

Venezuelan Anarchism

Book review

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a review of

Rodolfo Montes De Oca, translated by Chaz Bufe, *Venezuelan Anarchism: The History of a Movement 1811-1998*. See Sharp Press, 2019. 211 pages, \$16.95 paper.

This is not an academic treatise but a more popular introduction. If you want to get some background on Venezuelan society and anarchism's place in it, read this book. It's a good place to start.

Montes de Oca attempts to trace the origins of anarchism in Venezuela to the very beginnings of the republic, following independence, citing a speech by a representative of the Sociedad Patriótica, Francisco Antonio "Coto" Paul, calling on the spirit of "anarchy" to save the fledgling republic from the dangers of centralization. He also cites cattle rustlers and rural bandits of the 1850s as possible precursors. A bit of a stretch if you ask me.

The anarchist movement developed pretty much along the same lines as the other movements in Latin America, only without the same success as, say, in Argentina or Uruguay or Mexico.

A few Proudhonist intellectuals and the formation of guilds and mutual aid societies by artisans in the 1850s and '60s developed socialist ideas in the country, followed by the development of a labor movement that emerged in tandem with the economic development of the country at the turn of the 20th Century. A Proudhonist-leaning section of the First International was established in 1871 in Caracas by French, German and Swiss refugees that functioned until 1893. In 1896 a Workers' Congress was held in Caracas that included Spanish anarchist immigrants of the Workers' Alliance. But the Workers' Congress was definitely reformist in orientation and briefly formed a labor party.

During and after World War I anarcho-syndicalism began to penetrate the labor movement but was hampered by the authoritarian regime of Juan Vicente Gomez. Many of the workers drawn to capital construction projects like the railroads and the oil and gas industry were brought from Spain and Italy and many of them had experience of anarcho-syndicalist organization. Wobblly maritime workers also brought the ideas of revolutionary industrial unionism to the area. Anarcho-syndicalists were among the leadership of the first industrial strike in Venezuela. The strike on the English-owned Bolivar Railway Company Limited in July 1918 disrupted not only

rail traffic but also maritime traffic. It resulted in a pay raise for the workers and imprisonment for several strike leaders.

In the oil fields of Zulia state, anarcho-syndicalists and Wobblies began to build a labor movement that eschewed politics and promoted direct action as the method of struggle. They helped to form the Petroleum Workers Mutual Aid Society (SAMOP) that grew to 5,000 members. But when this organization was smashed by the dictatorship many of the anarcho-syndicalist workers dispersed to other parts of the Caribbean.

Anarchists also promoted cultural centers along the lines of the ateneos characteristic of the Spanish movement. The centers put on concerts, lectures, held meetings to discuss neighborhood issues, held literacy classes and housed libraries.

Anarcho-syndicalists were at the foundation of the Venezuelan Confederation of Labor (CTV) and spread the word through the pages of the magazine *El Obrero* (The Worker), which published daily in 1919 and 1920. The CTV brought together unions of streetcar, railroad, electric utility, telephone, construction and shoe workers. But while anarcho-syndicalists were active in the foundation and development of the CTV, the organization contained other tendencies as well, including social democrats and Communists. When the dictator Juan Vicente Gomez died in 1935 there was a brief opening and political parties of various stripes formed and the labor movement came under party domination. The anarcho-syndicalists were not organized enough to counter this tendency. During the 1940s and '50s many of the leading anarcho-syndicalists threw in their lot with the social democrats/populists of the Accion Democratica Party. Particularly Francisco Olivo and Salom Mesa, both important militants in the labor movement, who became active party members and even held various government offices from time to time.

The defeat of anarchism in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War brought Spanish exiles to Venezuela in the 1940s. A branch of the CNT in Exile was established and the Casa Espana became the epicenter of anarchist activity in the '40s and '50s. Anarchist involvement in AD is credited with that party's allowing the Spanish Libertarian Movement in Exile to set up shop in the country.

A military coup in 1948 sent the AD and PCV underground. Francisco Olivo was expelled from the country and Salom Mesa and some Spanish anarchists joined plots to assassinate the military junta. The failure of the plot landed Mesa in the torture cells of the National Security.

Following the final overthrow of the military junta in January 1958 the CTV was reconstituted under the tutelage of the AD and included some Spanish CNT exiles in leadership positions. However, collaboration with the AD didn't sit well with some cenetistas who set up a dissident anarchist Grupo Malatesta that published the periodical *Simiente Libertaria*. Another anti-collaborationist group was the Grupo Buenaventura Durutti in the city of Maracay. Another group came together to begin publishing *El Libertario* and anarchist youth associated with Casa Espana began publishing *Crisol Juvenil* as the voice of the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth and *Juventud Libre*. In addition, the CNT sponsored a Culture and Social Studies Center in Caracas where they held forums, concerts, plays and other cultural events.

