

The Uniqueness of Anarchism in Argentina

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Anarchism is an ideology that has shown a remarkable talent for survival; it has been with us for some 200 years, since its ideas were first propounded by William Godwin at the end of the 18th century. The principal focal points of anarchism in modern history were in Italy, where an anarchist movement first appeared, led by Bakunin, and in Spain and France, where, from the 1880s to the 1930s, it amassed many adherents. In North and South America, it gained a strong foothold in the United States and Argentina, and more limited support in Brazil, Uruguay, Cuba and Mexico.

As an active movement, with its own institutions and publications, anarchism existed uninterrupted in Argentina for about fifty years, between 1880 and 1930. A study of the source of the survival of this movement, whose ideological component was such an outstanding feature, will nonetheless find it difficult to explain its survival in Argentina based solely on its ideological force. The explanation lies in a number of factors: the massive flow of European immigrants (many of whom had an anarchist past); the social ferment that beset Argentina at the turn of the century; the internal developments within anarchism which brought about a strengthening of the 'pro-organization' faction that supported activism in the workers' organizations; the formation of a faithful group of anarchist activists who inspired trust among the cosmopolitan immigrant workers that crowded the big cities; the marginal political standing of the working class that had risen from the waves of immigration and failed to gain access to the political organizations; the freedom of expression, both written and oral, and the freedom of organization of all kinds of anarchist cells.¹

It should be noted here that the source of anarchism's success is not to be found in any given one of these factors, nor in their sum total, but rather in their unique integration within the historical process. Each played a role and had an effect according to its place in the historical course, far beyond its own

specific content. Hence, the most appropriate way to understand the uniqueness of Argentinian anarchism, and how it struck roots, is to begin with a brief historical review of the landmarks in its development and decline.

Argentinian anarchism was from the outset, in the 1880s and up until the 1930s, predominantly a workers' movement, based on the urban proletariat. The first anarchists in Argentina were immigrants from Italy and Spain, with a record of anarchist activities in those countries. Some had fled to escape police persecution and, upon their arrival in their country of asylum, they suddenly enjoyed complete freedom of action, but had a limited sphere of influence.² Anarchism was brought closer to life in Argentina through the activities of Errico Malatesta, a leading figure in world anarchism, with anarcho-communist views, who lived there between 1885 and 1889. During this stay, he helped to bridge the gap between the anarcho-communist circles, who opposed relations with the labor organizations, and the anarchists who were in favor of activities within the trade unions. The bridge collapsed when Malatesta left Argentina.³

From the early '90s, workers' organizations were founded mainly by socialists. Around the turn of the century, anarchists again approached the workers' unions and a debate erupted between two streams of anarchist ideology: those who favored organizing within the unions versus the 'purists', who opposed it. The first regarded the workers' organizations as a natural weapon in the social struggle. The anti-organizers, on the other hand, argued that, once inside the unions, the anarchists would cease to be revolutionaries for they would be involved in reformist activities. The influence of the organizers increased with the publication of the newspaper, *La Protesta Humana*, in 1897.⁴

In 1898, with the arrival of Dr. Pietro Gori in Argentina, the pro-organization trend gained great impetus. Gori was an Italian anarchist of international renown; an eminent propounder of the anarchist cause, as well as poet, lawyer and criminologist, he encouraged anarchist participation in the fledgling labor federation and played a prominent role in founding a federation with a pro-organization bias.⁵

The strengthening of the pro-organization stream within the anarchist movement also owed much to the influence of Pellicer Paraire, a Spanish printer who had been active in the first International and had immigrated to Argentina in 1891. In 1900 he published a series of articles on "Labor Organization" in *La Protesta Humana*, in which he put forward the basic principles for a labor federation. He posed the need for a dual, though interrelated, organizational structure, with one economic and trade-based arm represented by the labor federation, and another which would be revolutionary and specifically anarchist.⁶

These principles later guided the founding documents and practices of the FOA (*Federación Obrera Argentina*), formed in 1901 as a joint endeavor with the socialists. Within a year, the FOA split up and the socialist unions escinded. The group that remained within the federation comprised 8000 members, while those who left numbered about 2000, thus establishing anarchist hegemony in the workers' unions. This hegemony was maintained for the next ten years.⁷

The first decade of the 20th century was of singular importance in the formation process of the Argentine working class. The politics of the labor movement during these ten years were characterized by the rise of anarchism, defined, particularly in the FOA, as anarcho-communism. From the beginning, the FOA organized itself outside any kind of politically legitimizing framework; it resorted to strikes, boycotts, sabotage and the general strike. For the anarchists, the latter had an insurrectional character and was considered an instrument in the struggle to abolish the state and form a new society.

