocratic thinkers that has in fact permeated left-wing politics in Spain over recent decades. Specifically, he has had a notable influence in the anti-Francoist struggle, the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT, social movements such as the 15m and political parties such as Podemos, among others.

Born in Zamora in 1926, García Calvo studied classical philology at the University of Salamanca. In 1964 he was appointed to a university chair of Classical Lan-

guages at Madrid's Universidad Complutense. After supporting the student revolt in 1965, he was removed from his professorship and lived in self-imposed exile in Paris. In 1970 he was appointed professor at Lille University and at the Collège de France. He also worked as a translator for the exiled Spanish publishing house Ruedo Ibérico. In 1976, following the death of General Franco, he recovered his chair in Madrid, where he remained teaching ancient philology until his retirement in 1992. He was emeritus professor at the Universidad Complutense until 1997 and remained active as a lecturer, writer and columnist until his death in 2012.

In his work, García Calvo proposes a hypercritical model of political action that focuses on discovering the falsehoods on which our reality is built, condemning them and insisting on saying 'no' to any form of imposition. He argues that this is the only realistic political tactic that can be cultivated in our circumstances: to bring to the surface the commands that the ruling social order imposes; to show that these commands are not to be confused with our own impulses, desires or wills; and thus to begin to realistically resist.³ He is well aware of how restricted his programme is, but insists that that is precisely its strength, being rigorously realistic about how what are described as *our* desires, and so on, are always integrated and assimilated by the existing social order. He thus maintains that it is not possible in this conjuncture to draw any kind of positive theoretical conclusions at all. Rather, all we can do is to insist on being resolutely negative. We must simply give up the production of theory, together with any plans, strategies or proposals to which such theory might give rise, in order to focus entirely on negative action, struggle and praxis. His political project may be said

to resemble the attitude of the gentleman in Kafka's tale, of whom the servant, when he sees him saddle up and about to leave, asks, 'Where is the master going?', to which his answer is: 'Just out of here.'⁴ 'Just out of here' is at once all we can say and a sufficient basis for action. That is to say that to condemn the ideas and forms imposed from above, to break these forms and ideas and to uncover what lies behind them is – however apparently purely negative – already a worthwhile step. In fact, it is not only worthwhile, but necessary.

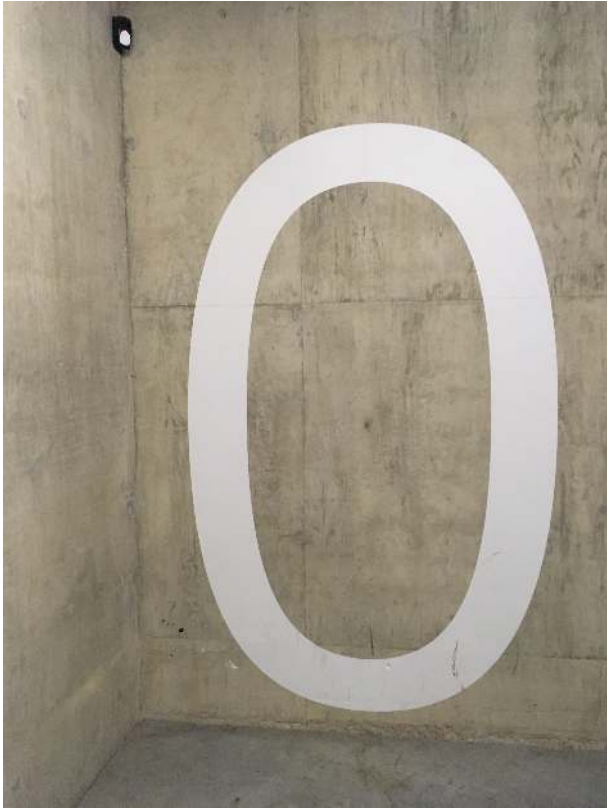
So how might García Calvo's strategy be integrated into a coherent and consistent left-wing programme? The first thing to understand is that it is not a question of what one speaks *for*, but only of what one speaks *against*. García Calvo starts with an indefinite pronoun and impersonal speech, from which the *subject* has been eliminated. When 'one' intends to 'be against', there are neither guides nor rules: the important point is to fight against what is being imposed and what is being presented as what 'one' desires.⁵ Paraphrasing one of his favourite poets, Antonio Machado, one might say that for García Calvo it is the struggle itself that lights up the road. In this struggle it is supremely important to know what one is against; it is all that finally matters. García Calvo is in no doubt whatsoever about this. He is against any and all plans and projects, against any and every authority and dogma; in short, against all the falsehoods on which life today is based – the State, the capitalist production regime, representative democracy and patriarchy. So, if in political terms the intention is a left-wing transformation of reality – or, as he insisted, transformation from 'below' – the first and most urgent task is to bring to light the contradictions on which the present social order is based. In fact, we need to impose a self-limiting ordinance on ourselves and refuse to do anything *more* than that. Otherwise we risk both neoliberal assimilation and outright rejection by those whose 'utopias' or 'positive' proposals fail to match our own, thus fragmenting opposition from the very outset. García Calvo makes no concessions: for him discontent is both the beginning and end. The struggle is a war against every aspect of reality as currently constructed.⁶ Negation is the only viable path towards liberation.

