

Latin American Anarchism

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There are important reasons for anarchists in English-speaking parts of North America to study the history of Latin American anarchism.

One reason is political. We need to form principled, collaborative relationships with our Latin American comrades to fight global capitalism globally and, to do so, we obviously need be able to identify our real comrades among the countless groups in the region that make claims upon our solidarity. Should we “defend the Cuban Revolution” or toast Lula’s social democratic victory in Brazil? Should we adopt the Zapatista ski-mask as our emblem or devoutly align ourselves with small anarchist groups? A genuine confrontation with these questions requires a deep appreciation of the history of Latin American opposition and certainly the anarchist movement has played a significant role in this history.

Another reason is more theoretical: it is necessary to develop a vision of a worldwide anarchist movement that takes into account the very different conditions that exist in “underdeveloped” parts of the world (such as Latin America) as opposed to Europe or the United States. It is necessary to understand how these conditions affect the form and content of anarchist activity. For example, clearly Belgian and Bolivian anarchist movements will have different characteristics, but exactly what type of differences and why? Certainly a good way to begin exploring these questions is by looking at the actual experience of anarchist movements in Asia, Africa, or, in the case of this review, Latin America.

Finally, the Latino identity is central to economic and cultural contradictions in the United States. Of course it is a positive source of community, tradition, and sense of self for millions of Latinos within U.S. borders and it is also used as a negative signifier to justify exploitation and racism. The constantly changing meaning of the Latino identity is highly dependent upon ideas about the history of Latin America and radicals can encourage the most expansive, utopian elements of this identity by making sure that liberatory historical experiences in the Americas are not forgotten.

Unfortunately those who try to research the Latin American anarchist tradition will immediately discover that the historical literature on the movement is remarkably poor. There are no books on the topic in English or Portuguese and only five in Spanish, of which one is an anthology and another is a very brief overview.¹ The paucity of studies does not reflect the significance or dynamism of the movement but rather that social democrats and Marxists, who have produced the richest literature on social movements in the Americas, are hostile to the anarchist tradition and have attempted to erase or diminish its presence in this historical record.² Both groups need to construct the revolutionary Left as fundamentally statist to justify their social projects: the Marxists to defend their authoritarian regimes and the social democrats to present their free-market policies as the only socially conscious alternative to Marxist authoritarianism. Of course the existence of the anarchist tradition—a revolutionary, anti-authoritarian alternative—complicates their assertions.

¹ In addition to those reviewed here, the other two books on the subject are: *El Anarquismo en America Latina*, ed Angel J. Cappelletti and Carlos M. Rama (Caracas, Venezuela: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1990) and Angel Capelleti, *Hechos y Figuras del Anarquismo Hispanoamericano* (Madrid: Ediciones Madre Tierra, 1990).

² For a good example of the social democratic omission of anarchism, see Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Castañeda, Mexico’s former Foreign Relations Secretary, excludes anarchism entirely from his sweeping study of the Latin America Left. The Marxist hostility to anarchism is noted in nearly every study of anarchism in Latin America.

Thus contemporary anarchists are obliged to undertake a major reconstructive effort to restore anarchism to its proper place in the history of the Americas and the three books reviewed here are among the best on the subject. Their authors defiantly and unanimously assert that the anarchist movement was a vital actor in early twentieth century social history. Louis Vitale, in a sentiment echoed by the other authors, observes that “anarcho-sindicalism was the dominant current in the Latin American workers’ movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century.”³ They also all assert that anarchists were leaders in the creation of early labor unions, cultivated a strong working class militancy, and achieved many concrete gains for the working class. Indeed, between the revolutionary unions, schools, daily newspapers, and other projects, these authors paint a picture of a profoundly dynamic anarchist movement, especially in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay.

Anarchism and the Labor Movement

Alfredo Gómez’s *Anarquismo y Anarcosindicalismo en América Latina* (Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism in Latin America) treats anarchism in Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Gómez focuses on anarchists’ role within the revolutionary labor movement and attempts to draw conclusions about the classical anarchist project based on the comparative study of the anarchist movement in these countries. Gómez, who is an anarchist, wants to both document the history of the movement and defend it in theoretical terms.

