

# Introduction

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## The Hidden Story Line of Anarchism in Latin American History

GEOFFROY DE LAFORCADE AND KIRWIN SHAFFER

Many of us were graduate students in the mid-1990s when anarchist history became a growing focus of research on a worldwide scale. This trend grew out of new directions in the history of labor and social history, gender and ethnic studies, the world-historical turn in migration studies and intellectual history, and, most of all, the crisis in socialist and Marxist ideologies that followed the long-anticipated collapse of state-sponsored social engineering. Scholars and activists struggled with outdated teleological paradigms of modernization and class formation, particularly in Latin America, where ominous cracks in the national-popular state, and the dependency theories upon which it rested, were just beginning to birth the social uprisings that would rattle the continent from Chiapas and Oaxaca to La Paz and Buenos Aires. Many on the left welcomed the demise of authoritarian regimes, cautiously embracing the democratic and globalizing claims of grassroots social movements, liberal democracy, and human rights but were weary of the cheerleading and celebrations heralded by right-leaning advocates of an “end of history.” In this climate, activists and scholars began to reinvestigate the era of diverse, contending socialisms that culminated in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In Latin America itself, Marxism had made only timid appearances in the waning nineteenth century, and Communist Parties did not emerge until the 1920s. By this time anarchists had been active throughout the hemisphere for four decades.

Even prior to expressions of modern anarchism, socialist utopianism had existed in Latin America throughout the nineteenth century. In 1828 Robert Owen requested permission to create a collectivist commune in the Mexican state of Texas, and an Icarian settlement inspired by Étienne

Cabet appeared after the territory's annexation by the United States. A Fourierist "phalanstery" or cooperative was created in Aguascalientes in 1850.<sup>1</sup> The Greek immigrant Plotino Rhodakanaty spread the ideas of Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon among artisans, peasants, and indigenous communities and launched a "School of Reason and Socialism" in Chalco, Mexico, in 1855.<sup>2</sup> That same year, shortly after the fall of the Bogotá Commune, Élisée Reclus, the Belgian geographer who later became an influential spokesperson for anarchist communism, experimented in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta with a rural commune. Located on land confiscated from the *latifundistas*, it was worked by European, Asian, and indigenous artisans and peasants whose empowerment was violently negated by liberal elites. The significance of this experience was not lost on future historians of Colombia who recognized its countercultural challenge to the creole ideologues' definition of national identity.<sup>3</sup>

Italian immigrants who flocked to Brazil during the expansion of the coffee economy in the late nineteenth century also launched utopian experiments of rural communitarian organization such as the Guararema plantation and the Colônia Cecília in the 1890s. The former was established in the final months of the monarchy by the artisan jeweler Artur Campagnoli with the help of Italian, Spanish, Russian, French, and Brazilian colonists—the latter in Palmeiras, in the southern state of Paraná, where another Italian anarchist, Giovanni Rossi, received a land grant from the departing Portuguese emperor to establish a utopian colony based on universal equality and free love.<sup>4</sup> Both experiments reflected the utopian and experimental aspirations of new immigrants who believed, like the Buenos Aires-based French anarchist Joaquín Alejo Falconnet (alias Pierre Quiroule), that America was a new frontier for "volunteers of anarchy" intent on escaping the chaotic exploitation of Europe and building a new egalitarian society based on cooperative labor.<sup>5</sup> These and other experiments in utopian community-building reflected the importance of equality and freedom by European émigrés who sought to found futuristic micro-societies in the Americas. At the same time, "foreigners" were not the sole voices of libertarian ideals. In Brazil, for example, the experience of the *quilombos* (autonomous societies founded by fugitive African slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), struggles for abolition in the nineteenth century, and the idealism of Antônio Conselheiro's rebellious Canudos community in the 1890s fueled the historical imagination of prominent anarchist writers of "native" Afro-Portuguese descent, such as Gabio Luz and Afonso Henriques de Lima Barreto.<sup>6</sup>

Just as these past authors found inspiration in the rebellious struggles of their day, many modern historians looked to “current events” for new frameworks of analysis. A lasting image of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle was one of anarchists employing direct action to disrupt the meeting. This challenge to the twin powers of global capitalism and neo-liberal states was broadcast into homes worldwide. The World Social Forum, ongoing transnational protests against the World Bank and the Davos Forum, and similar dramatic events such as the indigenous-led Zapatista insurrection in Mexico epitomized the resurrection of anarchist-inspired themes.<sup>7</sup>

The beginning of the new millennium witnessed a series of new crises in global capitalism. Massive economic chaos in Argentina and the surge in privatization and state deregulation throughout the hemisphere resulted in the pursuit of militant strategies that had once been understood as anarchist forms of direct action: landless peasant movements, factory takeovers by unemployed workers, and “horizontalism” (the reaching out of activists and communities across social sectors in cooperative and barter arrangements, rather than confronting the state head-on or seeking vertical power).<sup>8</sup> Workers, peasants, unemployed, downwardly mobile middle sectors, and landless peasants, disenfranchised economically and politically, fought back not as an imagined Marxian proletariat but as people united in common struggle against contemporary forms of cultural, economic, political, and social oppression. They did not seek change through formal elections or parliamentary reformism but instead articulated profound yearnings of freedom and democratization from below. It is no coincidence that the publication of histories of anarchism in the past twenty years has grown symbiotically with the rise of neo-anarchist social practices during those years.

