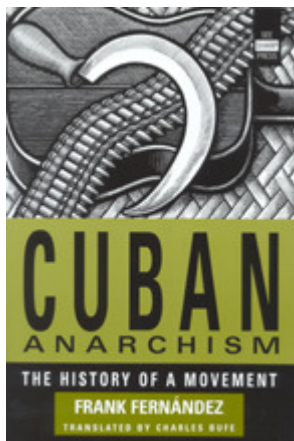


FERNÁNDEZ, Frank. *A History of Cuban Anarchism*

- Fernández, Frank. *Cuban anarchism : the history of a movement* / Frank Fernández ; introduction by Chaz Bufe. — Tucson, Ariz. : See Sharp Press, 2001. [1]

"At the height of their influence in the 1920s, Cuba's anarchists controlled the Cuban union movement, provided free, nonreligious schools for poor children, provided gathering places for Cuba's working class, organized campesinos into unions and agricultural collectives and published newspapers and magazines across the island. Later, they would take an active part in the resistance to the Machado, Batista, and Castro dictatorships."



"At the height of their influence in the 1920s, Cuba's anarchists controlled the Cuban union movement, provided free, nonreligious schools for poor children, provided gathering places for Cuba's working class, organized campesinos into unions and agricultural collectives and published newspapers and magazines across the island. Later, they would take an active part in the resistance to the Machado, Batista, and Castro dictatorships."

Introduction by Chaz Bufe

Friday, 17 September 2004

From the publisher...

This is not a conventional history. Rather, it's a tribute, an homage to the thousands of Cuban anarchists who worked over the course of more than a century to build a freer, juster world, and who, but for this book, would remain almost entirely forgotten. That would be a tragedy, as virtually all of them were idealistic, admirable human beings, and many were truly heroic. All are more deserving of historical remembrance than such power-hungry dictators as Gerardo Machado, Fulgencio Batista, and Fidel Castro.

The author of this work, Frank Fernández, has been a member of the Movimiento Libertario Cubano en Exilio (MLCE) for decades, and was the editor of its long-running periodical, *Guángara Libertaria*, for which he wrote easily half a million, and perhaps a million, words on Cuban history and politics. He is also the author of the book, *La sangre de Santa Águeda*, which deals with a pivotal event in Spanish and Cuban history, the assassination of the Spanish premier Cánovas del Castillo in 1897.

Like the other members of the MLCE and their predecessors in Cuba, Frank has done his political work in his "spare" time—after his day job as a mechanical engineer—and has never received a dime for his countless hours of work on behalf of Cuban freedom. He writes here from deep conviction and also from a deep knowledge of the history of Cuba and its anarchist movement. That knowledge includes personal acquaintance with most of the Cuban anarchists mentioned in chapters 4 and 5, whose testimony and remembrances form the backbone of those chapters.

In reading this history of Cuban anarchism, one is struck both by the immense courage and dedication of the Cuban anarchists, and by the lessons to be learned from their struggles. A particularly poignant lesson is that concerning so-called wars of national liberation. In the 1890s, Cuba's large and powerful

anarchist movement split over the question of whether or not to participate in the national independence struggle. A great many anarchists defected to the independence movement, but that movement proved to be a disaster both for the anarchists, who were seriously weakened, and for Cuba's people as a whole, hundreds of thousands of whom died in the conflict. In the end, nothing worthwhile was achieved—Spanish colonialism was replaced, but by a republic in the hands of the sugar barons and beholden to foreign financial interests. At least some Cuban anarchists evidently learned from this fiasco—that it's always a mistake for anarchists to put aside their principles and support would-be governors, no matter how “nationalist” or “progressive”—but a great many other anarchists evidently didn't.

Twenty years after this Cuban disaster, large numbers of the world's anarchists (including many Cubans) threw their support to the Bolshevik government after the 1917 Russian revolution. Despite growing evidence of the brutal, totalitarian nature of the Communist regime, many anarchists continued to support it until well into the 1920s, when two well known and respected anarchists, Alexander Berkman (in *The Russian Tragedy and The Bolshevik Myth*) and Emma Goldman (in *My Disillusionment in Russia and My Further Disillusionment in Russia*) revealed the truth. Even then, some anarchists refused to surrender their illusions about the nature of the “workers' state.”

