One of my first "political" memories was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. At the tender age of 12 years, all I could gather from the TV news was that Cuba had had a "communist" revolution and had bought arms from the "evil empire" (i.e., the USSR) and the USA was going to put a stop to it. At the time we were studying the American Revolution in school and I thought to myself that it was quite hypocritical of the U.S. to deny the Cuban people the right to determine what kind of government they were going to have or who they were going to trade with. I didn't know anything about the nature of the Cuban revolution, "communism," or anarchism for that matter. In my own naive way I just thought it was wrong for the U.S. to bully a small country. (I was also pretty disgusted knowing that there were people [Kennedy and Khrushchev] with the power to destroy the world with the press of a button.)

Later, when I got to college and got involved in radical politics, the Cuban revolution again loomed into consciousness. There was talk of Che Guevara and creating "two, three, many Vietnams" and the Venceremos Brigades, collections of young people recruited to go the Cuba to harvest sugar cane. Cuba was the only free territory in the Americas and only "gusanos (worms)" and CIA stooges would dare to criticize Fidel.

It was only in the anarchist movement that I started to encounter criticism of Castroism. In old issues of Views and Comments of the defunct Libertarian League there was mention of Cuban anarchists in exile in New York and Miami. However, in other publications there were accusations that the CIA financed these Cuban anarchist exiles, and some anarchists still defended the Cuban regime because it defied U.S. imperialism.


Fernandez, who was an editor of the Cuban Libertarian Movement in Exile's magazine Guangara Libertaria, does an excellent job of relating the story of the Cuban anarchist movement from its mutualist beginnings during the colonial period through to the tragic denouement of exile.

Fernandez divides his text into periods: Colonialism and Separatism (1865-1898), Intervention and Republic (1899-1933), Constitution and Revolution (1934-1958), Castroism and Confrontation (1959-1961) and Exile and Eclipse (1962-2001). His concluding chapter is a look at the current reality in Cuba and prospects for the future. There are also great photos and an extensive bibliography.

Fernandez makes it clear that the labor movement in Cuba, from the very beginning, was influenced by anarchism. The first workers' paper in Cuba, La Aurora, established in 1965, published the works of Proudhon. In the 1880s quantities of anarchist propaganda came to the
island from Barcelona, spread by the Bakuninist Alianza Revolucionaria Socialista (Revolutionary Socialist Alliance). Important anarchist publications of this decade included El Obrero (The Worker) and El Productor (The Producer). El Productor spawned an organization called the Workers Alliance and cosponsored, along with the recently formed Federation of Cuban Workers (FTC), the first Congress of Cuban Workers in 1887. This Congress adopted classical anarcho-syndicalist positions: opposition to hierarchical authority within the workers' organizations, autonomy of locals, unity through a "federative pact," mutual aid, solidarity among groups, and opposition to political or religious doctrines within the federation.

In the 1890s the issue of independence came to the fore and the Cuban anarchist movement was split between those who supported the independence movement and those who saw no benefit in subordinating the economic struggle of the workers to the bourgeois chimera of "independence." A number of anarchists actively participated in the armed struggle for "national liberation" while others tried to defend the interests of the workers during the war. In the end independence from Spain meant subservience to the USA with the forced adoption of the Platt Amendment, which gave the USA carte-blanche to intervene in the internal affairs of Cuba at any time.

Undoubtedly the heyday of Cuban anarchism was in the period 1899-1933. It was in this period that saw the formation of the moderate, but still anarchist-influenced, General Workers League and the more radical anarchist Workers Circle; the sojourn of Malatesta; the first organizations of sugar workers on the plantations, under anarchist leadership; deportations of Spanish anarchists; the formation of the Workers' Federation of Havana (FOH) and the National Confederation of Cuban Workers (CNOC), both adopting anarcho-syndicalist methods. This period also saw the formation of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), which attracted some anarchists who fell for the Bolshevik myth. (One note of interest is that ex-anarchist and Communist International agent Enrique Flores Magon, brother of Ricardo Flores Magon, midwifed the PCC.)

