

# Anarchism in Latin America

## The challenge of abandoning our crutches

Rafael Uzcategui

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Rafael Uzcategui is a member of the editorial collective of the anarchist magazine *El Libertario*, published in Caracas, Venezuela. The below has been excerpted from an entry which originally appeared on his June 2016 blog in Spanish & has been translated by FE staff.

As anarchists struggling against current forms of domination in Latin America, it is important for us to understand the socio-political conditions that have developed in recent years. We also need to reflect on how anarchists have responded to them.

Many Latin American countries went through a so-called progressive decade, beginning in 1999, in which a series of left-wing governments came to power through the electoral process. The governments of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, “Pepe” Mujica in Uruguay, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, constituted a regional bloc of leftist governments.

This coincided with a period of economic prosperity for Latin American economies due to the high price of energy and mineral resources on international markets.

The left bloc countries were politically differentiated from those countries with neoliberal governments, such as Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Peru. However, all these governments based their economies on economic development through extractive industries and natural resource exports for global markets.

The high prices provided the leftist regimes with the financial resources to pursue economic redistributive policies to alleviate poverty and thereby strengthened their popularity. Now, falling prices of natural resources on the international markets coincide with crises for leftist governments as revealed by recent electoral reverses. Social tensions have also arisen as the result of their failure to continue fulfilling expectations and promises, as seen in Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil, and discriminatory policies, along with the criminalization of protests that have generated broad resistance movements in Bolivia and Ecuador.

In addition to these failures, we have witnessed changes in the Cuban economy since the resignation of Fidel Castro, and more are expected. The normalization of relations between the Cuban and U.S. governments will have political, economic, social, and diplomatic consequences, and will deal a harsh symbolic blow to the imaginary revolutionary past of the country.

Uruguayan anarchist Daniel Barret (1952–2009) observed that anarchism as a movement has survived and developed in response to the deteriorating conditions of our time. But, the question is how have we responded to the local historical variables in Latin America? The response, in our opinion, has been embarrassing and underwhelming.

## Seditious Awakenings

Barret discussed the current history of anarchist groups and initiatives worldwide, including in Latin America, in *Los sediciosos despertares de la anarquía* [Seditious Awakenings of Anarchy], (Libros de Anarres, 2011).

In the chapter “Latin American Movements of Our Times: Realities and Tasks,” he described the state of anarchist movements between the Rio Grande and Patagonia. He noted that these movements experienced significant growth during recent years, and that very few groups existed before the 1980s.

He also observed a great diversity of groups and tendencies: platformists, anarchopunks, anarcho-syndicalists, insurrectionists, anarcho-indigenists, ecologists, feminists, anti-militarists, and all the other colors of the current anarchist rainbow. None of these tendencies could be described as dominant or ascendant.

Barret felt that the diversity of the anarchist movement in Latin America must be interpreted as a consequence of the lack of a single paradigm that takes into account the complexity of prevailing socio-cultural fragmentation. But this diversity also provides an opportunity for generating deeper understandings of the intricacies of contemporary capitalism.

However, he also recognized the difficulty of communication and cooperation between the various anarchist tendencies, and the lack of a capacity to develop a shared paradigm. We need to confront the fact that all of the tendencies have limitations, emphasizing different anachronisms and sectarianisms that don't have a future. Strictly following the texts of any one individual or group only winds up generating yet another piece of propaganda.

## What we Owe Each Other

Since Barret, nobody else has dealt with the issue of how to connect the various anarchist groups into a coordinated movement, how to respond to the movement's diversity or how to face current dilemmas and future challenges. There have been some interesting theoretical efforts from various anarchist tendencies. But the absence of mutual support and a shared paradigm, continues exacerbating the lack of ideas for creating a collective movement that can go beyond the limits of any of the different tendencies.

Anarchists in Latin America have not been able to elaborate a perspective that adequately addresses issues related to economic development through extractive industries and natural resource exports, the emergency created for leftist governments by falling prices, or the problem of the Cuban revolution being taken as an emancipatory model for the region. Inadequate responses to the latter two problems have been of great importance recently.

From early on, most anarchists, including in Latin America, failed to critically evaluate the so-called Cuban Revolution. Even during those periods when anarchists on the island were persecuted, imprisoned and executed by the state, there was a shameful lack of solidarity that should never be forgotten.

