

From Left to Right: Self-Fashioning for a Post-War Spain in Regina García's *I was a Marxist*

Ruth Littlewood
(Department of Hispanic Studies)

Yo he sido marxista: el cómo y el porqué de una conversión (I was a Marxist: The how and why of a conversion, 1946) by Regina García appears to be an early example of a category of memoirs which inundated the publishing market in the late-1940s and 1950s: repudiation by ex-communists of their former beliefs.¹ This abjuration, by ideologues such as Douglas Hyde, Alfred Koestler, and Howard Fast, was done publicly as part of a movement that attempted to provide an insight into the workings of the Communist Party at an international level.² By discussing the inner motivations behind the writers' conversions to and eventual disillusionment with the cause, their intention was to expose the essentially flawed nature of communism and to warn others of the dangers of a large-scale implementation of the ideology.

García claims that she experienced a process of conversion that falls within the remit of this type of memoir, with her original left-wing stance steadily diminishing as she became better acquainted with the political movement. I will argue, however, that García's text does not strictly conform to this category. Despite the title, García was not a Marxist. Although many of the central tenets of socialism do stem from Marx and Engels' writing, to be a Marxist in that period was usually to advocate the violent overthrow of government and the state, and the abolition of private property, and

¹ Regina García, *Yo he sido marxista: el cómo y el porqué de una conversión* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1946). The translation of the title and quotations are my own.

² Howard Fast, *The Naked God: The Writer and the Communist Party*, (London: Bodley Head, 1958); Douglas Hyde, *I Believed: The Autobiography of a Former British Communist* (London: The Reprint Society, 1952); Alfred Koestler and Richard H. S. Crossman, *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950).

García simply did not subscribe to any form of these revolutionary ideas. In fact, the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* or PSOE), of which García was a member, held parliamentary seats at that time and was founded on democratic values; with revolutionary rhetoric traditionally being espoused in Spain by the strong anarchist movement and the smaller Communist Party. This article will consider the motivations behind García adopting a Marxist persona, looking particularly at how it helped her to discuss her former political activity, and the benefits of her doing so, whilst still maintaining a gender-appropriate role within the patriarchal post-war Francoist society. It will discuss the ramifications that García's creation of a persona has for considering *I was a Marxist* in comparison to other ex-communist narratives, arguing that her motivations for writing are based upon three elements. Firstly, in accordance with other ex-communist memoirs, the text allows her to re-inscribe herself in the public sphere since her former political beliefs were then taboo. Secondly, by publicly rejecting her former beliefs, García attempted to spare herself from a life of stigmatisation and suffering, which the majority of the defeated Republicans experienced under the Franco regime. Finally, the writing and publication of what is essentially a political memoir subversively challenges the subordinate position of women within Spanish society. The latter two motivations not only demonstrate that *I was a Marxist* represents a specifically Spanish dimension within conversion narratives, but could also be used to argue that García uses the genre to problematise the status of women after the Spanish Civil War.

To my knowledge there has been no research conducted into García and her name is absent from writings on female political figures from twentieth century Spain, despite her relatively prominent status within the PSOE and her roles as both the first female Editor-in-Chief of a large daily newspaper and the head of Propaganda and

Press Commissary during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). García's conversion to *franquismo* and her public disavowal of her political beliefs in her autobiography would have been a major propaganda coup for the regime in the post-Civil War years. She was born in the early twentieth century in La Coruña into a bourgeois military family and quickly became aware of the inequality between the rich and the poor in Spain during those years.³ As a young woman she moved to Madrid and became involved in socialist political activity during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship during the 1920s. She rose quickly through the ranks and became well-known as a consequence of her writing in left-wing newspapers and magazines, such as *El Día*, *Hoy*, and *La Voz*, and for her oratory talents at political rallies.

In her own analysis of her political development, García explains that after the breakdown of the dictatorship and the creation of the Second Republic in 1931, she became steadily more disillusioned with the Left, disgusted by the partisan infighting, the lack of progress and the constant outbreaks of violence, and withdrew from the Socialist Party. However, under the pretext of protecting the right-wing members of her family that were living with her, she re-joined during the Civil War and was given the role of leading the Propaganda and Press department for the Central Commissary. Throughout this time, her waning belief in the Republic was inversely proportional to her waxing Catholic faith. At the end of the war she was arrested and tried for her political activity, and sentenced to 12 years and 1 day in prison (although she actually only served around eighteen months of her term, due to her family's relations with prominent Nationalists). García concluded her memoir as a religiously and politically satisfied citizen within the right-wing Franco dictatorship.