For Gómez, anarchism or anarcho-sindicalism (he does not distinguish between the two) is linked fundamentally to the labor movement. He regards anarchism as a theoretical expression of workers’ capacity to organize themselves and potentially run society without the interference of capitalists or statists. In other words, anarchism allows workers to become conscious of their power as workers, defend their immediate interests, and fight to revolutionize society as a whole.

In each country he treats, Gómez charts the emergence of a combative working class and the influence of anarchist groups on this class. His study of Colombian anarchism, which makes up nearly half of the book, is a welcome contribution given that Colombia has received scant attention in existing studies of Latin American anarchism. Here he documents major strikes, such as the anarchist led banana workers’ strike of 1928, and also the activities of anarchist groups such as Bogotá’s Grupo Sindicalista “Antorcha Libertaria,” the Via Libre group, and others.⁴ However, his emphasis lays upon the working class and its capacity to fight directly for its own interests rather than specifically anarchist activities per se. This is partially because the anarchist movement was less developed in Colombia than in other countries, but also because Gómez regards a direct action based workers’ movement and anarchism as essentially two sides of the same phenomenon (practice and theory, respectively). In Brazil, Gómez shows us how anarchists led a massive and nearly revolutionary wave of strikes from 1917 to 1920. In Argentina, which had one of the most mature anarchist movements in the Americas (and the world), Gómez focuses on the relationship between the anarchist Federación Obrera Regional de Argentina and working class struggles. In Mexico, Gómez examines the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón’s intervention

³ Luis Vitale, *Contribución a una Historia del Anarquismo en América Latina* (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Espiritu Libertario, 2002), 155. All translations are mine.

⁴ The banana strike was immortalized in Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

in the 1910 Mexican Revolution and also treats the Mexico City based Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker), which was a center of anarchist organizing and labor radicalism.

The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism

The double book released by Chile's Ediciones Espiritu Libertario contains *Cronica Anarquista de la Subversion Olvidada* (*Anarchist Chronicle of Forgotten Subversion*) by Oscar Ortiz and Luis Vitale's *Contribución a una Historia del Anarquismo en América Latina* (*Contribution to a History of Anarchism in Latin America*). These books document the history of anarchism in Latin America but have a special focus on the movement in Chile.

Vitale is a renowned Trotskyist author of Chilean citizenship who participated in the anarchist movement in his native Argentina as a young man. He states in the prologue that his book is an attempt to repay a debt he incurred to the anarchists, who presumably introduced him to revolutionary politics, and who gave him the élan necessary to survive the nine concentration camps in which he was interned during Pinochet's dictatorship.⁵ His short (47 pages) and overwhelmingly laudatory work is divided into four sections. The first treats the origins or pre-history of anarchism in Latin America (i.e., utopian socialism) and the second discusses the influence of anarchism on the workers and students' movements and culture of Latin America between 1900 and 1930. This section, which is the longest part of the book, contains brief commentary (sometimes no more than three or four paragraphs) on anarchism in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, and Colombia. The final section analyzes the history of the anarchist movement in Chile from the end of the 19th century to the 1960s.

Although Vitale also places anarchism squarely within the labor movement, his focus is slightly different: he understands anarchism less as an expression of class interests and more as a utopian movement that seeks to reconstruct society along radically democratic, communitarian lines. Accordingly, he locates anarchism at both the beginning and end of industrial capitalism. He sees it as an articulation of the communitarian elements present in capitalism's early artisanal phase, when small workshops and many pre-capitalist practices were the norm, as well as the utopian sensibilities that emerged with the decline of industrial capitalism around the period of the New Left (expressed by thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse). In this sense, Vitale's concern lay on the anarchist movement's capacity to advance democratic sentiments against capitalism as opposed to its role within the development of class contradictions in the capitalism system.