This situation repeated itself with Castro's rise to power in 1959. A great many anarchists, especially in Europe, were so desperate to see positive social change that they saw it where there was none—in Cuba, thanks in part to a skilled disinformation campaign by Castro's propaganda apparatus. Despite suppression of civil liberties, the prohibition of independent political activity, the government takeover of the unions, the militarization of the economy, the gradual impoverishment of the country (despite massive Soviet economic aid), the reemergence of a class system, the institution of a network of political spies in every neighborhood (the so-called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), and the government-fostered personality cults which grew up around Fidel Castro and Ernesto (“Che”) Guevara, large and important sections of the world's anarchist movement supported Castro until well into the 1970s.

That situation began to change in 1976 with publication of the respected American anarchist Sam Dolgoff's *The Cuban Revolution : A Critical Perspective*. But even today some anarchists continue to be hoodwinked by the Castro regime's “revolutionary” rhetoric and the veneer of social welfare measures with which it covers its ruthless determination to cling to power at any price.

The Cuban experience provides us with valuable lessons. Two of the most important are that anarchists should never support marxist regimes, and that they should be extremely wary about supporting, let alone participating in, so-called wars of national liberation. These are the negative lessons to be learned from the history of Cuba's anarchists. The positive lesson is that it is possible to build a large, powerful revolutionary movement, despite lack of physical resources, through dedication and hard work.

Before going on to the body of this book, it's necessary to consider the ideology of Cuba's anarchists. Because there are so many popular misconceptions about anarchism, it's imperative to clarify what anarchism is and what it isn't. First, what it isn't :

Anarchism is not terrorism. An overwhelming majority of anarchists have always rejected terrorism, because they've been intelligent enough to realize that means determine ends, that terrorism is inherently vanguardist, and that even when “successful” it almost always leads to bad results. The anonymous authors of *You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship : The Anarchist Case Against Terrorism* put it like this :

The total collapse of this society would provide no guarantee about what replaced it. Unless a majority of people had the ideas and organization sufficient for the creation of an alternative society, we would see the old world reassert itself because it is what people would be used to, what they believed in, what existed unchallenged in their own personalities.

Proponents of terrorism and guerrillaism are to be opposed because their actions are vanguardist and authoritarian, because their ideas, to the extent that they are substantial, are wrong or unrelated to the results of their actions (especially when they call themselves libertarians or anarchists), because their killing cannot be justified, and finally because their actions produce either repression with nothing in return, or an authoritarian regime.

Decades of government and corporate slander cannot alter this reality : the overwhelming majority of anarchists reject terrorism for both practical and ethical reasons. Time magazine recently called Ted Kaczynski “the king of the anarchists,” but that doesn’t make it so ; Time’s words are just another typical, perhaps deliberately dishonest, attempt to tar all anarchists with the terrorist brush.

This is not to say that armed resistance is never appropriate. Clearly there are situations in which one has little choice, as when facing a dictatorship that suppresses civil liberties and prevents one from acting openly—which has happened repeatedly in Cuba. Even then, armed resistance should be undertaken reluctantly and as a last resort, because violence is inherently undesirable due to the suffering it causes ; because it provides repressive regimes excuses for further repression ; because it provides them with the opportunity to commit atrocities against civilians and to blame those atrocities on their “terrorist” opponents (as has happened recently in Algeria) ; and because, as history has shown, the chances of even limited success are quite low.

Even though armed resistance may sometimes be called for in repressive situations, it’s a far different matter to succumb to the romance of the gun and to engage in urban guerrilla warfare in relatively open societies in which civil liberties are largely intact and in which one does not have mass popular support at the start of one’s violent campaign. Violence in such situations does little but drive the public into the “protective” arms of the government ; it narrows political dialogue (tending to polarize the populace into pro- and anti-guerrilla factions) ; it turn politics into a spectator sport for the vast majority of people ; it provides the government with a handy excuse to suppress civil liberties ; and it induces the onset of repressive regimes, “better” able to handle the “terrorist” problem than their more tolerant predecessors. It’s also worth mentioning that the chances of success of such violent, vanguardist campaigns are microscopic. They are simply arrogant, ill-thoughtout roads to disaster.