Presocratic logic

But García Calvo's position is not merely a tactical political response to present conditions. It is rooted in the Presocratic philosophers' logical speculations and it is on this basis that he approaches the contemporary political world. What, then, does he take from Presocratic logic? Certainly not an *apodeiktikes epistemes* or a demonstrative science in the style of Aristotle, nor a formal science intended to formalise principles of valid reasoning. Rather, García Calvo understood Presocratic logic as an activity through which one might explore some of the mechanisms of language and follow those mechanisms through to their ultimate consequences. For him, Presocratic logic is pre-philosophical: it reveals the discontinuities that make up that which constitutes us and the essentially contradictory character of the real.⁷ It does not therefore – and of course this is what is crucial for García Calvo – present any positive doctrine. It is a constant questioning that does not seek to come to any agreement that would connect or annul the differences that reason encounters when it strikes out to investigate reality.

So how exactly is Presocratic thought political? Certainly not as a political aetiology which allows one to infer how to rule, of the sort one finds in what remains of Presocratic fragments. But Presocratic thought may nonetheless be political inasmuch as it insists that reality is made up of contradictions, that reality is genuinely contradictory. For García Calvo, this logic of contradiction is the foundational example of a non-submissive thinking that can help develop a politically – because negative – position. Anaximander's *apeiron* (unlimited or boundless), Heraclitus' *logos* (reason) or even Parmenides' *to eon* (what it is) bring to light latent contradictions between language and reality. I draw attention here to the apparently less negative thinker of those mentioned: Parmenides. After hearing the first of the ways that one can conceive – 'the one that it is and that it is not possible not to be' – Parmenides is witness to the second way – 'that it is not and that it is right it should not be'. The testimonial word of Parmenides, the word that he hears and that asserts non-being in order to negate it,

evokes non-being, and on evoking it makes possible the passage that goes from being to non-being. The 'is' that the goddess proffers seeks to define itself as apart from all negation.



Nevertheless, upon showing him the road of 'is-not' the goddess converts it into a case of 'is'. 'This IS that has no IS NOT that counterbalances it', writes García Calvo, 'is in fact also a negation of negation'.⁸ The attempt to assure the identity of 'being' metaphorically ($a = a$) ends up strengthening the contradiction that one wanted to escape ($a = \neg(\neg a)$): the opposition between 'a' and '¬a' reveals the identity of the substance 'a', but the substance is also revealed to be contradiction. What does this 'no' do? What's so radical about that? Presocratic denial can only negate what is established as real. By denying reality, Presocratic logic takes a stand against the ideas that constitute reality and destroys the very reality it denies. The destruction of what appears to be leaves breaks and pathways for 'what is not' to arise – "what is not" which we clumsily call life, love, happiness or pleasure'.⁹

The unveiling of the fundamental contradiction that our thought rests upon is an example of what García Calvo seeks to recuperate for reflection: *wounding*

logic – which is 'what Presocratic thought represents for philosophy (and its history)'¹⁰ – needs again to be heard in public. This is the task that García Calvo makes his own. He develops a conception of contradiction that does not deny the truth of things and their relations, does not seek to hide or harmonise the living contradiction that beats at the foundation of the real, but rather shows that these are the very contradictions in which human life is grounded.

No

García Calvo carried out a large portion of his public activities in anarchist cultural centres linked to the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, or National Confederation of Labour), despite the fact that he was not affiliated to any anarchist group or trade union. In anarchism, García Calvo found people he could speak with and listen to, and it would be in part in libertarian milieux that he tested the constant practice of *logos*, or common reason.¹¹ For instance, his political ideas had a powerful impact on the anti-Franco resistance group *los Ácratas* (the Anarchists). This group had the Francoist authorities on tenterhooks between 1965 and 1969, and succeeded in putting an end to the Falangist SEU (Sindicato Español Universitario, or Spanish Students' Trade Union), the only legal student organisation in Spain since 1939. According to Miquel Amorós, one of the most rigorous historians of anarchism, García Calvo was their leading influence.¹² Although in some respects they had diametrically opposed points of view – mainly concerning García Calvo's total rejection of the use of violence to achieve political aims – *los Ácratas* were nonetheless inspired by García Calvo's *via negativa*: they refused to obey orders, did not recognise courts, rejected paying taxes, avoided military service and promoted a rhetoric of confrontation with the state. Tellingly, this was based directly on García Calvo's interpretation of the Presocratics.¹³

