

Cuba: interview with Octavio Alberola

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Among other things Octavio Alberola is presently the driving force behind the GALSIC (Support Group for Libertarians and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba), a support and information network which, in concert with the Cuban Libertarian Movement in Exile (MLCE), denounces the excesses of Fidel Castro's multi-faceted dictatorship from an anarchist viewpoint.

El Libertario: What are anarchism's beefs with the so-called Cuban revolution?

Octavio Alberola: Essentially, that it is not a social revolution at all but a semantic ploy to disguise its true essence and the reality of a populist dictatorship. Of course, there is the matter of the lack of fundamental human rights (rights of opinion, expression and assembly), denied to Cubans by a totalitarian dictatorship. Anarchists see such rights as being inalienable.

But our criticism of Castroism - because the so-called "Cuban revolution" is merely a totalitarian power set-up in Fidel Castro's service - goes far beyond mere vindication of those rights. We anarchists have always fought, and always will fight, for human liberation, to put paid to exploitation and domination. Not just of one class by another but also of man by his fellow-man. The communist ideal used to look forward to a society with neither exploited nor exploiters, neither ruled nor rulers.

As a result, revolution ought to have torn down the structures that allow Capital and the State to exploit and rule. A political change that fails to destroy those structures and which merely places them in the service of some new social group, party or Leader, does nothing to alter the worker's exploited status or to free the citizen from his status as one of the ruled. Such a change is therefore not social revolution, unless that term is understood to mean a straightforward change of rulers through coup d'état or armed uprising.

And that is what happened in Cuba. Batista's place in power was taken by Castro. Except that, in order to consolidate his hegemony and to cling to power, Castro availed of an ideological disguise, marxist "revolution", representing this as synonymous with himself and vice versa. He was not the first to employ that stratagem. Stalin, Mao and many of the leaders of the decolonisation struggles in Asia and Africa before him had done so in order to seize power and to cling to it. Thus, as in many of those instances, in Cuba too revolution of that stripe just meant the imposition of a totalitarian dictatorship and state capitalism. That is, the workers' lot is to beg and to work. The power and the privileges being reserved for the bureaucrats, the new nomenklatura. Which is why none of the aforesaid "experiments" did away with wage slavery, repressive agencies, the army, etc. On the contrary: a system of police surveillance and a single party, single trade union,

single press, etc, arrangement was imposed in order to keep the populace under control and stop it thinking for itself. We criticise and denounce the so-called “Cuban revolution” because the demagogic selling of it as that - like every other instance of the same thing - not merely helps to pervert the idea of revolution, but helps to get millions of the exploited in Cuba and around the world to give up on the fight for emancipation. All these supposed revolutions have only served to destroy the yearning for emancipation in the working class and to consolidate capitalism; as a system and as a generalized form of individualism. So much so that the Dollar has now become the standard currency, not just in the USA but also in Russia, China and .. Cuba.

True, in Cuba - as in other formally communist countries - virtually all private ownership was abolished and everything - officially at any rate - became state property. But this did not put paid to inequality, since those who threw in their lot with the state were in a position to manage the distribution of the usufruct of the national wealth, the wealth that that produced and still produces, to their own advantage. This was the culmination of the process of capitalist concentration and monopoly by a single firm - the state - and (in Cuba) by Castroism and Fidel. It is as if in the USA the Coca-Cola company had gained a monopoly over every enterprise, over the entire economy, and as if the state was run by Coca-Cola executives and as if its director were to cling to power forever the way Fidel has. US citizens would have been left utterly dependent upon the whims of the company and its executive directors; the way that Cubans are dependent on Castro & Co. and its managing-director, the Commander-in-Chief. Such economic dependency implies utter political and social dependency, with dissent left no option but to go underground or go to jail. State capitalism turns the worker into a victim of exploitation who is required to accept exploitation in a resigned fashion, lest he be looked upon as a traitor to the Revolution .. Such a system is the paradigm of capitalism, is wholesale capitalism.

El Libertario: Is it correct to think that the Cuban people is caught in between two camps - its own government on one side and “US imperialism” on the other? Given the strategy of the “lesser enemy”, might we not be obliged to back Fidel Castro in that context?

Octavio Alberola: That is what both the US government and the Castro government would have us believe. The fact is that the Cuban people is not at the heart of the concerns of either government. All they are concerned about are their interests. Which is to say: their privileges and their continued survival.

The latest “anti-Castro” measures taken by the Bush government have shown this. Essentially, Bush says that he has taken these steps to weaken Castro and ease “transition to democracy for the Cuban people”. Although we all know that at the back of his mind is winning votes in support of his re-election among the Cuban exiles in Miami. On the pretext of defending Cuba and the Cuban people from imperialist aggression, Castro has responded by raising prices and cutting rations.. When we all know that the primary casualties worst hit by Castro’s measures are the poorest Cubans.