This was especially notable among most anarchist groups in Latin America. There was a lack of critical thinking. As many anarchists in the region fell under the influence of a Marxist oriented anti-imperialist vision of national liberation struggles, Cuba came to be seen as the prime model to be emulated.

For a long time, the topic of repression of anarchists and other negative aspects of the Castro regime were considered politically taboo in most Latin American anarchist circles. This can be seen in the scarcity of literature produced on the topic.

For instance, Frank Fernandez's book *El anarquismo en Cuba* (Fundacion Anselmo Lorenzo, 2000) [*Anarchism in Cuba* (See Sharp Press, 2001)], was published in several languages, including Spanish, but was not widely circulated in Latin America. Daniel Barret also wrote extensively criticizing the Cuban Revolution, however, curiously none of his articles dealing with the subject were included in the book of his writings cited above.

Anarchists also failed to critically comprehend and adequately respond to the emergence of national-populist groups and governments during the last century. This failure continued with regard to the leftist governments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Anarcho-syndicalists characterized most of these governments as simply fascist, as they had the government of Juan Domingo Peron in Argentina. This mistaken diagnosis led to a bad strategy.

The dominance of Marxists on the left from the 1960s through 1988, generated a great deal of confusion. Anarchists were not up to criticizing and contesting the policies of leftists in power. So, even after the fall of the Berlin

Wall, which created optimal conditions for the rebirth of anarchism worldwide, in Latin America, the image of the Castro regime remained healthy and whole, thanks to continuing support from leftists.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the conditions for a resurgence of the anarchist movement were promising. Decentralized and horizontally organized action networks developed within the emerging anti-globalization movement. New methods of protest were being sought that went beyond and around the limitations and promises of a bureaucratized left that had been integrated into the political-economic system.

However, an increasing number of leftist governments in Latin America—with their vaunted successes in redistribution of wealth and electoral popularity—neutralized the growth of autonomist anti-state and anarchist movements. As Barret noted, consideration of an anarchist perspective on revolutionary change was postponed in the face of leftist demands for defense of these states, based on electoral popularity and tactical necessity. This enabled a new form of institutionalized domination to take hold.

## **Anarchists and the State**

Anarchists were unable to offer adequate critical evaluations of left-wing governments' policies or to develop questions and answers and assemble resources to deal with ongoing problems due to a lack of a unifying revolutionary paradigm.

Some anarchists considered the new leftist form of government to be only a variant of capitalistic domination. Others were faithful to their principles and didn't support this kind of regime, but neither were they openly critical. Finally, those anarchists most influenced by Marxism and focused on the greater enemy, the U.S. government, supported the left-wing coalitions, promoting so-called popular power in the name of organized class-struggle anarchism, and denigrating the other anarchist positions as individualist.

The lack of common understandings also impeded the development of a shared critical response to the expansion of extractivist capitalism.

Marxists, exulting in the political and economic prosperity of the region, assured others that the leftist states would be able to withstand the power of the neo-liberal consensus centered in the U.S.

Some anarchists, although not the majority, joined the Marxists in asserting that the extractivist policies followed by these governments were justified because:

- 1) The sovereignty of the states had to be strengthened and protected at any price, including their prerogative to engage in energy extraction;
- 2) in a multipolar world, all investments not under the American flag were welcome; and
- 3) revenues from extractive industries enabled the development of redistributive policies to combat poverty.

True, there were anarchists who were opposing mining throughout the continent, but their opposition was considered to be marginal by those who enthusiastically embraced the left in power.

## **Possibilities and Perspectives**

Anarchists in Latin America now have opportunities similar to those experienced in Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall. Possibilities are opened up by the softening of Cuban state capitalism, Cuba's fading as an emancipatory model, the eclipse of the left in power (demonstrating the contradictions and limits of state-centered revolution), and the understanding of new polycentric modes of domination of globalized capitalism.

Anarchists need a fusion of new theory and new forms of organization to create practices for meeting the challenges of our time. We need to retake the offensive in social struggles through a new revolutionary paradigm.

The challenges are as great as the possibilities. It is clear that there have been fundamental changes in the world that oblige us to develop new theoretical concepts that go beyond classical anarchism. Indeed, we must throw away our crutches-whether stemming from intellectual laziness or sectarianism-and venture to walk on our own feet.

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