

# **Anarchism in Brazil**

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The anarchist movement had a substantial presence in Brazil in the early twentieth century. Eclipsed by the ascension of the communist left and crushed by anti-communist military regimes, it still survives, and its traces can be seen in some contemporary political and cultural movements.

## FROM COLONIZATION TO THE INDUSTRIAL ERA

During the colonial era some aspects of the numerous slave rebellions had an anti-authoritarian character, notably the *quilombos* – independent agrarian settlements formed by escaped slaves in the Brazilian hinterlands. The inception of Brazil’s anarchist movement *per se*, however, is generally dated to the arrival of European immigrants, particularly Italians, in the late nineteenth century. It was a number of Italian anarchists, led by Giovanni Rossi (1856–1943) and Gigi Damiani (1876–1953), who founded the Colônia Cecília (1890–3), a notable Utopian experiment in the rural province of Paraná on land purchased from the liberal emperor. Experimenting with free love, libertarian education, and collective land tenure, the colony was blighted by a croup epidemic in its fourth year, then undone by new arrivals who betrayed the trust of the founding families. Unlike Rossi’s pioneers, however, the bulk of the Italian immigrants, imported by employers as a factory workforce, were only radicalized after their arrival in the new country; hence, Brazilian anarchism can be considered a domestic product, and not only a foreign import (Gordon 1978: 18–19).

It was in the labor unions of the urban centers that Brazilian anarchism was to reach its greatest strength. In the *favelas* (slums) of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Santos, immigrants from Italy, Spain, and Portugal, but also from Greece, the Ukraine, Russia, and even Canada and England, mingled with “a local working class composed largely of former black slaves, but also a high proportion of women and children (particularly in the textile industry),” producing one of the most diverse anarchist communities in the world (Colson 2004, trans. mine). Thus, while Afro-Brazilians were “much less visible” than their white counterparts in the labor movement, Brazil’s anarchosyndicalist movement was unique in its inclusion of black and mestizo leaders such as Lima Barreto (1881–1922), a prominent journalist and writer, and Domingos Passes, general secretary of the União Geral da Construção Civil (General Union of Civil Construction Workers) (UGCC), who came to be called “the Brazilian Bakunin” (McIntyre 2002: 171; Ramos & Samis 2004). Similarly, despite the “masculine tone” of early Brazilian anarchism, the movement “increasingly embraced ...women’s syndicalist tactics and traditions” (Wolfe 1993: 136). The anarchist militants who emerged from this class fermentation, such as Neno Vasco (1878–1920), Edgard Leuenroth (1881–1968), and José Oiticica (1882–1957), were instrumental in the formation of a national labor movement, and their ideas predominated in the Brazilian Workers’ Congresses of 1906 and 1912 (Gordon 1978: 37). Female activists such as Maria Lacerda de Moura (1887–1945) and Maria Angelina Soares (1901–85) also made key contributions, particularly in the construction of an anarchist counterculture.

Historian Francisco Foot Hardman speaks of a “strategy of exile” enacted by Brazilian anarchists, one that “had a solid basis in the actual conditions of the Brazilian proletariat”: namely, the experience of mass immigration and the sequestration of factory laborers in company towns (“Vilas Operárias”). Embracing their “exile” from national identity, anarchist workers attempted to construct a self-affirming, cosmopolitan counter-culture centered on working-class values and priorities, fully equipped with its own cultural institutions. A prolific anarchist press developed,

workers' theater companies staged performances, and in São Paulo, the Modern Schools of Brás and Belenzinho (1913–19) implemented the libertarian pedagogy of Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, enrolling some 150 students before they were shut down by the government. Workers' festivals featuring poetry, song, dance, and sport raised money for anarchosyndicalist organizations and reinforced a sense of solidarity (Hardman 1983: 59–60, 70–1, 36–43).

