

The Anarchist Alternative in Cuba

Bill Weinberg

A former community center that hosted a youth rock scene is now being occupied by activists, seemingly ignored by the authorities. A few blocks away, urban farms are bright patches of green in the landscape, producing vegetables and fruits for the community.

Oakland? Detroit? Manhattan's Lower East Side?

Nope. This is Havana.

This April, I returned to Cuba for the first time in 24 years, on assignment to look into the ecological alternative on the island, and how it has fared since the end of what was called in official government parlance the Special Period that began in 1989.

I found an island transformed since those days of crisis, with some elements of the ecological model surviving and others abandoned. But the trip afforded me the opportunity to witness another alternative—an emergent anarchist network, seeking to advance anti-authoritarian ideas as the dictatorship begins to tentatively open up.

Cuba became a living experiment in a post-petrol future for humanity after the collapse of the Soviet Union meant a cutoff of subsidized oil. This crashed the economy, ushered in the Special Period, and prompted a big push for self-sufficient and ecological models—bicycle transportation and urban farms in Havana, organic agriculture in the countryside.

It was in the midst of this crisis, in 1993, that I visited Havana for a conference on urban bicycle transportation, and saw the beginnings of the community gardens and farms that were taking root in vacant lots around the city.

A generation later, Cuba is getting subsidized oil from Venezuela, opening its economy to private capital, and hoping for an end to the US embargo. Had these ecological alternatives survived?

It was clear from walking around downtown Havana that bicycles have largely been abandoned. They had outnumbered cars on the city streets when I was there in 1993. Now they were almost gone, except the *bici-taxis* that pedaled tourists about amid the incessant car traffic. Official urban planners I spoke to admitted that the bicycle lanes had been forgotten when the oil started to flow again.

It was also clear that something akin to gentrification is taking hold in Old Havana—lots of foreign capital is flowing into the tourism sector, with upscale bars, galleries and restaurants proliferating.

However, I was told that the urban agriculture that started to emerge spontaneously as a self-help measure during the Special Period had been adopted by the bureaucracy and is still going strong.

To see these urban farms, I took a taxi out to Vedado, the greener, more spread-out and in pre-Revolutionary times upscale district to the west of Central Havana. The center of Vedado is the Plaza of the Revolution, Cuba's heart of administrative power, where Che Guevara's iconic face looks down from the wall of the Interior Ministry building.

Just a couple of blocks off this expansive and sterile square, housing projects stand alongside faded mansions of the long-departed bourgeoisie, now inhabited by working-class residents. On one of these streets, I visited Isabel Díaz Torres, a sometime literature professor and one of Cuba's handful of dissidents of the left. His network, the Cuban Critical Observatory, was founded after the power transfer from Fidel to Raul Castro in 2006, to bring an explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist voice to the agitation for greater freedom.

Díaz considers himself an anarchist, and lives much as you'd expect one to—in a squat, or as near as you get to one in Havana. As we passed through the columned entrance of the old house and crossed an interior courtyard, he told me the history.

“In the '90s, this was the Cathedral of Heavy Metal,” he recalled with a smile. During the Special Period, the building served as a *casa de cultura*—a government-sanctioned community center—known as the Patio de Maria. But the youth rock scene there got a little out of control, and in 2003 the government had it closed—possibly due to the embarrassment of a hive of metal-heads just a block off the Plaza of the Revolution.

The building sat vacant for a while, but after the devastating hurricanes of 2008, local folk whose homes had been destroyed or damaged took shelter there—and were allowed to stay, their residency unofficial, but tolerated. Díaz and his boyfriend are among them, sharing a small apartment behind the courtyard.

Díaz sees a process of state appropriation of alternative culture at work. He notes that while the rebellious Patio de Maria was shut, a new, official club drawing metal acts, Maxim Rock, has opened on the other side of the Plaza.

“In the beginning, the metal scene was totally underground,” he said. “Then they created an agency for it. They have one for rock, they have one for hip-hop—it is totally controlled.”

Community agriculture, that other form of reclaimed urban space from the Special Period, survives—although here too, is cynical. Contrary to official claims, he said gardens are being abandoned around the city. Díaz “The perspective of growing your own food on plots proved temporary, now that we have oil and chemicals again.

He noted that two how-to books on gardening and household self-sufficiency that were immensely popular during the Special Period—*El Libro de La Familia* (The Book of the Family) and *Por Nuestras Propias Esfuerzas* (By Our Own Efforts), both published by the army's Olive Green Editions—are “almost forgotten today.”

It may be hard to say if the *huertos familiares*—informal family gardens, not regulated by the bureaucracy—are in decline. The formal urban farms—known as *organopónicos*—are clearly thriving.

Díaz took me for a walk just a few blocks from his squat, and we passed big lots planted with rows of spinach, lettuce, chives, celery, parsley, cauliflower. Workers with hoes tilled the ground behind fences intertwined with fruit-bearing vines and flowers or reinforced with rows of cactus.

One *organopónico* is named Quinto Congreso—for the Fifth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party that took place in 1997, the year the farm started. Another is named Plaza, for the municipality that covers Vedado.

The workers took a little time out to answer my questions.

These farms began spontaneously, yet often under the direction of bureaucrats who worked in the nearby government office buildings—to feed their own employees during the Special Period. But soon they were formally recognized and organized as collectives. They are still closely linked to the bureaucracy—for instance, selling produce to the Council of State, the highest body of power in Cuba, with its headquarters nearby.

The same process can be seen here, however: a spontaneous bottom-up initiative that came under state control as the price of survival.

Isbel Díaz and his comrades are now organizing to bring an openly anarchist voice to the gradually widening debate on Cuba's future. Six years ago, they founded the Alfredo Lopez Libertarian Workshop as a current to emerge from the Critical Observatory—named for the anarcho-syndicalist leader assassinated by the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado in 1926.

Through meetings they've been holding in Havana over the past two years, they are advancing a critique of what they call Cuban state capitalism, and looking to the legacy of the island's anarchist tradition.

Cuba had a strong anarchist-oriented labor movement, especially in the cigar industry, from the turn of the century through the repression of the Machado era in the 1920s and '30s.

The very last remnants of this movement were extinguished in the early years of the Castro regime, when anarchist dissenters were imprisoned for “counter-revolutionary activities.” This presaged the regime's more general crackdown on potentially dissident culture, with Afro-Cuban music discriminated against, the Beatles banned, and—most significantly—gays persecuted and even interned.

The regime has loosened up on all these things considerably (there is even a John Lennon Park in Havana), but it remains to be seen how much space will be tolerated for something as openly oppositional as anarchism.

The Alfredo López Libertarian Workshop is currently raising funds to purchase a building in Havana to serve as a social center and anarchist library—taking advantage of the loosening real-estate market.

They've affiliated with a regional Central American and Caribbean Anarchist Federation, to promote anti-authoritarian ideas and action throughout what the US considers its traditional US backyard.

With oil-benefactor Venezuela itself now in deep crisis, and Donald Trump unveiling a hardline Cuba policy that portends a return to Washington's long destabilization campaign, Cuba and the region generally could be looking at grim new challenges in the coming years or even months.

From the seeds I saw in Vedado, it is clear that the anarchist voice, at least, will be there.

Bill Weinberg blogs at CounterVortex.org.

Support the Alfredo López Libertarian Workshop at GoFundMe (Euros only): gofundme.com/gg2wrcac.

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