In 1902 the first general strike took place in Argentina and saw the full force of the state descend upon the workers through outright repression and deportation. The deterioration in labor relations in 1902 induced the authorities to legislate the "*Ley de Residencia*". The law was used against alleged anarchist ringleaders and led to the expulsion of hundreds of anarchist militants and foreign-born workers from Argentina. From this point on, there was an escalation in the social struggle between the anarchists, entrenched in the FOA unions, and the authorities.⁸

This tension prompted the radicalization that culminated in the incorporation of the anarcho-communist ideology into the federation's platform at the fifth FORA (formerly FOA) congress. The resolution read as follows: "The fifth Argentine Workers' Regional Conference, declares: 'That it advises and recommends the widest possible study and propaganda to all its adherents with the object of teaching the workers the economic and philosophical principles of anarchist communism. This education, by preventing them from concentrating merely on achieving the eight-hour day, will emancipate them completely and consequently lead to the hoped-for social revolution'."⁹ This declaration was adopted as basic policy for many years, and the movement, oriented as it was towards anarchist ends, rejected any other concept of trade-unionism.

After 1905, a period of social conflicts ensued, with successive waves of strikes instigated by the anarchists. In 1906, a syndicalist group split from the socialist party to become an independent sector within the workers' unions and began to challenge anarchist hegemony, promoting the convergence of all anarchist trade unions. The militant anarchists opposed this trend and

rejected all attempts at *rapprochement*, all the while trying to maintain the movement's singularity.¹⁰

On the first of May, 1909, the police opened fire on the participants in a demonstration organized by the FORA, and several were killed. The Chief of Police, Colonel Ramón Falcón, was blamed for the bloodshed. On November 13, a young anarchist Jew, named Simón Radowitzki, threw a bomb at his car and killed both Falcón and his secretary. A period of unprecedented repression followed. Thousands were arrested; many were sent to jail; foreigners were deported; martial law was declared and lasted until January 1910.¹¹ That year had been designated for the celebration of the centenary of Argentina's independence, and the authorities did everything possible to ensure that the festivities take place in a calm atmosphere. In February, the state of siege was lifted and anarchist activities resumed.

For the anarchists, 1910 was to prove a critical year; its events, a watershed in the influence of the anarchist movement. The FORA leadership planned demonstrations and acts of protest against the "Law of Residence" and the policy of oppression, but, despite these outward manifestations, the proletariat did not display a particularly militant attitude in the social struggle. As a result, the FORA leadership became hesitant, and there were even those who ventured that "it should not be assumed that victory in this confrontation is possible".¹²

It was the syndicalist CORA (Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina) that pushed, then, for direct confrontation, in order to gain the upper hand in the competition for influence in the workers' unions. At their instigation, a general strike was called for May 18; the FORA leadership had no choice but to follow suit. The untimely announcement of the proposed general strike allowed the authorities time to organize,¹³ only now not just the police was entrusted with enforcing the repressive measures, but a new force –gangs of the so-called "patriotic autonomist youths"– was given permission to raid "points of agitation". Those gangs launched a pogrom on the workers' clubs and offices, as well as in some workers' and Jewish neighborhoods. This kind of "white terror", together with the reimplementing of the state of siege and the massive arrest and deportation of alleged agitators, succeeded in quashing the strike.¹⁴

These acts of repression were combined with the legislation of the "Social Defence Law", which prohibited the entry to Argentina of those suspected of anarchism and forbade the association of anarchist groups, threatening strike agitators with severe penalties and other restrictions. Repressive measures of such scope were unheard of and inflicted a harsh blow to the activities of the anarchists.¹⁵ The anarchist historian and publicist, Diego Abad de Santillán, would later write: "Thus, in a wave of prison, terror and mass deportations

and a spate of fires at the libertarian printing offices ends what we would call heroic anarchism in Argentina... It was understood that it had reached the end of the road and that important chapter of social history was coming to a close".¹⁶