Vitale shows how anarchists not only fought for the immediate interests of the working class but also created a broad culture of resistance that challenged the fundamentals of the social order with a deeply democratic politics. For example, in addition to their contributions to the labor movement, Vitale emphasizes anarchist support for women's liberation. He writes that "not only were [the anarchists] the most consequent fighters for the equal rights of women in the workplace, but dared to frankly pose [the issue of] free love, questioning the patriarchal servitude of marriage, advocating the egalitarian relation among the sexes in all aspects of the daily life."⁶ He highlights the important role played by anarchist women in the movement and specifically

⁵ Luis Vital, *Contribución a una Historia del Anarquismo en América Latina*, 148.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

mentions anarcho-feminist activities (such as the first anarcho-feminist periodical in the world, *La Voz de La Mujer*, which was published in Buenos Aires from 1898 to 1899). Vitale also notes that anarchists were leaders in anti-militarist campaigns, the first to oppose compulsory military service, and among the first on the Left to collaborate with militant neighborhood organizations. In the realm of culture, Vitale emphasizes anarchist's literary contributions, as well as struggles to democratize the university. He not only notes leading anarchist thinkers such Manuel Gonzalez Prada of Peru (who was one of the first on the Left to take up the "indigenous question") and Mexico's Ricardo Flores Magón but also lesser known writers who radicalized the broader cultural environment of their countries, such as Alejandro Escobar y Carvallo, the author of the first essays in sociological history in Chile, Argentina's tango lyricist Enrique Santos Discépolo, and others. As for university struggles, Vitale notes that the movement for university reform was led by anarchists in Chile and in Argentina and that anarchists were also leaders of the first (1918) process of university reform in Latin America. As a whole, he paints an image of a movement engaged in the broadest possible opposition to the status quo and one that struggled to democratize all aspects of social life, from the economic to the cultural realms, from the private to the political arenas.

Anarchism as Radical Culture

Oscar Ortiz's *Cronica Anarquista de la Subversion Olvidada*, which makes up the greatest part of Ediciones Espiritu Libertario's double book, is a collection of seventeen short, historical essays chronicling various important events and personages in the history of Chilean anarchism from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1970s. Ortiz combines a narrative flare with an academic rigor, and thus his essays are both a pleasure to read and rich in a scholarly sense (although the book is an anthology of his essays and, hence, not particularly systematic).

David Viñas's *Anarquistas en América Latina* is also an anthology of sorts. It consists of short excerpts from texts written by and about anarchists during the period of anarchism's heyday and contains no sustained analysis except for a 30 page introductory essay. The excerpts, which are organized by country, cover Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina. Although Viñas provides some editorial comments, there is no attempt to offer a history of the movement or additional resources for interested researchers. The book is really a montage of quotes and seems more like the preparation for a book than a finished book per se.

Although Ortiz and Viñas do not advance strong theories of anarchism, claims about the nature of anarchism are present nonetheless. They also locate anarchism within the labor movement, but they are concerned primarily with its cultural elements, particularly its ability to provide the cornerstone of a productive counter-culture around which revolutionaries and dissents could gather.

Ortiz's study of key moments in the history of Chilean anarchism allows him to illustrate a revolutionary counter-culture made up of militant workers and idealistic bourgeoisie who were unified by a common anarchist axiom and the vicious persecution visited upon them by the ruling class as a result. Ortiz focuses on anarchists who transformed Chilean culture in various ways and, more often than not, anarchists who transformed the culture not through their explicitly anarchist activities but through activities that were somehow linked to their political convictions.

For example, he devotes a chapter to the working class anarcho-Tolstoyian painter, Benito Rebolledo. Rebolledo, a committed anarchist who was immersed in the working class culture of the time, transformed Chilean painting by bringing poor people into his art. This accomplishment was of course innately connected to his anarchism, and he was celebrated and loved by the poor for his contributions. Likewise, Ortiz has a chapter treating Juan Gandulfo, who was both a militant anarchist and pioneer of socialized medical care in Chile. Gandulfo's medical contributions were also directly wedded to his anarchist commitment to improving the health of the working class. Ortiz's approach allows one to see anarchism as a broader social project: one that was not only embedded in working class struggle but also one that had the capacity to transform multiple areas of life.

