

Review of Dolgoff Cuba Book

Cuba Book Avoids Crucial Questions

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a review of

Sam Dolgoff, *The Cuban Revolution, A Critical Perspective*; Copyright 1976, Black Rose Books, Ltd., Montreal; \$5.95.

Sam Dolgoff's book, *The Cuban Revolution*, presents some interesting and relevant information not previously available in English, although most of it has been available to Spanish-speaking readers for a long time. For those of us who are vitally interested in knowing more than the "communist" myths about the history and progress of revolt wherever it may occur, this book is a starting point. But for those of us who really want to comprehend the past so that we can begin to go beyond it, this book is superficial and inadequate.

Like so many other ideologically partisan works, its emphasis on ideologies—anarchist, communist, etc. — as the moving force in and explanation for historical events, leaves out much. Some is left out—such as socio-economic comparative background material—because it is considered secondary when compared with ideological trends, and some is left out—such as the Spanish anarchists' participation in the Republican Civil War government or the Cuban anarchists' cooperation with the Castro government in its early days—because it doesn't fit the ideological argument.

The information given concerning the anarchist movement in Spain is interesting, but it would have been more valuable if it had been presented in its social context. This might enable us to understand why anarchism was so much more compelling to Latin workers and peasants than socialism, beyond its "truth" and its consideration of their condition, and recognition of their importance.

Brief and Tantalizing

Dolgoff's historical background of the anarchist movement in Latin America is brief and tantalizing, but it lacks both depth and perspective. The number of anarchists and anarchist organizations given are not meaningful because we are not given any comparative information such as the numbers of the total populations at the times given or the proletarian populations in particular at the times under consideration.

We have no way of evaluating the relationship of these numbers to other aspects of social life. Who were these Latin American anarchists? When they were Workers, how did they differ from or resemble their fellow workers? What justifies us calling them anarchists? Did they study and publish anarchist ideas? Did they practice anarchist direct action? What specifically is meant by this? Did they organize themselves into non-authoritarian functioning groups? Were they primarily cultural anarchists? And so forth. Why did they become anarchists rather than socialists, beyond the fact that they were Latins?

These are far from unreasonable questions, and answers to them might give us some real understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Latin- American anarchist movement in general and the Cuban movement in particular. We might then begin to understand why and how this movement was so totally overwhelmed and their historical existence suppressed by the “communists” in the labor movement and in the “political sphere.”

The simplistic explanation that the communists took advantage of the anarchists and the naiveté of the proletariat, and that they destroyed the anarchist movement with the help of corrupt politicians such as Machado and Batista, explains nothing. Political corruption and murderous repression were part of the context in which the proletarian movement developed and grew. And the urban and rural proletariat of Cuba staunchly resisted and defied these realities well into the mid-1930s, when they staged a number of general strikes and occupations, counter to advice from “communists.”

The author would have us believe that these actions and more recent worker insurgency, and the land seizures carried out by rural proletarians and small farmers, were inspired by the anarchists although he does not indicate concretely how. Both through his selections and in his own words, he explains the loss of anarchist influence by telling us that the “masses” are naive and can be taken in by “bad” as well as “good” propaganda. This is obviously the anarchist understanding of the destruction of their influence among the Cuban proletariat.

Anarchists and the Communist Party

In this context, it would not be irrelevant to discuss in depth the participation of anarchist militants in the initial formation of a Cuban Communist Party in the early '20s. This wasn't a freakish, isolated incident. Anarchists were active in the formation of the Brazilian and Chinese parties as well. They left the ranks of the new parties when it became clear that the Russian state intended to subordinate all such national organizations to its international revolutionary authority. With the “success” of the Russian revolution as inspiration, the idea of national communist parties became more palatable to anarchists. In general, these anarchists did not disagree with the new parties' approach to the “masses” or with their view of their relationship to the “masses.”

It would also be relevant to discuss the impact of the Spanish civil war on the Cuban movement, particularly since a number of prominent Cuban anarchists participated in that struggle. Dolgoff presents the Spanish anarchist declaration against governments and Parliamentaryism, but does not discuss how this document fits in with the anarchist participation in the Spanish Republican government. This fact of practice is not even mentioned. Surely the participation had an impact on the Cuban anarchists and their movement, not to mention the Cuban proletariat. What was it?

Many anarchists were involved in the underground and guerrilla activity which led to the Castro takeover of the national government. Many wanted to participate in and cooperate with the new regime. They believed that its good points outweighed its bad points until their own activities were inhibited by the government. The uncritical reference in Dolgoff's book to groups such as the Irish Republicans, the Jewish Secret Army of Israel, the Cyprus patriots and the Algerian Resistance Movement—which have been known for their repression of proletarian self-activity and self-organization when it stood in their way—as providing useful models for organizing resistance against the Castro regime is not merely incidental.

It becomes clear from the selections offered and from Dolgoff's own testimony that the anarchists he is concerned with believe (as he does) that, without such organization, and without outside assistance, the Cuban “people” will be unable to revolt. In the same vein, the revolts of the 1930s, which the anarchists cannot take credit for, receive hardly passing notice in this book—just enough to point out the “communist” betrayals.

Although Dolgoff clearly indicates why the 1959 government takeover cannot be called a social revolution, he can give no satisfactory explanation of why the anarchists were willing to go along with its mystification as such, until the new regime began to repress their activities. The only reason offered is that they didn't want to be identified with counter-revolutionaries (the masses might not be intelligent enough to distinguish between their revolutionary ideas and the counter-revolutionary, destructive criticism of the right) and they hoped for better things from the regime. But, given the fact that they recognized that no social revolution had occurred, and that there had only been a changing of the guard, what could they have expected? Benevolent authority?

Masses or Middle Class?

And what were the roles and activities of the Cuban proletariat in the period leading up to the 1959 take-over? Dolgoff and others assert that the Cuban “masses” played the most significant part in Batista’s downfall. But the resistance Dolgoff describes in his chapter “Anonymous Heroes of the Revolution” and elsewhere in the book, was primarily conducted by middle-class elements—medical students and doctors, law students and lawyers, businessmen and aspiring politicians, etc.—who identified themselves with various political groupings.

Although proletarian resistance through strikes, slowdowns and other work actions is briefly referred to in passing, the political and military activities are what is dealt with in detail. And Dolgoff also explicitly tells us that the resistance to Batista was primarily middle-class—by which is meant the active resistance. Perhaps the “low profile” of the working class in the anti-Batista fight was not due to the bad influence of the communists in the labor movement. All the facts are not in yet, but perhaps the proles knew what value the new regime would be to them better than their anarchist teachers.

We would like to know what happened to the influence of the Cuban anarchists among the proletariat. If it persisted as claimed, how was and is this manifested concretely? The present-day slowdowns, work stoppages, “juvenile delinquency,” etc., briefly referred to cannot necessarily be credited to anarchist influence. Workers all over the world have been and are resisting state and private employers through these means without necessarily having been inspired by anarchist ideas. What is the present-day relation of the anarchists to Cuban society?

And we should not leave out of consideration the position which many respected anarchists around the world took toward the Castro regime and toward the Cuban anarchists when these latter finally became critical toward the “Revolution.” Many respected anarchists and anarchist organizations continued to be enthusiastic about the new regime and charged the Cuban anarchists with being counter-revolutionary agents or simply misled.

How could this have happened thirty-six years after the Bolshevik takeover in Russia? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the propensity of many anarchists to mystify history in their own behalf, as demonstrated by this book.

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