

Anarchism in Argentina

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Contents

High Point	3
Decline	6
From the New Left to the Dictatorship	6
From the Return to Constitutional Rule to the Present	7
References And Suggested Readings	7

Argentine anarchists built one of the largest, most dynamic anarchist movements in the world and played a pivotal role in that country's history from the 1890s to the 1930s. Though their numbers are greatly reduced today, traces of the movement's heyday are evident in the Argentine state's corporatist commitments and in a highly egalitarian counterculture.

High Point

The first anarchist groups formed in Argentina in the 1870s, galvanized by refugees from the Paris Commune and the arrival of anarchist literature from Spain, Italy, France, and other countries. French immigrants founded a section of the First International in Buenos Aires in 1872, and Italian and Spanish sections appeared shortly thereafter. Reflecting factional struggles that would split the organization internationally, the French section embraced Marx's views, whereas the Spaniards and Italians identified with Bakunin; the latter dominated among Argentine anarchists after 1876.

Anarchist ranks soon experienced substantial growth, thanks to the waves of European immigrants who began landing on Argentine soil in the 1880s and did not stop for nearly three decades. The majority were Italian, the second largest group was Spanish (from Galicia, in particular), and the third was French. Some had experience in the European anarchist movement and virtually all came to escape political repression and poverty. Instead of finding prosperity and liberty, most encountered crushing economic deprivations and a government that responded to them primarily through repression. This, in the context of a society undergoing massive economic and industrial growth, provided fertile ground for anarchists' revolutionary aspirations.

Initially, anarchist groups focused on discussion and education and stood aloof from larger social struggles; however, this countercultural posture grew increasingly untenable as a debate unfolded among anarchists about the relative merits of intervention in the labor movement. Some believed that such a course would dilute anarchist aims, whereas others saw it as the most effective path to revolution. Advocates of the latter perspective were triumphant, thanks especially to three Italian anarchists: Errico Malatesta, Héctor Mattei, and Pietro Gori. This victory set the stage for the emergence of a mass anarchist movement.

Anarchists were instrumental in creating Argentina's earliest workers' organizations. In 1901 a coalition of anarchists and socialists founded Argentina's first labor federation, the Argentine Workers' Federation (Federación Obrera Argentina) (FOA). The socialists departed soon after, and founded the General Workers Union (Unión General de Trabajadores), leaving the FOA in anarchist hands. The FOA was an explicitly revolutionary body committed to direct action, boycott, sabotage, and class warfare in general. In 1904 the FOA changed its name to the Regional Worker's Federation of Argentina (Federación Obrera Regional Argentina) (FORA). At the FORA's 5th congress in 1905 it made a commitment to anarchocommunist part of organizational statutes.

Anarchists had greater penetration among workers than militants from any other tendency, and their unions won many important victories, such as wage increases, reductions in the length of the working day, and various rights of association. They led the port workers, ground transport workers, and seamen's unions, and were also heavily represented among bakers, metal workers, construction workers, and ship workers. Control of these unions, particularly those operating on the ports and in the ground transport industry, put them in a position to paralyze Argentina's

economy. Anarchists did, in fact, disrupt economic normalcy on numerous occasions and in some cases brought the country to a standstill. They led six general strikes in the first decade of the century and many more that were partial, though still significant. Their goal was to organize a revolutionary general strike that would cause the capitalist economy and the political structure to collapse, leading ultimately to complete workers' self-management; however, anarchists believed that confronting and defeating capitalism required more than just battles on the shop floor and along the picket line: it also demanded that workers feel a strong sense of class solidarity and have an enlightened, progressive perspective on social affairs.

Anarchists set out to nurture this through myriad cultural activities. They were extremely active publishers, putting out two dozen periodicals between 1890 and 1904, sometimes as many as twenty at one time, including eight in Italian and three in French. *La Protesta Humana*, which was founded in 1897, became a daily, and sometimes twice daily, publication after 1904. A general-interest anarchist newspaper, it reached a very wide audience. For example, more than 10,000 copies were circulated weekly in 1907, even though it was banned at the time. Another anarchist daily, *La Batalla (The Battle)*, was founded in 1910. It published a morning as well as evening edition. Additional publications of note were *La Liberté*, *La Question Sociale*, *El Oprimido*, *El Perseguido*, *L'Arvenire*, and *El Rebelde*.

