

The Cuban Libertarians and the Castro Dictatorship

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The beginnings of the anarchist movement in Cuba go back to the last century. When the island was still a Spanish colony, anarchists who had immigrated from Spain propagated the ideas of the First International: "The liberation of the workers must be fought for by the workers themselves".

Although they took part in the wars of independence, the anarchist spokesmen saw national sovereignty as only a step on the way to eliminating all class and racial discrimination. Banished to Africa under colonial rule, the Hispanic freedom fighters were deported to Spain by the Cuban government.

In sovereign Cuba, North American financiers saw a favorable ground for capital investment. The economic founding period that now began was soon accompanied by serious class struggles in which the anarchists played a leading role. In 1902, just a few months after the country had achieved independence, a general strike broke out in Havana, which was bloodily suppressed by its own rulers. Soon afterwards, the campesinos Casanas and Montero, who were close to the anarchist movement, fell victim to the ruthless actions of the rural police (Guardia Rural) during a farm workers' strike. The protest against this act of violence, initiated by the anarchist newspaper "Tierra", spread throughout the country.

The Cuban anarchists also took part in international protest and solidarity actions. When the champion of the free school, Francisco Ferrer, was executed in Spain in 1909, a storm of indignation arose in Cuba, incited by the anarchists; and when the Mexican rural population unfurled the flag of revolution under Emiliano Zapata in 1910, the Cuban anarchists were the first to stand by their side with solidarity rallies.

Finally, it was Spanish anarchists who founded a free colony in the east of the country in the first decade of independence, which was to be the forerunner of a free Cuba, as the idealistic pioneers hoped.

During the First World War, sugar production became the country's most lucrative source of income. Now it was up to the workers in the sugar industry to defend their interests so that they too could share in the new prosperity. To achieve this, they had to form unions and fight. Again, it was the anarchists who set the example with their initiative. In the ideological magazines "Nueva Aurora" and "Nueva Luz" and the union newspapers "El Progreso" and "La Madera",

which were inspired by their libertarians ideas, they constantly strengthened the fighting spirit of the workers.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 sparked great enthusiasm among the Cuban anarchists. Far removed from Russian reality, they believed that the communism proclaimed by Lenin was the great breakthrough to communist anarchism of Kropotkin's style and declared themselves in favour of joining the Communist International. But when the 21 admission conditions, which were filled with an authoritarian spirit, were announced at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in 1920, they turned away from Moscow and the Comintern in disappointment as opponents of authoritarian state communism.

During the Machado dictatorship (1925–33), the libertarian movement was condemned to illegality. After the fall of Machado, Cuba had a democratic period interrupted by shorter intervals of dictatorship that lasted until 1932, during which the anarchist movement was able to develop relatively freely. Despite limited resources — they could not compete with the communists financed by Moscow — the movement spread across the whole country.

In 1944, a libertarian congress was held in Havana, attended by groups from all parts of the island. It was decided to give the movement the name “Asociacion Libertaria de Cuba (ALC)” — Libertarian Association of Cuba. In 1948, the second congress of the ALC was held in Havana, attended by the writer of this report. Over a hundred delegates came from all parts of the country. The congress drew up a declaration of principles and a strategy. It states that the libertarian movement in Cuba wants to replace the centralized state with a federation of free communities and, as an alternative to the private capitalist economic system, free, independently operating production and consumer cooperatives.

However, the congress was not satisfied with a more or less abstract declaration of principles about the future society; it also set out current demands for the struggle of workers and peasants against exploitation and oppression, against bureaucracy and nepotism in public administration. Anarchist trade unionists concretized their postulates in 14 points. The most important of these were: a six-hour day, improved social security, especially maternity protection, control of companies by the trade unions, direct action against price increases for food and consumer goods, preventing the production of poor quality products, reducing the weight of rice and sugar sacks to make work easier in the transport sector.

A program of 19 points was drawn up to solve the problems of farm workers and agrarians. The ultimate goal was the redistribution of arable land and the establishment of voluntary work collectives, as well as the organization of production, purchasing and sales cooperatives. Compulsory state collectives on the Russian model were expressly rejected. Agronomists and experts in agricultural issues present at the congress made their professional knowledge available to the farm workers.