Anarchism is not primitivism. In recent decades, groups of quasi-religious mystics have begun equating the primitivism they advocate (rejection of “technology,” whatever that might mean) with anarchism. In reality, the two have nothing to do with each other, as we’ll see when we consider what anarchism actually is—a set of philosophical/ethical precepts and organizational principles designed to maximize human freedom.

For now, suffice it to say that the elimination of technology advocated by primitivist groups would inevitably entail the deaths of literally billions of human beings in a world utterly dependent upon interlocking technologies for everything from food production and delivery to communications to medical treatment. This fervently desired outcome, the elimination of technology, could only occur through means which are the absolute antithesis of anarchism : the use of coercion and violence on a mass scale.

Anarchism is not chaos ; Anarchism is not rejection of organization. This is another popular misconception, repeated ad nauseam by the media and by anarchism's political foes, especially marxists (who sometimes know better). Even a brief look at the works of anarchism's leading theoreticians and writers confirms that this belief is in error. Over and over in the writings of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Rocker, Ward, Bookchin, et al., one finds not a rejection of organization, but rather a preoccupation with how society should be organized in accord with the anarchist principles of individual freedom and social justice. For a century and a half now, anarchists have been arguing that coercive, hierarchical organization (as embodied in government) is not equivalent to organization per se (which they regard as necessary), and that coercive organization should be replaced by decentralized, non-hierarchical organization based on voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. This is hardly a rejection of organization.

Anarchism is not amoral egotism. As does any avant garde social movement, anarchism attracts more than its share of flakes, parasites, and sociopaths, persons simply looking for a glamorous label to cover their often-pathological selfishness, their disregard for the rights and dignity of others, and their pathetic desire to be the center of attention. These individuals tend to give anarchism a bad name, because even though they have very little in common with actual anarchists—that is, persons concerned with ethical behavior, social justice, and the rights of both themselves and others—they're often quite exhibitionistic, and their disreputable actions sometimes come into the public eye. To make matters worse, these exhibitionists sometimes publish their self-glorifying views and deliberately misidentify those views as "anarchist." To cite an example, the publisher of a pretentiously (sub)titled American "anarchist" journal recently published a book by a fellow egotist consisting largely of ad hominem attacks on actual anarchists—knowing full well that the "anarchist" author of the book was a notorious police narcotics informant. Such individuals may (mis)use the label, but they're anarchists only in the sense that the now-defunct German Democratic Republic (East Germany) was democratic and a republic.

This is what anarchism isn't. This is what it is : In its narrowest sense, anarchism is simply the rejection of the state, the rejection of coercive government. Under this extremely narrow definition, even such apparent absurdities as "anarcho-capitalism" and religious anarchism are possible. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no such shining examples of anarcho-capitalists.

But most anarchists use the term "anarchism" in a much broader sense, defining it as the rejection of coercion and domination in all forms. So, most anarchists reject not only coercive government, but also religion and capitalism, which they see as other forms of the twin evils, domination and coercion. They reject religion because they see it as the ultimate form of domination, in which a supposedly all-powerful god hands down "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" to its "flock." They likewise reject capitalism because it's designed to produce rich and poor, because it inevitably produces a system of domination in which some give orders and others have little choice but to take them. For similar reasons, on a personal level almost all anarchists reject sexism, racism, and homophobia—all of which produce artificial inequality, and thus domination.

To put this another way, anarchists believe in freedom in both its negative and positive senses. In this country, freedom is routinely presented only in its negative sense, that of being free from restraint. Hence most people equate freedom only with such things as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of (or from) religion. But there's also a positive aspect of freedom, an aspect which anarchists almost alone insist on.

That positive aspect is what Emma Goldman called the freedom to. And that freedom, the freedom of action, the freedom to enjoy or use, is highly dependent upon access to the world's resources. Because of this the rich are, in a very real sense, free to a much greater degree than the rest of us. To cite an example in the area of free speech, Donald Trump could easily buy dozens of daily newspapers or television stations to propagate his views and influence public opinion. How many working people could do the same? How many working people could afford to buy a single daily newspaper or a single television station? The answer is obvious. Working people cannot do such things; instead, they're reduced to producing 'zines with a readership of a few hundred persons or putting up pages on the Internet in their relatively few hours of free time.