³ García, p. 16.

Considering this transferral of belief from Left to Right, how does García's journey of conversion and disillusionment compare to that of other converts? For the ex-communist writers of this genre of narratives, the initial conversions to a left-wing ideology were generally provoked by weariness with the injustice of Western democracy and capitalism (albeit from an intellectual, middle-class perspective), expressed metaphorically by André Gide: 'I cannot accept a place in a life-boat in which only a limited number of people are saved'.⁴ García put this sentiment into practice, demonstrating her early preoccupation with social inequality. Whilst talking to the children of a working-class anarchist, she discovered that:

[...] they couldn't buy coffee or sugar because they cost a lot of money, and I decided to take them these goods [...] stealing them from my grandmother's pantry. However, in order to account for the secret deficit, I gave up my own breakfast, declaring that I had lost my appetite in the mornings.⁵

In this category of conversion memoirs, communism represents a bona fide alternative to the disparity of wealth and privilege in Europe, with many people in the early twentieth century losing patience with political parties and the ruling classes in capitalist democracies. But, in order to create a new political state, a pact is formed between the convert and the Party: complete submission to the will of the Party and an acceptance of a transitory restriction of liberties, until society is cleansed (through a violent revolution) of bourgeois tendencies. The point where disillusionment sets in, as Richard Wright argues in *The God That Failed*, is when the convert begins to question his blind acceptance to dogma:

⁴ Koestler and Crossman, p. 173.

⁵ García, pp. 13-14. Original: 'Ellos no podían comprar café ni azúcar porque costaban mucho dinero, y yo decidí llevarles esos géneros [...] hurtándolos de la despensa de la abuela, aunque, para nivelar el secreto déficit, suprimí mi propio desayuno declarando que habían perdido el apetito por las mañanas'.

I learned that when a man was informed of the wish of the Party he submitted, even though he knew with all the strength of his brain that the wish was not a wise one, was one that would ultimately harm the Party's interests.⁶

This process of questioning destroys the pact and the convert is forced to break with the Party, at least in terms of its current structure, if not ideologically.

On paper García's initial conversion to socialism follows this model quite closely. She expresses her revulsion at social inequality and the experience of seeing people sleeping rough on the street in Madrid and uses these experiences to demonstrate her ideological development, eventually provoking her to join the Socialist Party. Although not requiring the same unquestioning devotion as communism, in the midst of her most fervent activism García does suggest that socialist ideology must succeed at any cost: 'What did life or death matter, faced with the triumph of an idea that had to be, as I believed, the salvation of the fatherland and the redemption of the working classes?'⁷ Nonetheless, this proves to be a concept that she was unwilling to follow arbitrarily, often commenting on her disgust at the outcomes of revolutionary behaviour in practice during the Civil War. Frustrated by the growing intolerance and anticlericalism, García remarks that 'nobody had been obliged to confess and to practice religion before. Why then should those who believe be prohibited from confessing and practicing now?'⁸ In a similar way to the ex-communist narratives, García's disillusionment and eventual split from the PSOE was not an ideological rupture but a break that was provoked by a knowledge and dislike of the inner workings of the party. Douglas Hyde, for example, wrote of this

⁶ Koestler and Crossman, p. 141.

⁷ García, pp. 34-35. Original: '¿Qué importaban la vida ni la muerte ante el triunfo de una idea que había de ser, según yo creía, la salvación de mi Patria y la redención de las clases obreras?'

⁸ Ibid., p. 40. Original: 'A nadie se le había obligado antes a confesar y practicar la religión. ¿Por qué, entonces, prohibir que la confesasen y practicasen quienes la sentían?'

experience as a leading member of the British Communist Party and an editor for the communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*. In the aftermath of the Second World War, he struggled to reconcile the use of sexual violence as a weapon by Soviet soldiers in Germany with the blindly positive rhetoric of communist propaganda. Despite having to publicly justify their actions, he commented that

The trouble was that it was all so unlike what we had taught them to expect and what we had come to expect ourselves – for from top to bottom of the Party we had made the mistake of swallowing too much of our own propaganda. We had dealt out the sunshine stories for so long that we had fallen into the error of believing half of them ourselves.⁹

Many of the ex-communist narratives reveal this sentiment of disappointment and the foundering of their political belief when reality failed to correspond to the theory.