In recent decades scholars have published new histories of anarchism that expand from Europe and the United States—the traditional center of anarchist studies—to China, Japan, Korea, South Africa, and Egypt. The revitalized historiography of anarchism in Latin America has been well represented in books, articles, conference papers, and Internet forums. Major scholarly conferences have included panels dedicated to anarchist history in the region or have included it as part of larger comparative panels on the movement’s diverse expressions and global reach: for example, the European Social Science History Conferences in 2006 (Amsterdam), 2008 (Lisbon), 2010 (Ghent), 2012 (Glasgow), and 2014 (Vienna). Various facets of Latin American anarchism were discussed at Latin American Studies

Association meetings in 2006 (San Juan), 2007 (Montreal), 2009 (Rio de Janeiro), and 2010 (San Diego). The emergence of the North American Anarchist Studies Association in 2008 gave rise to annual conferences blending activist reflection and scholarship, with papers dedicated to transnational anarchism in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2009 (Hartford), 2011 (Toronto), 2012 (San Juan), 2013 (New Orleans), 2014 (Surrey, British Columbia), and 2015 (San Francisco). In 2011 a forum in Mexico City brought together leading writers on Latin American anarchist culture, culminating in an edited collection in 2012.<sup>9</sup> The continent figured prominently in the collected volume *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Post-Colonial World*, a thematic volume on transnational anarchism in Latin America was published in the journal *E.I.A.L.: Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, and a collection of essays mainly on South American anarchism was published in French.<sup>10</sup>

The genesis of this book dates back to the middle of the first decade of the millennium, when it was originally conceived as a multivolume collection of the best works that had been written, in several languages, since the end of the Cold War on the history of Latin American anarchism. Originally the project was conceived as a country-by-country study, but we quickly realized the futility of that approach, in particular given the broad range of subjects addressed by Latin American historians of the movement in such countries as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. What appeared more interesting was to convey the different ways historians had approached anarchist history, and how those histories—while they contributed to local and regional understandings of society and culture, to an extent often underestimated by nationalist scholars—were not “national” per se in their totality or their scope. After all, anarchists themselves were not “nationalists,” so it seems rather counterintuitive to examine them solely from such an alien angle. As a result, we chose to focus on authors who skirted the traditional geographical, chronological, and thematic limits of the historiography and instead brought fresh directions to the research while unlocking new and interesting dimensions of the anarchist past.

Earlier studies of anarchism in Latin America tended to be nationally focused in the sense that they explored anarchist movements within the territorial and political framework of national boundaries. “International” events such as the Mexican and Russian Revolutions, the Spanish Civil War, and the Great War in Europe were regularly chronicled for their impact on such movements, and “foreign” migrants were generally understood to have transported their ideas from distant lands. However, when historians

labeled these phenomena “international” and “foreign,” they were semantically delineating the “domestic” or national space within which anarchist practice and organization are assumed to be centered. When studying the phenomenon of Latin American anarchism, however, several factors must be kept in mind: preexisting local and regional traditions of radical grassroots rebellion in the provinces in the formative periods of independence, the absence of an inclusive cultural concept of “nation,” the preeminence of the state as an authoritarian and centralized construct without such avenues for popular citizenship as universal suffrage or working-class representation, and the role of transatlantic European immigration in the spread of ideas of political dissent and social transformation. As Lucien van der Walt and Steven Hirsch write in their aforementioned volume, “anarchism was not a West European doctrine that diffused outwards, perfectly formed, to a passive ‘periphery.’ Rather, the movement *emerged simultaneously and transnationally*, created by interlinked activists on three continents.”<sup>11</sup> Thus anarchism was local, national, transnational, and transregional before it became aligned as a feature of individual nation-states. Contemporary historians of Latin American anarchism are concerned with the extent to which local, regional, and transnational solidarities embodied oppositional or countercultural practices and meanings and were effective in translating abstract libertarian ideas into concrete actions and lived experiences defending workers and resisting—rather than forging—the modern state.

### **Anarchism, Nationalism, the Nation-State, and Capitalism**

This is not to say that what Latin Americans and other postcolonial activists call the “national question” is entirely irrelevant. Indeed, the same scholars who confined the study of anarchism to national boundaries often denied its incidence on national traditions. David Viñas, José Aricó, and others have observed that historians and activists after World War II tended to view anarchism as an imported doctrine that was a prelude to the history of socialist organizations and nationalist genealogies.<sup>12</sup> The reality is somewhat more complex. The former American colonies of Spain and Portugal were from the 1870s through the 1920s—and in some areas for longer—a terrain of widespread dissemination, diffusion, and adaptation of anarchist ideas, perhaps one of the largest such theaters in the world, Max Nettlau surmised.<sup>13</sup> While as a revolutionary ideology anarchism enunciated clear new beginnings and called for a revolt against the establishment, its effectiveness and credibility depended on the movement’s ability to em-