It is clear that, by the end of 1910, anarchism had started to show clear signs of fatigue. Political repression, combined with steep obstacles to organization, a creeping economic slowdown, and the continuing flow of immigrants, had conspired to check the growth of the movement. After 1910, the syndicalist federation CORA, which advocated arbitration and negotiation at the expense of direct action, gained new followers. In accordance with syndicalist theory, this federation strove towards overall unification and felt that a weakened FORA would answer the call.¹⁷ Thus, in 1914, the CORA proposed to the FORA that they merge, on the basis of the FORA organizational covenant. Accordingly, a CORA congress was convened for that year that decided to dismantle the federation and recommended that all the unions join the seasoned FORA. Under these circumstances, the FORA leadership took up the initiative and called a unification congress.

In April, 1915, the FORA held its 9th congress and the syndicalists, who had dissolved their federation, joined the FORA. During the congress, they gained control of the leadership and, before the old guard realized what was happening, they abolished the commitment to anarcho-communism which was accepted in 1905. After the congress, the anarchists, by now aware of the substantial change, created a breakaway anarchist federation which was named the "FORA del Quinto Congreso". The syndicalists were left in control of the "FORA del noveno", and their influence increased. The background to the political amalgamation of anarchists and syndicalists in 1915 was determined by the fundamental changes that had taken place in the structure of the working class, and also reflected the effects of the process of naturalization, as native-born workers began to outnumber the foreign-born.¹⁸

The year 1919 marked another stage in the confrontation between the authorities and the workers. "La Semana Trágica," as it came to be known, began on January 7, when police launched a fierce attack on the Vasena metallurgical plant workers, who had been striking for several days, and killed some of them. In retaliation for this bloodshed, a general strike was called for January 10 and 11, with the backing of anarchists and syndicalists. The wave of strikes soon subsided, but the repression worsened. The police, the army and groups of right-wing civilians again launched a pogrom on the workers' quarters. The peculiar thing was that it was not directed against the strikers, but against the Russian-Jewish community that lived in a central zone of the city, in Villa Crespo. According to the socialist press, the "Semana

Trágica" left a toll of 700 dead and 4000 injured. The government and the conservative media denounced the strikes of early 1919 as the work of foreign agitators, proof of the general sense of apprehension that had been unleashed by the huge anarchist show of force.¹⁹

After the "Semana Trágica", the decline of anarchism continued. Anarchists played a marginal role in the events of mid-1919 and were unable to take much advantage of the continued spread of trade unionism up until the end of 1920. From that time on, the movement largely subsisted as groups of individuals with only a slight influence among the trade unions. There was one exception. In Patagonia, in 1920, an uprising of agricultural laborers was led by anarchist activists. The army promptly intervened, and the result was a nefarious military campaign of repression that sent 1500 strike leaders and ordinary workers to the firing squads. The remoteness of the region and poor communication prevented the full story from becoming known in Buenos Aires until much later. The army was under the command of Colonel Héctor Varela. When the details of Varela's methods became known, the anarchist press launched a campaign against the "killer of Patagonia" which culminated in the assassination of Varela by a Tolstoyan-anarchist, Kurt Wilkens.²⁰

From 1922, the anarchist movement experienced a steady descent towards marginality. This decline was compounded by schisms, banditry and terror, epitomized by the Severino de Giovanni affair. Eventually, internal strife and persecution led to its demise, just before the Uriburu coup in 1930.²¹

Some Remarks About the Contribution of Argentinian Anarchism

Anarchism in Argentina was a unique phenomenon. It created an amalgam of syndicalist organization and anarcho-communist ideology that was unlike anything previously accepted in anarchist movements. This fusion was characterized by the integration of theories imported from Europe with practical Argentinian experience. From an ideological and organizational standpoint, the anarchist movement may be viewed as syncretist, and it was precisely this fact that enabled the coexistence of European and local elements within it. This syncretism was broadened during the first decade of the 20th century, when the main thrust of the movement's activities was directed at the trade unions, while at the same time radical anarchist groups continued to coexist independently. These groups published journals and newspapers, organized assemblies and meetings, and engaged in education and propaganda activities. This coexistence of ideological groups acted as catalyst for the radicalism inherited by the anarchists active in the trade unions.