I would argue that, whilst García's conversion narrative does resemble those of ex-communists thus far in terms of a framework for political development and disillusion, her motivations for writing differ greatly and that, in this way, *I was a Marxist* fundamentally diverges from this genre.

García's motivations need to be questioned because, as mentioned above, she presents herself as a Marxist when she was in fact a socialist. At no point in the text does she express a desire for revolution, the overthrow of democratic government or the abolition of private property. She is, in fact, married to an extremely wealthy man: 'the estate where we lived was the largest of the twenty-seven which my husband possessed in the region.'¹⁰ As García was a leading figure within the PSOE and she regularly expresses anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary sentiment throughout the

⁹ Hyde, p. 198.

¹⁰ García, p. 104. Original: 'La finca en que residíamos es la más extensa de las veintisiete que en la región poseía mi esposo'.

memoir, it is inconceivable that she should mistakenly label herself a Marxist in the title of the text.

Before discussing her motivations for doing so, it is important to recognise the specifically Spanish context of García's political self-fashioning. By describing herself as a Marxist, García explicitly links herself to the defeated Republican side that lost the Spanish Civil War. Within Francoist discourse, the term 'Marxism' was conflated with the entire spectrum of dissidence from the ideology of the regime, as Michael Richards highlights.¹¹ This would have included left-wing groups that had formed the anti-Fascist movement, ranging from the anarchists on the Far Left to the most moderate Centre Left socialists. People that chose dissident lifestyles, such as atheists, those who had married in civil ceremonies under the Republic, and unmarried mothers, for example, would also have been labelled under the Marxist banner. Being identified as a 'Red' or a 'Marxist', therefore, was a wide-ranging stigma that somewhat indiscriminately demonised the defeated Republicans. Carlota O'Neill comments on the social consequences of this in her prison narrative, relating an episode when a common criminal is told that she is housed with political prisoners

And here Maimona was amongst 'Reds', as she clamoured, terrified. They had told her about men and women with tails, like beasts of the apocalypse, capable of poisoning you with their breath, who didn't believe in God. And Maimona didn't want our shadows on the ground to brush against hers; and with furtive glances she looked for our tail and horns.¹²

¹¹ Michael Richards, 'Morality and Biology in the Spanish Civil War: Psychiatrists, Revolution and Women Prisoners in Málaga', *Contemporary European History*, 10 (2001), 395-421 (p. 398).

¹² Carlota O'Neill, *Una mujer en la guerra de España* (Madrid: Oberón, 2003), p. 72. Original: 'Y allí estaba Maimona entre 'rojas', como clamaba ella espantada. Le habían hablado de hombres y mujeres con rabo, como bestias del apocalipsis, capaces de envenenar con su aliento, que no creían en Dios. Y Maimona no quería que nuestra sombra, en el suelo, se rozara con la suya; y con las miradas de acecho nos buscaba el rabo y los cuernos'.

By designating herself as a Marxist, then, García is knowingly cultivating this sensationalist image of herself, arguably for several different reasons.

Firstly, a popular understanding of Marxism in Spain and in the wider Western context was as a psychiatric malaise. In his article ‘Morality and Biology’, Richards discusses the pseudo-scientific work of Antonio Vallejo-Nágera, who tested female prisoners in Málaga (with funding from the regime) to try to determine if there was a psychological and biological basis which prompted this political affiliation. Richards argues that Vallejo-Nágera’s conclusions, drawn from tests that had an underlying basis in eugenics and were later discredited for not taking into account social factors, demonstrate that the Franco regime ‘related political attitudes to sickness and disorder, paradoxically in such diagnoses as “schizophrenia with religious delirium” or “Marxist mania”’.¹³ Matthew Hollow develops the idea of Marxism as an illness, suggesting that by linking the ideology to a pathological or neurotic mental state, its opponents could discuss the movement without attempting to engage with its political fundamentals.¹⁴ In the category of ex-communist memoirs, then, the self-reflective act of writing an autobiography becomes a cathartic experience that runs in the psychoanalytical vein. It can also be a process that does not allow the former ideologue to address in depth the tenets of their beliefs that they have renounced. This could explain to some extent why García might falsely accuse herself of being a Marxist: the mystique of suffering from a politically-charged neurosis which is then exposed, redressed and *redeemed* through a public, ‘intimate’ confession in the form of a memoir is far more exciting and alluring to a reader (and perhaps the writer’s

¹³ Richards, p. 420.