In 1925 Gerardo Machado came to power and hoped to gain the support of the newly formed CNOC. He offered the anarchist leaders positions in his administration and other political bribes. This the anarchists refused, and as a result Machado unleashed a wave of repression which sent many anarcho-syndicalists to prison, exile or the grave. Two of the most prominent anarchist union leaders murdered by the regime's death squads were Enrique Varona, a leader of the Northern Railway Union, which was organizing sugar cane cutters and other agricultural workers, and Alfredo Lopez, a leader of the FOH. Their bodies were only recovered after Machado had been overthrown in 1933.

While CNOC was influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas, and was originally organized along those lines, it was not made of anarchist workers only. There were also contingents of followers of AFL-type unionism (organized in the Workers' Commissions), who allied themselves with Machado from the beginning, and the militants of the Communist Party, who bided their time. After the most influential anarchist militants had been driven out of the unions the CP took the opportunity to step into fill the vacuum. While the anarchists had been eliminated from leadership positions, there were still many anarchists among the rank and file who continued to fight for their ideas. In 1933 a transport strike broke out in Havana and, thanks to the anarchists in the FOH, a general strike was organized. Machado was on the ropes and appealed to the CP for help. In exchange for recognition of the CP and their leadership of CNOC, the Party leaders
reached an agreement with the dictator and called for a return to work. The anarchists in the FOH vigorously opposed this sell-out and the strike continued. Then the U.S. embassy stepped in and sponsored a coup d'etat. Among the coupists was a sergeant by the name of Fulgencio Batista.

In the aftermath of the general strike, the anarchists launched a violent polemic against the CP for their betrayal, while the CP denounced the anarchists as collaborationist of Yankee imperialism. This conflict came to head in a gun battle at the anarchists' Workers Center between Stalinists and anarchists in which one anarchist was killed and several wounded on both sides. The military intervened to stop the battle.

The next period, from 1934 to 1958, was an era in which the Cuban anarchists struggled to regain their place in the unions and to reorient the labor movement back towards its libertarian origins.

The regime that took over after Machado was, according to Fernandez, left nationalist and made an attempt to assert its independence from the U.S. embassy, which had helped them to power. The new regime removed the Platt Amendment from the Constitution, made some noises about controlling foreign capital, and promulgated the so-called "50% law," which stipulated that 50 percent of workers in any Cuban business had to be Cuban. This latter decree gravely wounded the anarchist movement, given that many of its militants were Spanish immigrants. Hundreds of Spanish-Cuban anarchists were either deported or forced to return to Spain, just in time to take an active part in the Spanish Civil War and Revolution.

This government, however, lasted only 100 days before the U.S. embassy engineered another coup, this one led by now-Colonel Batista. Searching for political allies, Batista, like Machado before him, turned to the CP, which was more than willing to accept positions in Batista's government. Besides government posts, Batista also gave the Communists leadership positions within the newly formed Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC).

From the very beginning the CTC operated in the shadows of the government and in opposition to the traditions of the Cuban labor movement, its leadership dominated by politicians. The anarchists, however, did not abandon the unions and still carried some weight with the rank and file. They formed the Federation of Anarchist Groups of Cuba, Libertarian Youth as well as pressure groups within the unions to agitate for anarchist perspectives. During the Spanish Civil War and Revolution the anarchists raised funds for their anarcho-syndicalist comrades of the CNT-FAI through the International Antifascist Solidarity (SIA) and a number of Cuban anarchists volunteered for the Spanish anarchist militias.

In 1940 the Batista regime created a new Constitution for Cuba. The so-called "Magna Carta" of Cuba, as Fernandez calls it, repealed the Platt Amendment, instituted the 8-hour workday, and guaranteed civil liberties. The new Constitution once again allowed the anarchists to operate in the open and in 1944 they held the First Cuban Libertarian Congress at which was founded the Libertarian Association of Cuba (ALC). The ALC continued to work within the CTC at a rank-and-file level and denounced the CP and reformist leadership for subordinating themselves to the government.
The CP had supported Batista's election in 1940 and was rewarded with posts in the government and the unions. When Batista was defeated in the election of 1944 the new government kept the Communists at their posts. In 1947, under pressure from the U.S. embassy, the government made an about face and expelled the CP leaders from the CTC. This gave both the reformists of the Workers’ Commissions and the anarcho-syndicalists the chance to regain leadership of the unions. In new union elections several anarcho-syndicalists were elected to leadership positions in a number of unions, while continuing to maintain rank-and-file groups in others.