For over forty years, the Cuban people has been squeezed by both sides and throughout that time the only ones to suffer the consequences have been the Cuban people. The tragedy of the raft people demonstrates the inhumanity of both governments: the Castro government because it is responsible for the exodus and the US government because it has handed back lots of the raft people to the Cuban authorities. In fact, it suits the US government very well to have Castro cracking down on those trying to escape from the island and for it to keep the Cuban people in check. That is what the Yanks demand of other Latin American governments. So as far as we are concerned, the “lesser evil” or “lesser enemy” will not wash. In both instances we are dealing

with governments that want subject peoples and which exploit and oppress them as much as they are able. Bush too would like to be able to impose a single party, single trade union, single press .. But, in any case, it is the Cubans who must be in a position to determine which of them is the “lesser enemy”. And should be completely free to make that determination.

El Libertario: How do you see the role of the anarchist movement in Cuba in the fight against Batista, vis a vis the “Cuban revolution” and Fidel Castro’s accession to power? We have even read that you yourself had some sort of involvement in developments at that time. Is this true?

Octavio Alberola: Actually, I was in Mexico when Castro started preparing for the guerrilla struggle and the Granma expedition and up until Batista’s overthrow I worked with the Cuban exiles fighting against him. Especially with those from the 26 July Movement and the Revolutionary Student Directory. I was also involved in the launch of the Latin American Anti-Dictatorship Front, an umbrella for various Latin American youth organisations in exile in Mexico. As a result of these activities I was in touch with some Cuban libertarian exiles who had had to quit Cuba because of their clandestine activity against the Batista dictatorship.

So I was au fait with the position of the anarchist movement in Cuba. What happened was that there were a lot of misgivings as to Fidel’s real ambitions. His supporters at the time were trying to turn him, even then, into a caudillo. I had to step in personally to avert clashes between 26 July Movement supporters and other anti-Batista opposition groups which refused to have Castro’s leadership foisted upon them. I always tried to persuade both factions that the fight against the dictatorship had to be the priority, that personal ambition and party ambition had to take a back seat.

So, even though in the end Fidel wound up imposing his hegemony and his dictatorship has endured for so many years, I persist with the belief that our duty at that time was to fight - as we did - against the Batista dictatorship. The fact that we proved unable to stop the authoritarian-totalitarian rot from setting in in that anti-dictatorship movement in no way challenges our priorities at that time. The libertarian and revolutionary effervescence triggered by the collapse of the dictatorship justified it and, it seems to me, still stands as a justification for it. The fact now is that that inspirational experiment in the early moments of the “Cuban Revolution” - which, in some ways, was genuinely revolutionary, this being what drew so many people to it - has not been erased from the historical record by the ensuing dictatorial reality. Hence the importance of recovering and preserving that memory.

El Libertario: In his book *History of Cuban Anarchism*, Frank Fernandez refers to the meagre backing that the anarchist movement internationally afforded to the Cuban libertarians’ exposes of the direction being taken by the Castro regime during those early years. Why do you think that was so? And are things different now?

Octavio Alberola: It is true that for some years certain sectors and personalities in the international anarchist movement there was a lingering illusion that the “barbudos” (bearded ones) were revolutionaries with a human face. But the anarchist movement, as such, very soon started to distance itself and as Fidel’s rift towards caudillismo became more and more obvious, the movement comprehensively denounced it.

In 1961, along with Victor Garcia (Germinal Gracia), I took part in a lecture tour of Spanish exile anarchist circles in France and Britain to expose the totalitarian drift in the “Cuban Revolution”. The point was that at the time there was still some confidence in the ability of the popular movement to react and to thwart Castroism from hijacking the revolution completely. But it very

quickly became apparent that Castro had aligned himself with Soviet totalitarian communism and we learned of the persecution visited upon the Cuban anarcho-syndicalists.

At present I do not think that there is a single anarchist who is in any way soft on the Castro dictatorship. Campaigns against the repressive paranoia displayed by the Caribbean Stalin have been taken up in the entire anarchist press around the world. Castro's demagogy now deceives only his unconditional fans or those who cling to the myth in order to excuse their own retreats from revolution.

El Libertario: You are involved with the so-called GALSIC. What is the venture all about and what are its aims?

Octavio Alberola: Yes, I am one of the venture's sponsors and I serve on the team behind the GALSIC in France. In reality, the Support Group for Libertarians and Independent Trade Unionists in Cuba (GALSIC) is an informal group. Which means: that it has no standing organisational structure, but operates as a sort of occasional coordinating body for the sharing of information and furtherance of initiatives in support of the Cuban libertarians and trade unionists in their fight against the Castro dictatorship. Hence the GALSIC's activities are essentially centred on the publication and distribution of the bulletin CUBA libertaria (especially via the Internet).

The initial idea was to set up an international umbrella body representing all the libertarian organisations so as to afford concrete solidarity to Cuban libertarians and independent trade unionists. But although there was universal backing for that idea, it proved impossible to implement. Even so, everybody helps to distribute the CUBA libertaria bulletin. For the time being, the essential point is that this solidarity impulse should be boosted and that anarchists should liaise with one another to that end. That is: to make their presence felt and to show one and all that we anarchists are not giving up on the fight for freedom and human emancipation, in Cuba or anywhere else.