¹⁴ Matthew Hollow, ‘Disillusioned Disciples: Self-Technology in the Autobiographical Writings of Ex-Communists’, *SSRN*, (2009) <<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2100489>> [accessed 18 February 2013] (para. 17 of 29).

own vanity) than the reality of García's actual desire for social and democratic equality passively converting into acceptance of an authoritarian regime.

It is worth considering, however, that García's misleading acknowledgement of herself as a Marxist could have been prompted by editorial pressure. One of the defining characteristics of the Francoist dictatorship, as Derrin Pinto argues, was that it created an 'authoritative discourse', which aimed to control the populace 'by promoting the cult of personality surrounding the Caudillo, military strength, unity of Spain, the greatness of the fatherland, and the deep-rooted traditional values of Catholicism, family, and order'.¹⁵ This language of control was based upon a binary of promoting these principles whilst simultaneously deriding the defeated Republicans as being the tools of 'a secret alliance of Jews, Freemasons and the Communist Third International' which was 'conspiring to destroy Christian Europe, with Spain as the principal target'.¹⁶ Being neither male nor Jewish, the only one of these demarcations that García could legitimately ascribe to would be as a Marxist. Therefore in order to conform to the Francoist rhetoric, García may have had to categorise herself within this discourse in order to get her memoir published. The voice of the older García from post-war Spain intercedes somewhat anachronistically at times into the narration of her younger self, providing further examples of the 'authoritative discourse'. By littering phrases that were central to the Francoist discourse, such as 'Red cruelty', and 'orgy of blood', throughout the text, García ensures that her autobiography fits within the Nationalist-Catholic ideological framework.¹⁷ The fact that the placement of these expressions jars with the reader, however, perhaps indicates that these are

¹⁵ Derrin Pinto, 'Indoctrinating the Youth of Post-War Spain: A Discourse Analysis of a Fascist Civics Textbook', *Discourse & Society*, 15 (2004), 649-667 (p. 650).

¹⁶ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper Press, 2012), p. 4.

¹⁷ García, p. 145 and 146. Original: 'la crueldad roja', and 'orgia de sangre'.

alterations made to the text at a later stage, complying with the hypothesis of an outside editorial influence upon *I was a Marxist*.

García's creation of a Marxist persona under which to publish her memoir subverts the notion of autobiography as truthful, as discussed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson: when a text is acknowledged as autobiographical, 'we read differently and assess the narrative as making truth claims of a sort that are suspended in fictional forms such as the novel'.¹⁸ Smith and Watson go on to argue, however, that 'any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer'.¹⁹ It could be beneficial, then, to contemplate how *I was a Marxist* helps García to characterise herself within post-war Spain.

An element of García's post-war life that seems particularly uncharacteristic is her apparent rejection of a public life after years of high-profile journalism, oration, and editorial work. In many ways, at the peak of her activity García represented the modern society that was the aim of the Second Republic (1931-36): she was a politically active and liberal woman with a career who was working towards a more just society.²⁰ The rapidity of the material change in the status of women from the liberalism of the governments of the 1930s to *franquismo* is astonishing. The advent of the Second Republic conceded a plethora of rights to women, such as universal suffrage, the right to divorce, and the legalisation of abortion. These laws were repealed in the post-war years and women's social status was returned to that of the Civil Code of 1889, essentially relegating them to the legal status of juveniles, as well

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰ The left-wing governments of the Second Republic introduced a wide-ranging set of reforms that aimed to modernise and liberalise Spanish society. This threatened the highly conservative traditional power bases of Spain (Church, Army, Aristocracy), provoking the army to stage a coup d'état on 17th July 1936, which developed into the Civil War.

as punishing them retroactively for taking advantage of these freedoms. The national emphasis was on a reinstatement of traditional gender roles, with women being consigned to the domestic sphere. Clearly, there is no way that García could have continued in her public roles as these constituted a fundamental threat to the patriarchal basis of Francoist authority.²¹ It is also worth noting that García would have been one of thousands of women in the post-war years that carried the extra stigma of having been a prisoner. Paul Preston comments on the conditions of life after prison for many of these women:

Considerable cruelty was visited upon women under the rhetorical umbrella of 'redemption'. As well as confiscation of goods and imprisonment as retribution for the behaviour of a son or husband, the widows and wives of prisoners were raped. Many were forced to live in total poverty and often, out of desperation, to sell themselves on the streets. The increase in prostitution both benefited Francoist men who thereby slaked their lust and reassured them that 'red' women were a fount of dirt and corruption.²²

In light of this, García's creation of a Marxist persona and the publication of *I was a Marxist* give her the opportunity to publicly reject her former political activity, which would have been a long-term burden and a black mark against her name. It is unsurprising, then, that she goes to great lengths towards the end of the text to demonstrate how she fits within the patriarchal conception of a woman. García includes dialogue with her mother, in which she rejects the idea of returning to politics or journalism, choosing instead to focus on her relationship with her children

²¹ One of the only women to do so was Pilar Primo de Rivera, who headed the Women's Section of the Falangist Party, which played a supplementary and secondary role to the main organisation and which fully subscribed to the rhetoric of women's subordination.

²² Preston, p. 467.

and her new role within her brothers' household. In the absence of her husband, who has left her for another woman, she takes refuge in the home of her brothers and pays her keep by being their housekeeper. Despite their mistreatment of her, she maintains that she 'suffered and kept quiet', clearly evoking a biblical image of Christian acceptance.²³ Nonetheless, it is interesting that García's alleged capitulation to the Francoist discourse of womanhood does not correspond with the writing and publication of her memoirs, as this is an act that once again places her in the public sphere; a sphere from which women were supposedly barred. How, then, can this be explained?

In David Seed's article 'The Ex-Communist Memoirs of Howard Fast and His Contemporaries', he argues that Fast's 'departure from the Communist Party leads the authorities to airbrush him out of existence and therefore cue in the necessity for his own written record'.²⁴ This is a common sentiment in this category of memoirs, that having been obliterated from communist historiography as a defector, the former Party member feels the need to redress the balance and re-inscribe him or herself on the world. The writing of *I was a Marxist* could be seen in this light, as García's memoirs gave her the opportunity to write something outside of left-wing literature and away from the material she would have been normally associated with.

However, I would argue that García's text is more complex than a self-reflective process aimed at justifying the writer's behaviour, as is the case with ex-communist literature in general. Instead, it should be seen as a re-appropriation of the public sphere in a gendered way. Considering the conflict between the patriarchal determination of women's roles, and García's return to a public capacity in the guise

²³ García, p. 349.

²⁴ David Seed, 'The Ex-Communist Memoirs of Howard Fast and His Contemporaries', *Prospects*, 24 (1999), 605-624 (p. 609).

of a repudiation of her former values, *I was a Marxist* should be seen as a subversive act. In creating her persona as a former 'Red', she is able to portray an image of the ideal, repentant Francoist woman, whilst simultaneously challenging the roles that women are given within the regime through the public act of writing. Despite the implementation of universal suffrage in 1933 in Spain, this right was revoked under *franquismo* and so there was no official role for women to play within the political sphere. The public acknowledgement of her success and prominence as a former political activist must have served as a reminder of the recent past in Spain and constituted a challenge to the notion of women as secondary subjects.

Despite a second edition of the text being published in 1952, it is unfortunate that any discussion of García's intentions must remain relatively speculative: She does not appear to have continued in any form of public position and is only mentioned in research today as a pro-Franco source on prison experiences. Nonetheless, *I was a Marxist* is worthy of further attention, as it provides both an alternative understanding of the motivations behind publishing a conversion narrative and insight into the changing role for women in Spain during the 1940s. Although in several ways García's memoir can be said to converge with other ex-communist narratives, her conversion and disillusionment with Marxism has been revealed as false. However, her adoption of this Marxist persona reveals her motivations in writing and publishing her memoirs. Through the autobiographical construction of the persona 'Regina García' as the narrator of the text, García the writer strengthens her position within post-war society by renouncing her former left-wing militancy and by re-fashioning herself in a new domestic role. This would have ingratiated her with the regime, as her supposed conversion to *franquismo* would have been a propaganda coup for the right. The act of creating her memoir, however, should be seen as subversive: García gives

the appearance of submission to and acceptance of the new secondary societal position of women, whilst simultaneously encroaching on the male public sphere through writing and publishing her own story.