Anarchism was a central factor in the development of the Argentinian workers' consciousness during its formative years; it played an important role in the creation of the labor federations; it promoted agitation among the workers during the waves of strikes, and introduced the general strike as a protest weapon.

The anarchist activists at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century succeeded in understanding the uniqueness of the relationship between an ideological elite and the heterogeneous working class in which it was active, and they adapted their leadership to match the expectations of the urban proletariat that constituted its target audience.²² In the historical context of the early 20th century, the answers provided by the anarchists to the situations that arose in the class struggle obtained positive results among broad sectors of the population. Anarchist propaganda achieved better results than that of the socialists because it was simpler and more direct, and did not attempt to obtain support for a political party; it was geared to the mentality of the proletarian masses in Argentina, deprived of the elementary political right of participation in elections by the ruling oligarchy. The blocked conduits to political representation pushed the immigrants into seeking similar ways of organization. These organizations acted as substitutes for political parties and compensated the workers for their frustration at the absence of mobility in the political sphere. The fact that the majority of immigrants had gone to Argentina with the sole objective of finding economic security, and therefore had no strong bonds to Argentina as their country or homeland, made the task of anarchist propagandists in attracting them that much easier. They exploited the cultural isolation of the immigrants, as well as the deep disparities within Argentinian society.²³

The anarchist leadership placed great value on propaganda and cultural activities. This resulted in an abundance of propagandist and literary publications; in 1910, Argentina was the only country in the world that boasted two anarchist dailies. At the beginning of the century, Buenos Aires in Argentina and Paterson in the United States were the two most important publishing centres of anarchist literature. Argentina constituted the biggest market for anarchist literature in Spanish, which duly became the main source of popular education in European culture. After the arrival in Argentina of Jewish activists who had fled the Homeland Kishinev pogroms in Russia in 1908, anarchist literature in Spanish was joined by publications in Yiddish. Curiously, these publications outlived the general anarchist movement and lasted until the 1940s.²⁴

From the beginning of the century, anarchist influence was felt in Argentinian bohemian circles, particularly among playwrights, poets, and publicists. Diego Abad de Santillán noted, in retrospect:

"No hay país donde el anarquismo haya tenido tanta influencia en la literatura como en la Argentina, si exceptuamos un cierto período en Francia... Se puede decir que la gran mayoría de los jóvenes escritores en la Argentina se han ensayado desde 1900... como simpatizantes del anarquismo, como colaboradores de la prensa anarquista y algunos como militantes..."²⁵

Although this seems somewhat exaggerated to me, it does contain an indication of the force of anarchism's influence on young bohemian circles in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the century. One of the most notable intellectuals active in anarchist circles at the time was the playwright and poet Alberto Ghirardo. He was at first close to the young people who formed Ruben Dario's coterie at the end of the 19th century and joined anarchist circles in 1900, when he took up editing the anarchist literary magazines *Martín Fierro* and *El Sol*; from 1904, he was editor of *La Protesta*. Another example was the Uruguayan Florencio Sánchez, a leading playwright in the early years of the century who wrote *M'hijo el dotor*, a play that gave full expression to the reality of life of the lower classes in Buenos Aires. There was also Félix Basterra, who wrote *El crepúsculo de los gauchos*, as well as Armando Discépolo, González Pacheco, José de Maturana and Alejandro Sux. It should be noted that they all had dual loyalties: on the one hand, to the anarchist circles in whose publications they wrote and at whose social gatherings their plays were presented and their poetry read, while on the other, they carefully preserved their links to the external literary world in which their works were published and which constituted both their market and the source of the literary criticism that determined their status. At the same time, however, this dual loyalty opened gaps between the intellectuals and the anarchist activists, and created tension between the two groups. Most of the latter were autodidacts, who had acquired their education as they worked –so they may be termed "semi-intellectuals"–, and later applied it to their newspaper writing and propaganda efforts. The tensions continued throughout this period and culminated in the second decade of the century with the majority of the bohemian intellectuals leaving the anarchist ranks.²⁶