This proximity to anarchism, however, did not mean that he ceased to point out the imbalances that were at the foundation of its project, beginning with the negative particle 'an-' that the term itself incorporates. 'No' is, for García Calvo, the voice of common reason, the voice of protest, one of the few tools

with which the people can destroy the ideas that have been developed to create and defend reality. Incorporated as the negation of authority or power (*arché*), ‘an-archy’ becomes loaded with meaning, becomes something positive and ceases thereby to serve as a critique of reality. Negation is in this way domesticated: ‘avoiding this subjection of the No to some kind of future plan like Theirs, that of those that rule, is elemental, it is the most elemental thing that one can say in politics’.¹⁴ Presocratic logic is the guide here, for its essential mechanism is negation.¹⁵ And since a simple negation, saying ‘no’ to what occurs, has no substantive content of its own it cannot be integrated into any system.

The influence of that ‘no’ with which García Calvo confronts what has been established as real can be felt in various political, social and cultural phenomena. Within anarchism, sympathisers with anarcho-syndicalism, activists and those connected with libertarian anti-political groups have all shown themselves to be in tune with the political attitude of García Calvo, holding that ideologies play various functions within the complex machinery that assures social control – including the manufacture of lies. The only legitimate political tactic is, for them, saying ‘no’: no to the future, to computed time; no to progress; no to representative democracy; no to any ‘ism’, including anarchism. In addition, activists in citizens’ movements like the 15M *indignados* have followed García Calvo in his politics of ‘no’, although these activists represent only the most radical minority sector within the movement. Finally, this ‘no’ should be noted in artists such as Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio, Isabel Escudero or Santiago Sierra, all of whom have developed a hypercritical attitude towards systems and social institutions – state, church, economic system and political powers.¹⁶

Above/below

Despite his instrumental characterisation of ideologies, left-wing parties have been inspired by, and have used, some of the concepts that García Calvo developed. I have room here to explore only the most important of these: ‘those below’. For García Calvo, ‘those below’ are one and the same as those who are

‘the people’: the term points to the *to xynon* of Heraclitus. In one of the plazas occupied during the events of 15 May 2011 in Spain, García Calvo declared:

Therefore, when amongst ourselves we say and repeat that war is not about left or right, but rather is about below against above, we should not misunderstand ... We must try to avoid confusion about above and below. Clearly and most immediately, above means cabinet ministers, top banking executives, all of that that you know is above – ‘above’: people say it like that, as we have no need to say it differently. Those who are high up are puppets that can be swapped in a couple of years or less, but that doesn’t matter; they are those who are above. They are those who control. And below are those of us who are not them, to the degree to which we are not, because each of us is a little bit that – we are all of us a little bit of a banker and a little bit of a leader, and what are we going to do? There is a part of us that tends to that, but is not that, it is what is below: the people that does not exist but is, is simply what is below, below the government, below the oppression of capital, below money.¹⁷

It is worth paying attention to the contradiction between the polarities of ‘above’ and ‘below’, which are nothing but another manifestation of the movement to which things and processes are subjected. For García Calvo, the point, however, is that this dichotomy leads to a conflict that cannot be remedied. First, ‘above’ points to the space of power; second, it shows the teleological process of power since any power needs a direction and thus prescribes an imperative sequence of events. ‘Below’, on the contrary, points to what is common and public, to what is everybody’s because it is not anybody’s.

According to scholars such as Ruiz Fernández, Podemos, the most successful political party emerging from the demonstrations in Spain of 15 May 2011, has directly appropriated García Calvo’s ‘above’/‘below’ idea.¹⁸ While Juan Carlos Monedero, one of the leaders of Podemos until his resignation in 2015, denies Ruiz Fernández’s claim,¹⁹ it seems no coincidence that the leaders of the three principal currents that now converge in Podemos – Pablo Iglesias, General Secretary of the group, Íñigo Errejón, ex-Podemos spokesman in Congress, and Miguel Urbán, chief representative of the ‘Anticapitalists’ current – continue to make use of this idea of ‘above/below’.

Despite this adoption by Podemos, and also despite the admiration that Pablo Iglesias has for García Calvo,²⁰ there is nothing further from the political logic of the latter than a standard political party. García Calvo holds that people tend to fetishise stable and hierarchical organisations: they think that a group has to organise itself after the manner of a political party because it is the only way to be effective in social struggle. Nevertheless, history is obstinate in demonstrating the contrary, manifesting over and over again the toxicity of such options.²¹ And that is something the Left would do well to ponder.