Theater and poetry were also important. Influential wordsmiths included poet and playwright Alberto Ghirardo, Uruguayan-born dramatist Florencio Sánchez, and the novelist Roberto Arlt; as well as Félix Basterra, González Pacheco, Armando Discépolo, Alejandro Sux, and José de Maturana. Drawn to forms that seemed amenable to mainstream literary circles, they scarcely wrote philosophy and never produced anarchist theory of consequence.

Anarchists did not limit their radicalism to the written word. They were pivotal in the development of the tango, the quintessential expression of Argentine working-class culture before World War II. Anarchist dissidence even impacted language: *lunfardo*, the Argentine argot (slang) born of the prisons and ghetto streets, was closely linked to the tango and was part of the anarchist counterculture. Pageantry, in the form of parades and marches, was an integral component of their cultural apparatus. Their annual May Day marches often drew tens of thousands, demonstrating anarchist strength and, by forcing a revolutionary holiday upon the public, punctuating their assertion of a counternarrative to Argentina's historical development. Anarchists also created their own pantheon of heroes and martyrs, often foreign-born (as well as Argentine) revolutionary militants. Anarchists institutionalized their cultural interventions in social centers, theaters, adult and children's schools, popular libraries, and discussion circles. Linked to the unions and seeded throughout proletarian districts, these bodies were a vital dimension of the revolutionary movement, and easily mobilized during times of crisis.

Anarchists' commitment to leveling social hierarchies prompted them to advance a generous social radicalism. For instance, challenges to patriarchy and support for women's self-organization were common elements of anarchist discourse. There was a higher percentage of female activists among anarchists than among other radical tendencies, and an anarcha-feminist paper appeared as early as 1896 (*La Voz de la Mujer*), under the slogan "No god, no boss, no husband." One prominent anarchist, Virginia Bolten, led what was probably the first strike by women in Argentina. Anarchists also participated in many actions that involved large numbers of females by necessity, such as rent strikes and consumer boycotts.

The government understood that anarchists had the potential to shatter the economic, political, and cultural foundations upon which Argentina lay, and responded with a wide spectrum

of measures designed to raise the cost of revolutionary activism. Petty police harassment – humiliating and inconvenient searches and gratuitous demands for identification – was a familiar experience for militants. The outlawing of radical publications, the suppression of the right to public assembly, and mass arrests were also common; martial law was declared for a total of 18 months between 1902 and 1910. There were also legislative attempts to undermine the anarchist movement, specifically the Ley de Residencia (1902) and the Ley de Defensa Social (1910). The former granted the government the right to deport foreigners that it deemed undesirable, whereas the latter levied a series of penalties against anarchist activity specifically.

The state resorted to outright violence as well, which it exercised through the police, the army, and other formal forces, in addition to thugs, acting on its behalf. For instance, police opened fire on the anarchists' May Day march in 1909, killing several people as a result. There was also mass police repression in 1910 during events surrounding the centenary of Argentine national independence. Nine years later, anarchists would be scarred by incidents that took place during the *semana trágica* (tragic week) that transpired between January 7 and January 14, 1919. The turmoil began when several workers were killed during a conflict between striking metal workers and strike breakers. This led to a general strike that crippled the entire country and pushed Buenos Aires into a state of chaos for several days. It took the combined efforts of the police and gangs of hooligans to finally subdue the rebellion. Historians estimate that 700 were killed and 4,000 were injured during the confrontations.

Not all the repression occurred in urban areas. Beginning in 1920, anarchists led a year-long rebellion by agricultural workers in the Patagonia region. The army responded with a crackdown that sent 1,500 to their death before firing squads. A German anarchist named Kurt Wilkens later responded to these aggressions by assassinating Colonel Héctor Varela, who had directed the army's actions.

Anarchists were also subject to pressure from elements within the workers' movement that wanted them to adulterate their revolutionary convictions. This achieved its most decisive result in 1915, at the FORA's 9th congress, when there was a split between syndicalists, who sought to rescind the federation's commitment to anarcho-communism, and anarchists, who defended it. Both tendencies departed from the congress claiming the FORA's name: syndicalists came to be known as the FORA of the 9th Congress and anarchists as the FORA of the 5th Congress.

Changes in the state (prompted in part by anarchist efforts) also rendered anarchists' anti-statism more tenuous. For instance, the Saenz Peña Law (1912) made (male) voting secret and obligatory. This helped clean up the electoral process, thus enhancing its legitimacy, while also making anarchist abstentionism illegal, thus narrowing the space available to anti-statist social action.