Examples of the greater freedom of the rich abound in daily life. To put this in general terms, because they do not have to work, the rich not only have far more money (that is, more access to resources) but also far more time to pursue their interests, pleasures, and desires than do the rest of us. To cite a concrete example, the rich are free to send their children to the best colleges employing the best instructors, while the rest of us, if we can afford college at all, make do with community and state colleges employing slave-labor "adjunct faculty" and overworked, underpaid graduate-student teaching assistants. Once in college, the children of the rich are entirely free to pursue their studies, while most other students must work at least part time to support themselves, which deprives them of many hours which could be devoted to study. If you think about it, you can easily find additional examples of the greater freedom of the rich in the areas of medical care, housing, nutrition, travel, etc., etc.—in fact, in virtually every area of life.

This greater freedom of action of the rich comes at the expense of everyone else, through the diminishment of everyone else's freedom of action. There is no way around this, given that freedom of action is to a great extent determined by access to finite resources. Anatole France well illustrated the differences between the restrictions placed upon the rich and the poor when he wrote, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."

Because the primary goal of anarchism is the greatest possible amount of freedom for all, anarchists insist on equal freedom in both its negative and positive senses—that, in the negative sense, individuals be free to do whatever they wish as long as they do not harm or directly intrude on others; and, in the positive sense, that all individuals have equal freedom to act, that they have equal access to the world's resources.

Anarchists recognize that absolute freedom is an impossibility. What they argue for is that everyone have equal freedom from restraint (limited only by respect for the rights of others) and that everyone have as nearly as possible equal access to resources, thus ensuring equal (or near-equal) freedom to act.

This is anarchism in its theoretical sense.

In Cuba, as in Spain and a few other countries, there have been serious attempts to make this theory reality through the movement known as anarcho-syndicalism. The primary purpose of anarcho-syndicalism is the replacement of coercive government by voluntary cooperation in the form of worker-controlled unions coordinating the entire economy. This would not only eliminate the main restraint on the negative freedoms (government), but would also be a huge step toward achieving positive freedom (the freedom to). The nearest this vision has ever come to fruition was in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939, when large areas of Spain, including its most heavily industrialized region,

Catalonia, came under the control of the anarchosyndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo. George Orwell describes this achievement in *Homage to Catalonia* :

The Anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was in full swing. . . . the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the anarchists ; . . . Every shop and café had an inscription saying it had been collectivized ; even the bootblacks had been collectivized and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shopworkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. . . . The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. . . . All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.

This is what the Cuban anarchists were fighting for. While they did not achieve what their Spanish comrades did, they built one of the largest anarchosyndicalist movements the world has ever seen, which at its height in the 1920s included 80,000 to 100,000 workers in unions operated on anarchist principles.

This achievement did not come without cost : countless Cuban anarchists paid for it with their lives, imprisonment, or exile.

This is their story.

Chaz Bufe, Tucson, Arizona

A Note on Terminology

Throughout the text the author uses the term “libertarian” in its original sense : as a synonym for “anarchist.” Indeed, it was used almost exclusively in this sense until the 1970s when, in the United States, it was appropriated by the grossly misnamed Libertarian Party. This party has almost nothing to do with anarchist concepts of liberty, especially the concepts of equal freedom and positive freedom—the access to resources necessary to the freedom to act. Instead, this “Libertarian” party concerns itself exclusively with the negative freedoms, pretending that liberty exists only in the negative sense, while it simultaneously revels in the denial of equal positive freedom to the vast majority of the world’s people. These “Libertarians” not only glorify capitalism, the mechanism that denies both equal freedom and positive freedom to the vast majority, but they also wish to retain the coercive apparatus of the state while eliminating its social welfare functions—hence widening the rift between rich and poor, and increasing the freedom of the rich by diminishing that of the poor (while keeping the boot of the state on their necks).

Thus, in the United States, the once exceedingly useful term “libertarian” has been hijacked by egotists who are in fact enemies of liberty in the full sense of the word. Fortunately, in the rest of the world, especially in the Spanish-speaking countries, “libertarian” (“libertario”) remains a synonym for “anarchist.” It is used in that sense in this book.

[1] This book by Frank Fernandez is a longer version of his *El Anarquismo en Cuba*, with an introduction by the translator, Chaz Bufe