El Libertario: Are there centres of resistance on the island that are not tied to US influence? Are there any grounds for believing that there are anarchist groups active inside Cuba?

Octavio Alberola: Of course there are centres of resistance and dissent in Cuba that have no ties to the US government's influence and interests. What is more, it can be stated without any shadow of a doubt that this brand of dissent is the majority, even though it may get the least media exposure. Understandably so: neither the Castroites nor the US government have any reason to want these dissenters to prosper and gain a media presence. It suits both of them to peddle the belief that the only opposition to Castroism comes from the rightwing exiles in Miami and they spare no effort or resources to back up that belief.

The money Bush has promised "to help the transition to democracy in Cuba" will be funnelled exclusively to that reactionary faction which could not give a damn about the fate of the Cuban people. And the Castro government will of course only talk about this brand of dissent.. On the island as well as in exile there are dissident groups that repudiate both the Castro dictatorship and US imperialism. Groups opposed to Castroite state capitalism as well as to capitalism in all its guises, be they neo-liberal or archaic.

Many of the independent trade unionists know that their main mission will be to rebuild the unions in order to fight in the future against the other face of exploitation - private capitalism. Which will be every bit as savage as it has shown itself to be in those countries which have passed from communist totalitarianism to capitalist democracy. And all the more so because this new capitalism is going to be the product of an alliance between foreign capital and the bureaucratic coteries currently holding power in Cuba.

The presence of anarchist groups on the island is something that we currently have no way of verifying .. The brutality of the repression and the Cuban libertarians' lack of media resources ensure that they can look any further than the maintenance of a few personal contacts. However, as has happened elsewhere when communist dictatorships were shrugged off, we can foresee that the emergence of libertarian groups and trade unions can be expected and this will very likely be the case also with more current forms of anti-authoritarianism.

El Libertario: From the GALSIC platform you have promoted a "Bring a book to Cuba" campaign. What was that about? What are the avenues open to anarchists in demonstrating their solidarity with the Cuban people?

Octavio Alberola: The "Bring a book to Cuba" campaign was initially a proposal from the so-called Independent Libraries and we used the GALSIC platform to urge libertarian comrades going to Cuba to bring books out to those libraries; books on the history of social struggles, on experiences of self-management, on the collectives during the Spanish civil war.

The point being to ensure that Cubans get to read that which the existing authorities are keeping from them. The possibility exists that among the promoters of the Independent Libraries there may be some acting on religious or political motives and that a degree of ideological censorship may apply in their libraries too; but we are convinced that those are not the interests of the bulk of them. This no doubt is a form of passive resistance (albeit a very active form of it) to the censorship enforced by the Castro dictatorship. The mere fact that they freely offer Cubans who are interested the chance to read books not to be found in the official library systems or that the majority of Cubans cannot get access to is of itself a laudable venture and we should carry on contributing the literature that all of the (political, economic and religious) authorities will try to censor.

Plainly, this is not the only means of showing solidarity with the Cuban people in the difficult circumstances at present. Insofar as we can we urge condemnation of all measures affecting its day to day existence - whether they emanate from the Castro government or from the US government. And naturally we support the sending of aid directly to Cubans in need, dispensing, of course, with the official channels that confiscate such aid or purloin it for party political purposes. Although we are still convinced that the best way of demonstrating solidarity is to display it at every available opportunity by denouncing Castro's repression of every form of dissent.

El Libertario: There is a lot of speculation about what will happen after Fidel dies. How do you see Cuba's future?

Octavio Alberola: Regrettably, and contrary to what I would like for the Cuban people, the prospect one can objectively foresee at present is none too promising. Castro will die some day, as we all must, as Franco did - and he has lasted longer than Franco in power. The likelihood is that the Castro regime will more or less fitfully complete its "transition" to capitalism and that the return to Democracy will not come overnight. The interests of the domestic mafias and the mafia outside the island conspire in that direction, as do, of course, the interests of the US government and those of very many multinationals, including European Community interests, and so on.

Naturally, none of these players wants to see the Castro dictatorship come to a violent and radical end, much less that the Cuban people be in a position to try to effect the genuine social revolution that Castro was able to castrate. The only thing being negotiated now and will be finally negotiated when the time comes is how power and the wealth of the island are to be shared along with the property presently in state hands - and over which the Castroite nomenclature and the one in Miami squabble or will come to some accommodation: just as has happened in

other countries with similar regimes. The current balance of power does not suggest any other prospect.

Unfortunately, forty odd years of dictatorship and communist demagoguery have wiped out what was left of the workers' movement and its tradition of pressing claims and imposed resignation and disunity among workers. However, Cuban workers will have to come together and fight once again against private capitalism. Which is why we must as a matter of urgency help them to recover the historical record of the workers' movement in Cuba, which Castroism has so brazenly misrepresented. And as soon as we are able we must help them to rebuild genuine class-based independent trade unions, independent of the state and of any political force that would seek to turn them back into transmission belts .. the way that the Castro authorities use them today. I believe that this will be and already is the number one task if the fight against exploitation and domination is to be continued.

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