The military coup of General Batista (1952) brought an abrupt end to the movement's rise. The Freedom Association was dissolved and its press banned. Nevertheless, the freedom militants continued to fight underground, so that they too contributed to the overthrow of the dictator.

Not so the communists. The Communist Party, which had already been represented in Batista's first dictatorship government from 1940 to 1944 by two ministerial colleagues, Blas Roca and Rafael Rodriguez, refused to fight against its former protector Batista. Only when Batista's overthrow was imminent did it align itself with Fidel Castro.

The hope that the fall of Batista would usher in a new era of freedom was not to be fulfilled.

When Fidel Castro acted as a dictator in the first year of his seizure of power, the anarchists became suspicious, and with them the majority of the people. The suspicion that something was not right about the mysterious death of Camilo Cienfuegos, who was close to the anarchists and was the third man in the Sierra after Fidel and Che, grew. Fidel Castro's dictatorial measures: suppression of freedom of the press and freedom of association, nationalization of the unions and mass arrests of non-communist revolutionaries were branded by the anarchists as falsification and betrayal of the revolution.

In June 1960, the free syndicalists published a manifesto in which they demanded the abolition of the compulsory economic measures and the reorganization of the economy along the lines of the collectivization during the Spanish Civil War, as well as non-interference by the state in the collectivized companies and cooperatives. The manifesto states literally: "The trade unions are the organs of the working class called upon to economically transform the social order; only they can realize the old socialist demand that the government of the people should be replaced by the administration of things. The subordination of the trade unions to the state, on the other hand, means betrayal of the revolution, especially if this occurs at a time of revolutionary upheaval."

In doing so, they openly opposed the disempowerment of the working class demanded by Che Guevara and carried out by Fidel Castro.

As consistent antimilitarists, they also condemned the general military service introduced by Fidel Castro, which had not existed in Cuba until then. "Nationalism and militarism," they said in their manifesto, "are synonymous with Nazi fascism. What we need are teachers, not soldiers, plows, not cannons, bread and butter for the people, not weapons."

They demanded the construction of society "from the bottom up, from the simple to the complex." They explained that they had not fought the Batista dictatorship in order to establish a new dictatorship, but to abolish all dictatorships. "As long as individuals are not free, there can be no free society."

The brotherhood in arms from the Batista era had been dissolved. The free socialists and syndicalists saw Fidel Castro and his communist followers as traitors to the revolution, while for Castro, all those who did not agree with him were counter-revolutionaries.

After the nationalization of the unions, the union opposition inspired by the free socialists and syndicalists was dissolved and their press banned. The anarchists and all anti-dictatorial socialists and revolutionaries were left with the choice between prison, labor camps or exile. Emigration soon became the only way out.

The tragedy of the non-Bolshevik Russian revolutionaries after Lenin's final victory was to be repeated 40 years later for the non-communist Cuban revolutionaries after Castro's seizure of power. Anyone who did not want to end up in prison had to leave their beloved revolutionary country.

In exile, the Cuban libertarians continued their fight for a free Cuba. They recorded their dearly bought experiences in a declaration of principles that was presented to the International Anarchist Congress in Paris in 1971. It states: "We must be careful not to fall into the error of unrealistic generalizations again and we must resolutely oppose any totalitarian regime that tramples on human rights. We must distinguish between a totalitarian regime and those systems of government that recognize human rights and allow anarchist organizations. We must fight to ensure that technological progress benefits all people. This can be promoted by establishing production and consumption cooperatives and by voluntary associations of all kinds. We believe that the period of heroic revolutions is a thing of the past. We must finally free ourselves from

the idea of “imposing” the revolution and thereby “introducing anarchy.” On the other hand, we should support all movements that fight for more freedom and social justice and at the same time fight all forms of government and movements that enslave peoples and individuals, as totalitarian regimes do. Our militants should be active in the workers’, peasants’ and student movements, as well as in all popular groups, in order to defend freedoms and social justice at every opportunity.”

This declaration of principles is so clear and unambiguous that any comment on it is superfluous.

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