

Recovering Portugal's Mass Anarchist History

A review of João Freire's *Freedom Fighters: Anarchist Intellectuals, Workers, and Soldiers in Portugal's History*

Michael Schmidt

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Overshadowed in most histories by the Spanish anarchist movement next door, the Portuguese movement may have been numerically smaller but was relatively, by head of population, a *larger* movement, with the anarchosyndicalist CGT achieving an almost totally hegemonic position in the working class until the rise of what became the quasi-fascist New State in 1927, the suppression of free labour and the imposition of what was tellingly named “national syndicalism”. Its impact was also felt as far afield as Brazil and Lisbon's colonies such as Mozambique or Macau, where the early labour movements were built in part by exiled Portuguese anarchists.

I guess it's easy to forget that because that authoritarian state of affairs persisted far longer than the nasty, brutish and short Nazi regime or even Franco's long-lived autocracy, until the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and the withdrawal from Portugal's African empire. Sadly, because of this long winter, the Portuguese anarchist movement today remains a fringe shadow of its former self with no connecting tissue to previous generations (in the 1950s, the few Angolan anarchists, for example, had to subsume themselves into the dominant Marxist politics of the liberation movements such as the MPLA).

Freire's much needed study is commendably analytical rather than anecdotal, backed with statistics and tables. In particular it covers the key role of the anarchist movement which had managed to penetrate the armed forces in overthrowing the monarchy in 1911 alongside the republicans – similarly to what happened in China in the same year – largely because of a desire to take Portuguese society out of its stagnation and to modernise it. An important study in English of this understudied movement, and an important recovery of memory from the darkness that was the Salazarist era.

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