Anarcho-syndicalists were among the delegates at the Third Congress of Venezuelan Workers in November 1959. When the PCV split to set up the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores Venezolana the anarchists didn't follow.

An attempt to re-unify the CNT in Venezuela in 1961 failed. Although a formal unity agreement was adopted, two factions confronted each other, the collaborationist (with the AD government) *Nueva Fuerza* and the anti-collaborationist Local Federation of Caracas-CNT. Despite this, how-

ever, the CNT in Venezuela were able to give support to their Cuban comrades who fell afoul of the Castro Communists. They also managed to establish a Council of Anti-Franco Resistance in 1962. In that same year the FIJL started publishing *Ruta* as its organ.

During the 1960s "National Liberation" and "Armed Struggle" became the go-to position of the authoritarian left in Venezuela, inspired by the Cuban Revolution. Groups like the PCV, MIR and FALN carried out assassinations, kidnappings and other armed actions. Venezuelan anarchists were not impressed. Still the press had a field day denouncing the armed struggle as "anarchy."

In 1964 some Spanish- and Argentine-exiled anarchists set up the Grupo de Amigos del AIT (Friends of the IWA), later changing their name to Federacion Obrera Regional Venezolana (FORVe). They published a bi-monthly paper entitled *AIT* that appeared until 1978.

The world-wide rebellion among youth that was 1968 had its echo in Venezuela and gave anarchism a boost. A University Renovation Movement developed in 1969. Some of the student groups, like Poder Joven (Youth Power), were anarchist oriented. This movement was smashed by the state with the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas campus occupied by troops and shut down for two years. An attempt to establish a Partido Acrata De Venezuela (Anarchist Party of Venezuela) in 1970s failed to get off the ground. Also, in the 1970s exiled anarchists began to arrive in Venezuela from other South American countries, including Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, where movements were being savagely repressed. The Venezuelan CNT faded away. Under the control of the collaborationists the organization became inactive.

In the 1980s anarchism got a boost from the developing counter-cultural milieu of punk rock and student movements.

Anarchist collectives, social centers, coops and projects had been developing within the student, youth and counter-cultural movements of the 1970s and '80s. One group that developed at the Universidad Central de Venezuela was the Libertarian Self-Management Collective (CAL—Colectivo de Autogestion Libertaria). Made up of immigrants from Spain, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, the group published a short-lived tabloid called *El Libertario* and made a real effort to reach out to workers, distributing the paper at factory gates in Caracas. They also held forums jointly with the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), a union that split off from the social-Christian union CODESA. It was not an anarcho-sindicalist union but did hold some libertarian positions such as autonomy from political parties and self-management.

In 1989 came the so-called *Caracazo*, a popular rebellion against neo-liberalism and the structural re-adjustment required by the IMF, that was drowned in blood by the state. The anarchist zine *Correo A* analyzed the uprising as basically anarchist in character due to its spontaneity and leaderlessness. Despite the bloody repression, the rebellion announced a rejection not only of the neoliberal project but of the old leftist parties and groups as well. Anarchists sensed an opening of a path for the development of the idea in Venezuelan society.

In 1992 there was an abortive soldiers' revolt led by, among others, Hugo Chavez. The anarchist magazine *Correa A* sympathized with the popular anger at the policies of the government of Carlos Perez that led to widespread popular support for the rebellion but warned that a military coup was not the answer. Instead the anarchists championed a "movement for self-management in all areas of life" as the way forward.

In 1995 the Committee of Anarchist Relations was formed at the UCV by some Spanish CNT exiles and young Venezuelan anarchists attached to the counter-culture. They revived *El Libertario* and became a Friends of the AIT group. This is the Venezuelan anarchist group most widely known in North America and most critical of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

This History of Venezuelan Anarchism is a bit disappointing in that it only takes the story up to 1998—the year that Hugo Chavez was elected to the presidency and opened up the so-called Bolivarian Process. I had hoped that we would get a bit more about anarchists' perspectives and actions regarding the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, but, alas, no such luck. I've had to return to Raphael Uzcatequi's *Venezuela: Revolution as Spectacle* to get that perspective, but that book is already 10 years old. We need something more up to date.

Still, Montes de Oca's book is informative. The author gives a good description of the socio-political environment that anarchists in Venezuela were faced with: a long string of authoritarian regimes, followed by a corrupt "representative democracy" reigning over an oil-dependent economy with a labor movement dominated by political parties, leaving little room for the development of anarchist ideas within it. A difficult row to hoe.

One quibble, though: there's no index, which makes it a bit difficult to look things up. One can't have everything.

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