## **PERIOD OF STRIKES**

At the peak of their strength in the labor movement, anarchists led general strikes in 1906 in Porto Alegre, 1907 and 1917 in São Paulo, 1918 in Rio de Janeiro, and 1919 in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In response, government forces employed all the measures of brute force, sending police, troops, and even naval warships to crush resistance. They also attempted to exploit racial divisions between workers, appealing to Afro-Brazilians to reject the “foreign” influence of radical immigrants and take their jobs during the time of the general strikes, then reversing course and reaffirming the privilege of “white” labor over its black and “Indian” counterparts (Butler 1998: 39–40). Finally, the government pushed proprietors to make some wage concessions to workers. Together with police and military infiltration of the unions and the mass imprisonment and deportation of anarchists, this strategy of co-optation steered reformist unions toward replacing the revolutionary syndicalist federations as representatives of the working classes. In the 1920s the anarchists ceased to be able to persuade workers to engage in general strikes.

## **DECLINE OF THE MOVEMENT**

Some explain the decline of the Brazilian anarchist movement in terms parallel to the history of anarchism in most other countries: after the Russian Revolution, the anarchists' working-class constituency defected to the seemingly successful Bolsheviks, adopting their model and entering their organizations. After the collapse of the Partido Comunista Anarquista (PCA) formed in 1919 and led by José Oiticica, the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB), founded in 1922, absorbed a number of anarchists into its ranks, such as Edgard Leuenroth, who co-authored its charter, and Astrogildo Pereira, who served as its secretary-general for nearly a decade before he was expelled (Dulles 1973: xvi). Indeed, the PCB retained enough of an anarchist character that it was denied recognition by the Comintern, and sizeable anarchist protests and resistance to “integralist” fascism continued well into the 1930s. This persistence of anarchist influence has led other historians to argue that the real agents of anarchism's decline were a series of repressive governments, employing a combination of co-optative, populist tactics – e.g., establishing paternalistic, state-run unions to supplant independent workers' organizations – and brute force. The Bernardes regime of 1922–6 sent thousands of political prisoners into the remote penal colony of Clevelândia, where harsh conditions killed hundreds. The military regimes of 1930–85 continued this campaign with even more aggressive fervor.

## **SURVIVAL AND REAPPEARANCE**

During the military dictatorship of 1964–85 the anarchist movement survived clandestinely in the form of the Centre de Estudos Professor José Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo's Cen-

tre de Cultura Social, which continued propaganda activity and maintained links to movements in other countries. In the 1970s the newspaper *O Inimigo do Rei* (The King's Enemy) was published in Bahia, fostering the formation of new anarchist groups. Radical initiative, however, had largely passed to populist and libertarian Marxist currents, such as Paulo Freire's educational projects among the peasants of the northeast (1962–4). After 1984 the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement) (MST) evolved into a mass movement with decidedly anarchocommunist characteristics – a decentralized, non-hierarchical organization constituted for autonomous direct action – but has resisted being identified (or stigmatized) as “anarchist” (Fontes & Paget-Clarke 2005). While maintaining its political independence, the MST has accepted alliances with parties including the Partido dos Trabalhadores (the Workers Party) (PT), which became the governing party in 2002.

Contemporary Brazilian anarchism, like its counterparts elsewhere, reflects the influence of the “New Social Movements” of the 1960s and after, such as ecology and feminism. Thus, whereas the overwhelming majority of Brazilian anarchists' discourse on sexuality in the heyday of the movement, despite their defense of free love, had been “condemnatory” of homosexuality (Gordon 1978: 269–70), the anarchism of the 1980s reflected the presence of pro-homosexual activists such as Argentinian-born Néstor Perlongher (1949–92). At present, a number of Brazilian anarchist federations have embraced the strategy of “especificismo” in their organizing work, establishing common cause with groups such as the MST while maintaining their own distinct ideology and institutional identity. Other Brazilian anarchists, such as educator Silvio Gallo, have embraced “philosophies of difference,” linking anarchism to the poststructuralist and post-Marxist theories of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Rancière.

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