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Revolutionising Letter-Writing, 1917-1956. Nin, Gramsci, Serge, Sneevliet,  
Michalec, Rosmer, Katz.**

*Abstract*

Our epistemological study retraces the first generation of Comintern activists – women and men – through their written personal correspondence as they resituate class-based left activism in social movements during the 1920s and 1930s. Friendship and the dialectics of collective understanding – as conceptualised by their contemporary Ludwig Fleck – could indeed evolve a quality of interaction and advocacy for working-class interests outstripping the parallel and increasingly contrary efforts mounted in the meantime by hierarchical and institutionalised work-groups. In few cases of progressive social history, though, has the contrast in outcome been so fatal as between the Spanish, Italian, Dutch, French, Czech, German and Russian founders of the 3rd International under scrutiny in this study and the actual institutional outcome of their very own initiative over the following quarter of a century as the Communist International, to be abolished by 1943. On the basis of several hundred previously unknown personal letters by internationalist activists regrouping in left oppositional circles from 1924 onwards, we can now qualify and to a certain extent quantify their networking achievement against class society in the defensive (West) and under reconstruction (East). The collection under scrutiny includes some of the last pages to be written by André Nin (letter to Henk Sneevliet, Barcelona, 8th June 1937) as well as other collectively and individually compiled messages of striking analytical brilliance and visionary intensity. The previously unpublished materials have been retrieved globally from a variety of archives and collections, many of them only recently accessible to scientific research.

A contextualising reading allows to put forward new arguments for a reconceptualisation of personal advocacy in class struggle as epitomised by the following five main working theses of the study:

1. Social Revolutions in the 20th century may have to be reconceived beyond national histories as major concepts effective in their developments, since they have characteristically been evolved across borders and in transgressional learning processes.
2. Collective cognitive developments among non-conformist working-class revolutionaries may have to receive greater attention as non-hierarchical networks cannot be explained by simply inverting the personal cult characteristic to the other side of the barricade (Nin 1937).
3. Our notion of networks may need to be specified qualitatively, as networking among agents of real social change in the 20th century crucially involved a constant exchange and controversy on comprehensive social analyses. Recent, more superficial notions of networking might prove rather contrary to the interaction documented by the epistemological survey.
4. Present apologies of open space and civil society might need reviewing as such notions tend to explicitly exclude agency in class struggle from below. The medium of personal correspondence – too long ascribed to bourgeois class interest exclusively – crucially links communication to agency and biased social involvement.
5. Shifting attention from biographical to prosopographical approaches, we might be able to avoid some analytical traps canonised in past historical writing. Far from being a martyr caught in a dead-end, Nin now appears as part of an informal but none the less effective internationalist network, continuing his cause in a multitude of approaches. So – according to latest disclosures in Prague archives – in 1950, the Czech resource person of the network under scrutiny, Karel Fischer (alias Michalec), is active in a crucial position within the Czechoslovak film industry.

*The publication of the full version of this contribution is postponed until 2010.*