

Anarchists Confront the Marxist State in Cuba

Whee! Airbnb announces 2000 available Cuban listings; The New York Times has full page ads for travel to the island. Isn't it all grand? Well, no.

Quincy B. Thorn

2015

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The recent loosening of restrictions on economic transactions between citizens and companies in the U.S. and those in Cuba has been greeted by many liberals and leftists as a promise of what they designate as “prosperity” for the island.

They are hopeful that Congress will eliminate remaining trade restrictions, thereby helping to promote economic growth. However, given past examples of such liberalization, we can only realistically expect it to promote further integration of the Cuban economy into global capitalism.

Since shortly after taking power, the Castro regime has fairly systematically repressed anarchist activity. However, beginning in 2010, anarchist-inspired public activities have re-emerged in Cuba.

The Alfredo Lopez Libertarian Workshop (Taller Libertario Alfredo Lopez) has brought anarchists together, providing a meeting place for dialogue, mutual learning, rescuing hidden and forgotten histories, and coordination of public activities. (See the site observatoriocriticocuba.org for details.) This year, the Workshop, along with other organizations, sponsored a second Havana Libertarian Spring to commemorate the Haymarket martyrs and Cuban anarchists of the 20th century.

Since the 19th century, anarchists have continually faced repression, not only by traditional defenders of the capitalist order—employers, police, military and other government authorities—but also those forces posing as alternatives to the old world. Whether in power or aspiring to it, actors of the authoritarian left, from Marx on, have done everything they could to crush the possibilities and ideals of liberation ardently pursued by anarchists.

The regime established in Cuba in 1959 has not deviated from this tradition. The prevailing mystique surrounding the Castro brothers, Che Guevara and the guerrillas who fought in the mountains against a U.S.-supported right-wing dictatorship in the 1950s has obscured the importance of the country’s anarchist struggles. But it isn’t too late to explore and retell some of that story.

As in other parts of Latin America, anarchist movements in Cuba began in the mid-19th century, shortly after those in Europe. From their beginnings they have faced constant persecution, from petty harassment to major crackdowns. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalist had key roles in Cuban labor struggles, popular education, producer cooperatives and other areas of contestation at least until the 1930s.

Between 1903 and 1914, anarchists played important roles in many strikes. During these years, the anarchist movement also created alternative recreational and cultural facilities, medical clinics, housing, and producer and consumer cooperatives. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans were involved in these projects.

From the 1930s on, the Cuban anarchists experienced increasing repression. In the 1950s, many of them became actively involved in struggles against the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, and, like most people, they celebrated its ouster in 1959 by the guerrilla insurgency led by Fidel Castro.

At first, many anarchists had a hopeful attitude toward the new regime, while not completely trusting it. Toward the end of the regime’s first year in power, they began to lose hope as activities of independent labor unions and cooperatives were repressed and all criticism of the government started being labeled “counterrevolutionary.” At the same time, the Castro regime began an intensive campaign to gain the support of leftist oppositional tendencies and organizations in other countries.

One person who facilitated this endeavor was Manuel Gaona Sousa, Secretary for International Relations in the Asociación Libertaria de Cuba (ALC), an important anarchist organization.

Gaona enthusiastically supported the guerrilla insurgency and went on to support the new government. In his position with the ALC, he was in charge of maintaining contacts with anarchist groups throughout the world, enabling him to claim to speak for the Cuban anarchists.

In November 1961, a few months after Fidel Castro declared himself a Marxist-Leninist and began incorporating the Cuban Communist Party into the government's apparatus, Gaona published "A Clarification and a Statement of the Cuban Anarchists" which misleadingly asserted that "nearly all anarchist activities are now integrated in the various agencies of the Cuban Revolution."

It also falsely claimed that no anarchists were being imprisoned for their beliefs and activism. Both assertions had been repeatedly refuted in Cuban anarchist publications, including one by others associated with the ALC in the summer of 1960. For details, see an English translation of Rafael Uzcategui's 2012 article, "Authoritarian Demonization of Anarchists: Cuba and the Gaona Manifesto," at theanarchistlibrary.org. See also Chapter 4 of Frank Fernandez' *Cuban Anarchism: The history of a movement* (See Sharp, 2001).

The wording of Gaona's denunciation of his former comrades mirrored official propaganda, including statements such as, "We want to alert fellow anarchist movements in Mexico, Latin America, and the world, and fellow Spanish-speaking exiles in America, so that they won't be taken unawares by the malicious and deceitful information sent out by people who serve, consciously or unconsciously, the Cuban counterrevolution."

To legitimate his claims, Gaona had his manifesto signed by 25 Cuban anarchists (although it later emerged that many signatures had been gathered through deception). Many who were asked to sign refused because they considered the text a betrayal of basic anarchist principles.

Given the tightening grip of Castro's communist dictatorship, those who rejected Gaona's text faced persecution, imprisonment and worse. Gaona actively promoted the persecution of his former comrades, many of whom were forced to flee into exile.

Gaona's document was circulated widely in anarchist circles around the world and was cited in propaganda put out by various Marxist groups internationally as an indication of the wide support the Castro dictatorship enjoyed.

Outside Cuba, it fostered confusion and distrust of Cuban anarchists that lasted for decades. Many anarchist groups and individuals abroad became suspicious of those Cuban anarchists critical of the Castro regime. They regarded them as undeserving of support because of their opposition to a regime attempting social reform while under siege by the US government.

However, some anarchist groups challenged the lies, including the Cuban Anarchist Movement in Exile, (Movimiento Libertario Cubano en Exilio), centered in Miami, the Views & Comments group in New York City, and the Federación Libertaria Argentina. These developments are chronicled by Fernandez and by Sam Dolgoff, in *The Cuban Revolution: A critical perspective* (Black Rose Books 1976).

As Fernandez notes, the Castro regime responded to the anarchists' criticisms with denials, character assassinations and charges of counter-revolutionary activities. This is a familiar tactic of all Marxist state authorities in their treatment of anarchists, who they view as threats to their power.

It remains for those who cherish and fight for a future free from oppression and illusion to reflect on the implications of the anarchist-Marxist encounter in Cuba.

Quincy B. Thorn is a longtime anarchist living in the Pacific Northwest.

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An Answer Regarding Cuba
by Gaston Leval (1961), Translated by Paul Sharkey.
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gaston-leval-translated-by-paul-sharkey-an-answer-regarding-cuba-1961>

In June 1961, in the wake of the abortive April invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs, the French anarchist newspaper *Le Monde libertaire* published an article signed "Ariel" glorifying the Castro regime. It also criticised the French anarcho-syndicalist writer Gaston Leval for his lack of enthusiasm for the Castro revolution. This was his response.

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