Viñas's clearest statements about anarchism are present in his introductory essay. Here he describes anarchism primarily as a romantic protest against modernity waged by men and women who refused to accept the brutality of contemporary life. He refers to the "anarchist drama" that unfolded upon the stage that he describes as the social Darwinist city of the early twentieth century. Viñas's work offers a less consistent picture of the nature of anarchism—given that his book is really just a compilation of quotes—but one can surmise that the very form of the book indicates his conviction that anarchism is an essentially fragmentary project that rallied against the status quo.

The Decline of Anarchism in Latin America

All of these authors agree that anarchism disappeared as a mass movement in Latin America around 1930 and all agree that vicious state repression was a significant cause of its decline. For example, Gómez notes that the Argentine government declared a state of siege against the workers' movement for the first time in 1902 and another four times in the following eight years, with a total duration of 18 months.⁷ Also, citing Abad de Santillán, Gómez notes that the Argentine anarchist movement suffered around 500 deaths and accumulated more than a half million years of prison sentences in three decades of activity.⁸ Likewise, Ortiz details brutal tortures and imprisonment suffered by Chilean anarchists. And Viñas reproduces letters that Flores Magón wrote while in prison in the United States, as a victim of repression directed by both American and Mexican authorities. Clearly, the anarchist movement was a threat.

But why did the anarchist movement fail to overcome the vicious state repression and regain its footing as a mass movement?⁹ What was it about anarchism that prevented it, as a project, from adapting to the new challenges and flourishing?

These authors' different emphases allow them to highlight different internal problems that precipitated the decline of the anarchist movement. Of the four authors considered here, Gómez offers the most sustained critique of anarchism and devotes an entire chapter to "Reflections on the Decline of Anarcho-Syndicalism" (as an anarchist, he expects the most of the doctrine and, accordingly, is the most critical). Gómez argues that the anarcho-syndicalist project was essentially unable to articulate a coherent alternative to the social order it confronted. He sites "rationalist

⁷ Alfredo Gómez, *Anarquismo y Anarcosindicalismo en América Latina* (Paris: Ruedo Ibérico, 1980), 152.

⁸ This figure comes from Diego Abad de Santillán, *La FORA: Ideología y Trayectoria* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proyección, 1971), 23; cited in Gómez, *Anarquismo y Anarcosindicalismo*, 155.

⁹ South Africa's ANC is an example of a movement that was able to withstand terrible repression.

messianism” as one problem, wherein the anarchist faith in progress doomed anarchists to overestimate the potentials to educate humanity into a rational society and also discouraged them from acting in solidarity with other oppositional groups whom they deemed immersed in “metaphysics” (such as Zapata’s army in Mexico, which anarchists disparaged for their Christianity). He also sites the tendency of anarchist organizations to become ends in themselves (as opposed to the means for creating a revolution) and thus to ossify into stilted and basically conservative bureaucracies. For example, Gómez points to the tendency towards bureaucratic dogmatism in Argentina’s Federación Obrera Regional de Argentina. He cites the 1907 attempt to institute the doctrine of anarcho-communism as the basis for unified action with other unions, the ideological purges of 1924 (in which organizational support was withdrawn from those not considered properly anarcho-communist), and a gradual decline in organizational democracy (reflected in the diminishing frequency of congresses and a general language of organizational control). Gómez believes that these events indicate the growth of a regressive, dogmatic sentiment within the organization. He also shows how the tendency toward bureaucracy in anarchist unions dovetailed with the rigidly, para-statist organizations advanced by the Marxist-Leninists, both of which drew workers away from self-organization and a commitment to direct action.

Viñas and Ortiz offer less material about the decline of the movement. However, Viñas intersperses his book with citations from Marxists-Leninists who argue that anarchists failed to develop a coherent approach to the issue of political power. Presumably this is his view. Ortiz gives the impression that the militant working class counter-culture developed by the anarchists was simply unable to contend with changing cultural and economic circumstances and thus faded into history (becoming “the good old days”).