All in all, by comparison with other parts of the world, the anarchist movement in Argentina was fairly moderate. The early intellectual tradition of the movement soon disappeared. In the end, the principal attribute of Argentinian anarchism was its popular character, as defined by Abad de Santillán in 1938:

"Los propagandistas de la Argentina, ya sea por su carácter de extranjeros en su mayor número y por lo tanto inestables, bien

por el exceso de actividad o por las modalidades de lucha y de la propaganda, no alcanzan un nivel intelectual extraordinario... Se han divulgado ideas, no se han pensado, el movimiento argentino fue un vehículo excelente, pero no ha ofrecido al mundo mucho de original".²⁷

We can accept Santillán's assessment because the originality of Argentinian anarchism should not be sought in the theoretical sphere, but rather in the combination of theory and practice.

Argentinian anarchism played an important role in advancing workers' education, and this prompted the initiative to establish open rationalist schools, which in itself constituted a revolution in teaching methods. From the end of the 19th century, anarchists adopted the custom of establishing and fostering alternative schools –the "escuelas libres"–, which later became known as "escuelas racionalistas". The initiative was first taken by the anarcho-communist circles which tended to work inside the trade unions, and it was later adopted by the anarchists in the FORA unions.²⁸

Free schools were established by anarchist cells in the workers' quarters. The FORA activists supported this move and there was cooperation between the trade union people and the intellectuals. Despite their modest beginnings, the anarchist groups persisted in their activities, undeterred by the difficulties and government harassment that they faced. The burden was great and, consequently, the majority of these schools was shortlived; the mark they left, however, was profound. The establishment of free or rationalist schools continued uninterrupted throughout the first decade of the century. Because of their alternative educational approach, these schools attracted many intellectuals to the anarchist cells. The government, however, viewed the existence of the schools, which rejected accepted conservative pedagogical methods, with a jaundiced eye, and, during times of tension, pointed an accusing finger at them as centres of anarchist agitation.

The rationalist schools for children and teenagers, the workers' schools, the discussion groups and cultural programs, all became axes for fostering a popular, radical, proletarian counter-culture that strove to encompass every sphere of life. The point of departure was the broadening of education and the development of a rationalist consciousness as the means for creating a new man with alternative moral values that would prepare him for building the future anarcho-communist society when the time came. It is worth noting that this culture reserved a respectable place for women, a number of whom filled positions in the press and even in the trade unions.²⁹ Feminist groups were formed within anarchist circles from the end of the 19th century. In

1896, women published a newspaper of their own, *La Voz de la Mujer*, and in 1907, the feminist-anarchist league was established.³⁰

In addition to the direct contribution made by the proletarian counter-culture, the strengthening of anarchism in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century also acted as catalyst for events in other spheres. The fear of anarchism was grounds enough for taking strong preventive measures. At the end of the 19th century, when anarchist terror was prevalent in Europe, it had not yet affected Argentina; there it began in the first decade of the 20th century, in response to police brutality. We mentioned earlier that the first terrorist act took place in 1909, when Simón Radowitzki assassinated police chief Colonel Ramón Falcón, and the second in 1921, when Kurt Wilkens killed Colonel Héctor Varela in retaliation for the brutal quelling of the strike in Patagonia.³¹ Although terror itself did not constitute a real problem, the deterioration of the social systems and the strengthening of radical circles in the workers' movement were causes of concern for the authorities.