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Notes

1. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (New York: Mondial, 2006), 45.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit*, in *Gesamtausgabe II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944*, vol. 55, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 158; Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 17.
3. Agustín García Calvo, *De Dios* (Zamora: Lucina, 1996), 85. All translations of García Calvo are the author's.
4. Franz Kafka, 'The Departure', in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 497.
5. Agustín García Calvo, *Qué es el Estado* (Barcelona: La Gaya Ciencia, 1977), 8.
6. See García Calvo's talks at the Athenæum of Madrid: *Tertulia Política number 11 and 80* (2006, 2007), accessed 10 April 2018, <http://baultdetrompetillas.es/agustin-garcia-calvo/tertulias/en-el-ateneo/>
7. García Calvo studied logical contradiction in depth in his essay *Contra el Tiempo* (Zamora: Lucina, 1993).
8. Agustín García Calvo, *Lecturas presocráticas I* (Zamora: Lucina, 2001), 176.
9. Agustín García Calvo, 'Placer y negación' [Pleasure and Denial], *Conference*, 25 March 1992, accessed 29 March 2018, <http://baultdetrompetillas.es/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Placerynegacion.pdf>
10. Agustín García Calvo, *Lecturas presocráticas II. Razón Común: edición crítica, ordenación, traducción y comentario de los restos del libro de Heraclito* (Zamora: Lucina, 1985), 12.
11. García Calvo sometimes refers to his anarchic heart, 'a heart that has no ends, but only means, because its ends are nothing but its means. Its aim is above all the enemy order which is all constituted of ends and causes, of evolution towards ideal goals.' Agustín García Calvo, 'Carta a Carlos Semprún y Javier Domingo: contra la idea de hacer la Historia del Anarquismo' [Letter to Carlos Semprún and Javier Domingo: Against the Purpose of Publishing a History of Anarchism], *Historia Libertaria* 1:6 (1978).
12. Miquel Amorós, 1968. *El año sublime de la acracia* [1968: The superb year of anarchy] (Bilbao, Murturreko Burutazioak, 2014), 71.
13. Agustín García Calvo, *De los modos de integración del pronunciamiento estudiantil* [Different ways to integrate the students' movement] (Madrid: La Banda de Moebius, 1979), 8.
14. M.C. García and P. Nacarino, 'Contra la Realidad: entrevista a Agustín García', *Periódico CNT* 324 (2006), <http://www.cnt.es/noticias/contra-la-realidad>
15. García Calvo, *De Dios*, 293. See also Agustín García Calvo, 'Heráclito y la lógica' [Heraclitus and Logic] (1991), accessed 10 April 2018, <http://baultdetrompetillas.es/agustin-garcia-calvo/conferencias/>
16. For the influence of García Calvo's ideas on Spanish anarchism, see for instance Octavio Alberola, *La revolución: entre el azar y la necesidad* [Revolution: Between Randomness and Necessity] (Buenos Aires: Libros de Anarres, 2017),
17. To understand the connections between García Calvo and the Free Assembly of Puerta del Sol in Madrid on 15 May, see María del Consuelo Ahijado, *Enseñar a No Saber: la Contra-Educación como Acción Política en Agustín García Calvo* [Teaching Not Knowing: Counter-Education as Political Action in Agustín García Calvo] (Doctoral Dissertation, 2015), 391, accessed 12 March 2018, <http://www.tesisenred.net/handle/10803/365568>. On the links between García Calvo and artists, see Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio, *A contratiempo* (Madrid: Diapasón, 1978); Isabel Escudero, *Coser y cantar* (Zamora: Lucina, 1990); Santiago Sierra, *noglobaltour.com* (2009), accessed 12 March 2018.
17. Agustín García Calvo, 'Asamblea de la Puerta del Sol' (16 June 2011), accessed 17 March 2018, <http://baultdetrompetillas.es/agustin-garcia-calvo/tertulias/en-sol/>
18. Jesús Ruiz, 'Agustín García Calvo en el 15-M' [Agustín García Calvo at the 15-M], *Las Torres de Lucca* 8 (January-June 2016), 261. On the basis of discussions with those involved in the 15m Free Assembly of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Ruiz Fernández feels that the 'above/below' polarity has been appropriated by Podemos leaders.
19. Personal communication, 18 November 2017.
20. See 'La banda sonora de la campaña de Podemos', *Sabemos*, 22 May 2015, accessed 30 March 2018, http://sabemos.es/2015/05/22/la-banda-sonora-de-la-campana-de-podemos_2063/
21. Agustín García Calvo, 'Ateneo de Madrid. Tertulia Política no. 283' (2011), accessed 2 April 2018, <http://baultdetrompetillas.es/agustin-garcia-calvo/tertulias/en-el-ateneo/>