Vitale is the least critical of anarchists and, by detailing the history of the movement up to the 1960s, implies that it may not have declined as radically as is normally supposed. But of course he does note a decline, and advances two reasons to explain this. First, he asserts that anarchists were unable to respond to changing economic circumstances in which old quasi-artisanal structures were superseded by the concentration of workers in enormous factories and, second, he argues that the emergence of populist governments inclined to negotiate with workers undermined the appeal of anarchist’s strident, oppositional stance.

Of the four authors, Gómez offers the most cogent critique of the anarchist movement in Latin America, whereas Vitale and Ortiz offer the most compelling arguments for the continuity of anarchism.

Critical Points

These books all present different aspects of the rich history of Latin American anarchism, whether as a tendency in the labor movement, a force for democratization, or a counter-culture. They belie the political motives at work in the exclusion of anarchism from the historical record. As in Asia, Europe, and the US, the Latin American anarchist movement was a mass revolutionary movement that mounted a radical challenge to the existing order. Its significance can only be ignored at the cost of fabricating history.

But these works also have significant limitations when evaluated as potential resources for contemporary anarchists.

First, these books share a limited focus which makes it difficult to analyze the course of the anarchist movement in the context of the broader history of Latin American opposition. There is the implicit assumption that economic contradictions are at the center of history and hence an excessive focus on the labor movement to the exclusion of other forms of radicalism. This is expressed most clearly in Gómez's book, but it is evident in the other works as well (which always prioritize the labor movement, even if they construct anarchism in different ways). Thus, the authors hardly relate the anarchist movement to the other forms of resistance that took place during anarchism's heyday. For example, the authors fail to connect the anarchist movement to communitarian movements among indigenous people in any significant way (Gómez touches upon this in his commentary on the relationship between the Mexican anarchists and the original Zapatistas, but does not develop the point). Likewise, Vitale notes the link between anarchists and the feminist movement but, again, the point remains undeveloped.

Second, they are also limited when evaluated as possible resources for understanding the development of anarchism in "underdeveloped" parts of the world. For example, none of the authors make a comparison between the Latin American anarchist movement and anarchist movements in Europe or the US. And, furthermore, these books imply that the anarchist movement was not particularly conditioned by circumstances of underdevelopment. Gómez's book, for example, was initially conceived as a study of anarchism in Colombia alone, but he expanded the work to include Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico precisely because he believes the anarchist movement followed a similar trajectory in these countries, despite their very different economic and political conditions.

In addition, there is a striking absence of a truly Latin American perspective. Indeed, while all of the books treat anarchism in Latin America (except for Ortiz's, which focuses exclusively on Chile), it would be more accurate to say that they analyze anarchism in several Latin American countries, rather than Latin American anarchism per se. Although differences between individual countries make a country-by-country analysis important, it is unfortunate that the authors fail to situate anarchism within broader social and political trends in Latin America as a whole.

And there is also no attempt to explore the relationship between anarchism and the Latino identity. Is there a distinctly Latino anarchism? It is tempting to argue that there is not, given the pivotal role played by European immigrants in the Latin American anarchist movement and the early labor movement generally. For example, Gómez mentions that five and a half million European workers arrived in Argentina in the half century prior to 1924 (whereas the country's total population was 6 million in 1890).¹⁰ Among these immigrants was Diego Abad de Santillán, a Spanish born anarchist who became a leading participant in the Argentine anarchist movement and later returned to Spain to become a major figure among anarchists in the Spanish Civil War. Was he a Latin American anarchist or a European anarchist in Latin America? The possible meaning of a distinctly Latin anarchism remains unexplored.

These books all make important contributions to fleshing out a history that has been suppressed and must be reclaimed if the anarchist movement is to flourish once again in the Americas and in relation to the Americas. Their failings indicate the relatively low level of scholarship on the movement, although their strengths suggest points of departure for more thorough and critical studies that must come in the future.

¹⁰ Gómez, *Anarquismo y Anarcosindicalismo en América Latina*, 146.

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