In the first decade of this century, social ferment was so rife that the authorities viewed it as a real social threat. It was under these circumstances that the ruling elite saw that the repressive measures taken by the police were not enough and that political legislation was the solution. Initially, this took the form of legislation against foreigners, since politicians blamed mass immigration, supposedly infiltrated by agitators, as the source of the trouble. This served as background for the legislation of the "Ley de Residencia" in 1902, and the "Ley de Defensa Social" in 1910, that aimed to check the entry of anarchist immigrants and allow their deportation. These laws were met with opposition from liberal circles and instantly deemed unconstitutional. These liberal circles fought both the implementation of the laws and the deportation of anarchists, with the result that the legislation that had been designed to weaken anarchism's foothold in Argentina, in fact had served to strengthen it. Moreover, the deportation of foreign activists encouraged the rise of a new local leadership.³²

The challenge posed by the anarchists was considered dangerous enough to help precipitate the division within the oligarchy that led to the reforms of 1912. The "anarchist peril" among the workers and immigrants was one of the catalysts for the enactment of the Sáenz Peña Law. But the new electoral reform did not concede the right to vote to over half of the industrial working class, which remained excluded from the political process, and the political marginality of the foreign-born workers continued to be a constant source of conflict within Argentine society.

It may also be said that the strengthening of anarchism during the first decade of the century helped mold the kind of nationalism that led Ricardo Rojas to write in his book, *La Restauración Nacionalista* (1909): "The state of

anarchy that afflicts us today... is due to the massive immigration...", adding that "venal cosmopolitan anarchy begins to spread throughout the country."³³ Along these lines, the Argentine Patriotic League sprang up as a tool in the struggle against anarchist-cosmopolitan influence. It should be noted that the first pogroms that occurred in Argentina against anarchists, socialists and Jews erupted in 1910, before they could be attributed to the fear of "the Red Communist Peril". The Argentine Patriotic League itself came in the aftermath of the events of 1919. Its recruits were scions of the oligarchy and upper middle class. The League became an assault group directed against the unions, the anarchists, and, above all, the immigrants, in particular the Russian Jews who were accused of Bolshevism. It issued a manifesto explicitly stating its intention to adopt the necessary measures to ensure that its members organize themselves and cooperate in actions against movements of anarchist character.³⁴

In conclusion, we may say that the uniqueness of Argentinian anarchism as a syncretic movement on the international front, and its direct and indirect contribution to Argentinian society, warrant extensive study. However, it would appear that, for the moment, the historiography of Argentinian anarchism is still far from its full potential, despite the fact that scores of books and papers have been published on the subject, from those by historians like Diego Abad de Santillán to the autobiographies of activists like Alberto Ghirardo and Eduardo Gilimón, as well as the syndicalist Sebastián Marotta. An important contribution was made by the anarchist historian Max Netlau, who bequeathed a wealth of archival material and a number of important chapters from his books and papers to research. Also, author and journalist Osvaldo Bayer has bridged the gap between literature and research in his books on Severino Di Giovanni and *Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica*.

Since the '60s, with the growing trend towards the study of social history inspired by the Argentinian historian Tulio Halperin Donghi and his students, a number of important studies on this subject have been published, although most are only partial or combined with other subjects. Worthy of mention are those by José Luis Romero, Jorge Solomonoff, Hugo Del Campo, Julio Godio and José Panettieri. The '80s saw the publication of a number of objective research books, among them the comprehensive historical accounts by Eduardo Bilski, Juan Suriano, Ricardo Falcón, Antonio López; the sociologist Dora Barrancos's book on "Anarquismo educación y costumbres", and my own doctoral dissertation, published as *El anarquismo y el movimiento obrero en la Argentina*, which deals only with the formative period (from 1897 to 1905).³⁵

Lastly, it should be emphasized that there is a wealth of material on the subject waiting to be tapped, from the labor movement and the spiritual world of the working classes to the weight of the movement in the formation of the Argentinian consciousness. For historians, this is a vast field to explore and research.

NOTAS

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10. Bilsky, *La FORA...*, p. 126; Oved, *El anarquismo...*, pp. 403-409, 412-414; Godio, *El movimiento...*, pp. 197-202.
11. *The Economist*, 5.6.1909; 12.6.1909. In articles published in Buenos Aires, it was reported that police statements mentioned the confiscation of leaflets printed in Hebrew (probably

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On the victory as a result of anarchist-socialist cooperation, see: Godio, *El movimiento...*, p. 230; *South American Journal*, 12.6.1909; Gilimón, *Un anarquista...*, p.98; Diego Abad de Santillán, "Evocación del Primero de Mayo de 1909", in *Suplemento de La Protesta*, 18.7.1927, pp. 162-166.

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