Even with anarchist leadership in a number of important unions, including the Food Workers Federation, the Electrical Plants Workers’ Federation, the National Transport Workers’ Federation and National Federation of Construction Workers, the leadership of the CTC remained overwhelmingly reformist and tied to the political parties. In the early ’50s the anarchists decided to attempt the formation of a union center independent of the state and political parties. In 1949 they formed a National Independent Workers Committee (CONI) to agitate for the formation of a break-away federation and in 1950 the Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT - General Workers Confederation) was launched as an alternative to the CTC. This initiative, however, failed to take hold, given the opposition of reformists, Communists and the government.

In 1952 Batista pulled off another coup d'etat. This time, however, he was not able to openly collaborate with the CP because of the continuing Cold War. But the CP was still loyal and denounced the attack on Moncada in July 1953 by a band of guerrillas led by a bourgeois medical student by the name of Fidel Castro. The anarchists, while wary of Castro, took an active part in the anti-Batista movement. This movement, according to Fernandez, had as its stated aim the elimination of the dictatorship and the restoration of the Constitution of 1940. In other words, it was not a social revolutionary movement, but the ALC participated in it with the hope that the overthrow of Batista would open up space for renewed anarchist agitation and propaganda in the unions and neighborhoods.

The anarchists actively participated in the anti-Batista underground. Clandestine meetings often met at the ALC offices and a number of anarchists fought as guerrillas with Castro's July 26 Movement as well in the Escambray Mountains with the social democratic Revolutionary Directorate and in Oriente Province. As Fernandez points out, the anti-Batista movement encompassed all classes of Cuban society and Castro's movement in particular received financial aid from leading capitalists. By 1958 both the U.S. and the CP could see the writing on the wall and both withdrew their support from Batista, leading to his downfall.

At first the bourgeoisie (and the U.S.) thought that they could control Castro; however, with the support of the CP Castro inexorably moved the Revolution in a totalitarian direction. First the State succeeded in capturing the CTC, changing its name to CTCR (Cuban Confederation of Revolutionary Workers), by purging the old leadership, which they considered to be collaborationist, and imposing its own. Unfortunately the few remaining anarchist union leaders fell victim to this purge, despite the fact that many of them had fought Batista and had suffered jail and torture as a reward. Now they were accused of being collaborators and "counter-revolutionaries."
Cuba's descent into state capitalism continued. After getting control of the unions the new regime nationalized the economy. While the anarchists did not oppose expropriation of the capitalists they did object to statification. They saw clearly that under the developing regime there would be no room for dissent or independent workers organizations to defend the class against the new state-boss.

In 1960 the ALC issued a Declaration of Principles, under the name of the Libertarian Syndicalist Groups, in which it denounce the deteriorating situation and declared their opposition to the new regime. Repression began to mount and some anarchists joined the developing armed struggle against the new regime. Unfortunately some forces within this anti-Castro/Communist movement were reactionaries bent on restoring the old order and financed by the U.S. State Department. This fact gave the Castro regime the opportunity to paint the anarchists with the same "counter-revolutionary" brush. At the end of 1960 the last anarchist publication, Solidaridad Gastronomica, the organ of the food workers union, was forced to close down by the government and its editors fled into exile along with many other Cuban libertarians.

Fernandez dedicates a chapter to one of the most tragic and shameful episodes in the history of the anarchist movement, the failure of the international anarchist community to come to the defense of their Cuban comrades. The mystique of the Cuban Revolution greatly infected the international libertarian movement, just as the Russian Revolution had in 1917-21. One would think that anarchists had learned the lessons of that fiasco and the more recent Spanish debacle. One would think that anarchists would realize that Bolshevism is the mortal enemy of anarchism and refuse to support a Marxist-Leninist regime.

