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Review: Cuban Anarchism

Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement by
Frank Fernandez, See Sharp Press 2000

Danielarturo

2001

Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement is the long awaited elaboration of his 1987 essay, "Cuba: the Anarchists and Liberty." The book recounts the history of the Cuban labor movement through its inception in the 1850's, to the overthrowing of the Batista regime by Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement, and the subsequent neutralization of the Cuban anarchist movement on the island. The book deals with many issues still much debated within anarchist circles, notably the issues of national liberation struggles, the role of anarchists in authoritarian revolutionary movements, and the Cuban Revolution itself. I found Fernandez to put his energy into three interrelated "projects" in putting together this book: (1) to recover the eclipsed history of the Cuban anarchist movement, so centrally tied to the history of the Cuban labor movement; (2) to recount the central problems of the Cuban Revolution, particularly in its institutionalized form after 1959; (3) to relate the often contradictory reaction of the international anarchist movement to allegations made

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by Cuban anarchists about Fidel Castro's government and the situation in Cuba.

Fernandez does an excellent job piecing together the first decades of Cuba's anarchist movement. The great migration of Spanish workers to the island during the last half of the 19th century brought an influx of radical ideas that were then finding fertile soil among the Spanish working class. The first Proudhonian mutualist societies were founded by the end of the 1850's, and by the 1880's there were several explicitly anarchist labor newspapers and workers associations. By the end of the 80's anarchist-organized strikes shook the tobacco industry, both in Cuba, and in Key West and Tampa, where many Cuban laborers migrated to find work.

The 1890's were a complicated period for Cuba's anarchists, who struggled over support for the independence movement and Jose Marti's Cuban Revolutionary Party. In 1892, Cuban Anarchists held a conference in which they voted support for the independence movement, but seeing it as only a step in the direction of social revolution. This position continued to be controversial among the anarchists, some of whom bitterly opposed the separatist struggle as a total waste of time for working people who would go on to trade a foreign master for a local master. This debate was echoed on the international level where the Reclus brothers and Malatesta, among others, supported Cuban independence, while Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin remained neutral.

Although the anarchists continued to be a central influence within the broader labor movement on the island, their influence waned considerably after the 1930's, when Batista put the trade-union confederation in the hands of the PCC (the Cuban Communist Party) making it dependant to his government. Attempts to make an independent trade union central, along libertarian lines, failed.

Anarchists participated in the armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship, both from within and outside of the

26th of July Movement (M26J), of which the young bourgeois politician Fidel Castro was comandante en jefe. However, soon after the rebels' victory, on the 1st of January, 1959, things began to look ominous for Cuba's libertarians. The new government expelled leading anarcho-syndicalists from several unions where they had much influence, notably the food workers, construction, and transport unions of the Confederation of Cuban Workers. By the end of 1960, the Confederation was made an organ of the Cuban government, ending the last vestiges of independent union organizing. Much like the early years of the Soviet Union, as the new government consolidated itself, it began to eliminate opposition, which of course increasingly included the anarchists. Newspapers and journals were suppressed, militants were jailed as "counter-revolutionaries," and options grew scarce for Cuban anarchists. Some went into exile, joining the expropriated bourgeoisie in Miami; others took up armed struggle against the new government. Many were subsequently jailed or forced into hiding.

Fernandez spends considerable time recounting the experience of the exiled Cuban anarchists, particularly in relation to the larger international anarchist community, which in large part continued to uncritically support the openly (after early 1961) Marxist-Leninist government. Cuba's exiled libertarians were constantly on the defensive throughout the 60's and 70's, forced to defend their accounts of their own experiences with the increasingly repressive government that forced them into exile. The international revolutionary community, including, sadly, a great many anarchists, did not want to believe that the righteous Cuban Revolution, which against all odds defeated an U.S.-backed dictator, then continued to struggle against the United States itself, could be guilty of being as repressive and authoritarian as the Cuban anarchists insisted. It certainly did not help that the loudest voices decrying Castro's authoritarianism were precisely those hypocritical authoritarian right-

wing capitalists who were the reason for the revolution in the first place.

Fernandez has definitely done his research. He has seemingly tracked down and read every libertarian labor newspaper, pamphlet, meeting minutes, and flyer ever published on the island. Although this vast access to historical data enriches particularly the early chapters, it also proves problematic as Fernandez bogs us down in the minutiae of details of little interest to most readers. At the same time Fernandez misses many of those questions which are of interest to many readers, questions of broader trends in the history of Cuban anarchism. He barely addresses issues of strategy, theory, or the relationship of urban workers to rural workers (he barely mentions the countryside at all, which is strange as Cuba is overwhelmingly rural)

My main problems with 'Cuban Anarchism: the History of a Movement' stem from what I believe to be Fernandez's tendency to lose all ability to formulate an effective argument when the issue of the Cuban Revolution comes up. In contrast to other anarchist critiques of "communist" regimes, notably Berkman's *The Russian Tragedy*, Fernandez seems to go well out of his way to paint the most damning picture of life after the Revolution as possible, often making questionable statements or relying on unproveable allegations.

The facts, when clearly laid out, are damning enough, but Fernandez cannot seem to resist making his case weaker by pushing it so hard. Unfortunately, this may make people discount what he has to say on the subject. Lines like "The desire to escape from this great dungeon that Cuba had become was an obsession for almost all Cubans." (p 95), go towards discrediting Fernandez' account of the situation at the time, and show a lack of understanding of why people may have wanted to stay in Cuba, and why so many people did support Castro's government, particularly in the early years. In fact, Fernandez goes on to contradict himself when he later admits that the government

had "great popular backing" (p122). When strikes organized by the anarchists fail, multiple reasons are given, but when organized by M26J, the failure is "proof" that the movement had no base among the working class (p.76). Uncritical allegations of "Marxist indoctrination centers" and international Marxist conspiracies further erode his argument (p. 76, 97).

All writing is partisan. There is no such thing as neutrality, especially in writing history, but not all historical writing is equally obscured by one's partisan perspective. Writers willing to be more critical of themselves and of the movements to which they belong, as well as of their enemies, create more valuable work in that they allow readers a more nuanced understanding of the historical issues at play. The Cuban government has an incredible propaganda apparatus at its disposal. In order to effectively combat this, one needs to be as precise as possible. Unfortunately Fernandez is at his weakest when critiquing the present government.

This book comes at an important time, for Fidel Castro, nearing 80, will not be *comandante en jefe* too much longer. The Cuban people must soon decide how they will organize their lives, work, and communities in a post-Castro era. By bringing this rich, but suppressed history out of the closet, and by reviving historical memory, Fernandez takes the first step in renewing anarchism as a historical possibility for the Cuban people.