The accumulated impact of government repression, sectarian battles, and social changes meant that the 1920s would be a decade of retreat and internecine conflict for anarchists. Robberies and bombings carried out by Severino di Giovanni (1901–31), an Italian immigrant, propagandist, and partisan of revolutionary violence, were a central catalyst. In addition to other actions, he bombed the American embassy to protest the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the Italian consulate to protest Italian Fascism (killing 9 and injuring 34). His actions specifically, and the issue of "anarcho-banditry" generally, ignited a passionate debate among anarchists. This played out in the pages of the anarchist press, particularly in *La Anthoncha* (which defended di Giovanni) and in *La Protesta* (which attacked him). Historians now attribute the assassination of Emilio

López Arango (1894–1929), a *La Protesta* editor and one of di Giovanni's fiercest critics, to di Giovanni himself, who was arrested and executed in 1931.

Decline

The 1930 coup led by General José Félix Uriburu dealt the final blow to anarchism's existence as a mass movement, due primarily to the imposition of martial law and the assertion of a strong corporatist perspective within the state. Although anarchists continued to organize and disseminate their views, they slowly returned to the counter-cultural posture that was characteristic of their efforts in the 1880s.

Anarchists founded the Argentine Anarcho-Communist Federation (Federación Anarco Comunista Argentina) in 1935, which became the Argentine Libertarian Federation (Federación Libertaria Argentina) in 1955. This group, however, never acquired a mass base. Also in 1935, a coalition of socialists and anarchists started the Biblioteca Popular José Ingenieros, a library and social center. The socialists departed shortly after its founding, leaving the project in anarchist control. Anarchists led the solidarity campaigns organized to aid anti-fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and many traveled to Europe to fight among anarchist forces there.

The rise of Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón was paradoxical for anarchists. Although his populism was strongly linked to working-class mobilization and his government provided unprecedented benefits to workers, anarchists rejected Peronism as a jingoistic state-centered project that operated through networks of caciques instead of genuine proletarian democracy.

From the New Left to the Dictatorship

A portion of the many Argentine youth radicalized during the 1960s and 1970s turned to anarchism, although they were largely unable to work cooperatively with the older generation of anarchists. This was a consequence of cultural as well as political differences, particularly the younger militants' identification with the anti-imperialist currents that were then sweeping the globe. This divide caused a bitter wound in Argentina's multi-generational anarchist legacy, although it also prompted the more youthful militants to define their views with a degree of specificity not found among anarchists in countries that avoided such intramural conflicts.

Resistencia Libertaria (RL) was the most significant anarchist group to emerge during this period. Clandestine and cellular in structure, it aimed to spark mass resistance and, ultimately, a prolonged popular war. It agitated in the neighborhood, labor, and student movements, and also had a small armed wing, which it used for the purposes of defense and expropriation. Though formally a national organization, it operated primarily in La Plata, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires. A significant percentage of RL activists were disappeared in the mid-1970s, and many more after the 1976 military coup, as Argentine society grew increasingly polarized. RL continued to be active under the dictatorship until 1978, when police conducted simultaneous raids throughout the country and seized most of its remaining members. Approximately 80 percent of RL militants spent time in the dictatorship's concentration camps, where all were tortured and most were executed.

From the Return to Constitutional Rule to the Present

Novel and relatively anti-authoritarian social actors emerged during the final years of the dictatorship and immediately after the 1983 reinstatement of civil government. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, a group of mothers organizing on behalf of people disappeared under the military government, are the best known, although there were also ecologists, feminists, and others. This reflected a turn away from the state as the focus of the left's efforts, and an inclination toward a more decentralist politics. This phenomenon encouraged a renewed interest in anarchism, but not a significant increase in the ranks of the old anarchist groups. Punk rock also played an important role in cultivating interest in anarchism.

Argentina's 2001 economic crisis prompted the appearance of even more confrontational and more anarchistic social actors, such as militant neighborhood assemblies, factory occupations, and aggressive street protests. Their actions, combined with generalized public anger at the government, threw the country into a state of disorder and led successive Argentine presidents to resign. Though anarchists participated actively in these movements, they did not play a central role in defining their goals, and the size and number of anarchist groups did not expand dramatically.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism and Culture, 1840–1939 ; Argentina, Armed Struggle and Guerilla Organizations, 1960s–1970s ; Argentina, General Strike (Semana Trágica), 1919 ; Argentina, Social and Political Protest, 2001–2007 ; Argentina, Worker Strikes in Patagonia, 1920–1921

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