However, just as during the Russian Revolution, many anarchists were quick to believe the libertarian sounding rhetoric of the Castro regime and the myth of national liberation. Not all anarchists were taken in. To their credit the Libertarian League of New York (founded in 1954 by Sam and Ester Dolgoff and Russ Blackwell), the Libertarian Federation of Argentina, and few other Latin American groups supported the Cubans from the beginning. Still, it wasn't until 1976, with the publication of Dolgoff's The Cuban Revolution: A Critical Perspective, that the tide began to turn in favor of our Cuban fellow workers.

Fernandez points to what was, perhaps, a major cause of confusion within the international anarchist movement: the publication in November of 1961 of a document entitled "A Clarification and a Declaration of the Cuban Libertarians," penned by an old libertarian militant, and one of the founders of the ALC, Manuel Gaona Sousa, denouncing his former comrades who did not share his enthusiasm for the Castro regime. Gaona claimed that the Cuban Revolution was fulfilling all of the ancient dreams of Cuba's libertarian movement and that the Cuban anarchists had integrated themselves into the structures of the Revolution. In addition, Gaona succeeded in coercing or hoodwinking a number of elderly anarchist veterans to co-sign the document.

This document, which Fernandez characterizes as a true betrayal, caused confusion in the ranks of many anarchists internationally, who had a difficult time distinguishing between the opposition to the Castro regime of Cuba's anarchists and the opposition to the regime of the U.S. CIA-sponsored right-wingers. After the publication of Gaona's document in a number of
anarchist periodicals in Europe, the Cuban Libertarian Movement in Exile (as the anarchist oppositionists called themselves) tried to publish a response but were refused. Even Frederica Montseny, of Spanish anarchist fame, refused because "it was not popular to criticize Cuba in Europe."

In 1965, at an international anarchist congress in Bologna, Italy, it appeared that the Cuban anarchists had made a breakthrough in getting the Congress to denounce the Cuban dictatorship. In that same year the French Anarchist Federation also denounced the Castro regime at its Congress. However, many anarchists still sympathized with the Cuban myth of the guerrilla path to revolution. At an international congress in Cararra in 1968, the delegates denounced the Marxist-leninist betrayals of the Russian and Spanish Revolutions but were not willing to lay the same accusation against the Castro regime in Cuba. To underscore the anarchist confusions at this time, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, fresh from the barricades of May in Paris, denounced the exiled Cuban anarchists as agents of the CIA.

The publication of Sam Dolgoff's book on Cuba in 1976 began to turn the tide somewhat in favor of Cuba's anarchist exiles with its devastating critique of Castro's "Revolution." In 1979 an MLCE delegate was invited to attend the Congress of the post-Franco Spanish CNT and the CNT-affiliated magazine Bicicleta, which had only a few years earlier had repeated the lie that the MLCE was merely anti-Communist, published Alfredo Gomez's "The Cuban Anarchists, or the Bad Conscience of Anarchism."

It was around this same time that the MLCE began publishing a new periodical, Guangara Libertaria, as its propaganda organ for penetrating the Cuban exile community with libertarian ideas. Frank Fernandez was an editor of Guangara, which published 54 issues over 13 years and was one of the most widely circulated anarchist publications in the U.S., and the only Spanish-language anarchist publication since the demise of Cultura Proletaria in the 1960s.

In the final chapter, Fernandez deals with the current problems and prospects for Cuban society. He notes the increasing infiltration of old, liberal capitalist modes of production under the continuing totalitarian political system and its concomitant worsening of economic inequality on the island. He also points out the resurgence of racism and other forms of discrimination in these hard times. That the Castro regime will one day fall (he can't live forever), he has no doubt, but what will replace it is up for grabs. Fernandez believes that libertarian ideas still survive in the historical memory of Cuba's people and that the anarchists, with the help of the international anarchist movement, can once again play a role in Cuban society.

Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement would be a welcome addition to any anarchist's library. It's important not only as a history of Cuban anarchism, but as a cautionary tale for anarchists who might feel tempted to uncritically support revolutionary-sounding "national liberation" movements in the Third World. We should not blindly support such movements, which are universally led by nationalists and authoritarian Marxists, but seek out and support whatever libertarian elements might exist. Fernandez's book is a good place to start.

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