

Anarchist Anti-statism and the Colonial Question in Cuba, 1898-1902*

Alex Doyle**

Richard Cleminson***

University of Leeds, Reino Unido

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Abstract

This article examines a specific case study –the issues arising from Spanish colonialism and later U.S. imperialism– on Cuba at the turn of the nineteenth century through the lens of the working-class movement of anarchism. Anarchists in Cuba, many of whom were Spanish émigrés, argued that true emancipation came not from patriotism, nationalism and the political form of the state, but through self-organization and the transformation of “the social”. Tensions arose, however, within anarchist newspapers, upon which this article draws extensively, as to whether the pursuance of nationhood was an interim stage in this development or a trap offered by the bourgeois classes to domesticate workers’ demands. The state, nevertheless, was consistently rejected as a desirable medium or end destination.


Keywords: Anarchism, state, workers’ movement, Cuba, imperialism.

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** Public policy researcher based in the Reino Unido. Email: alexowendoyle@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3255-7199>

*** Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Leeds, Reino Unido. Richard Cleminson provided sections of the methodological framework, analysis and conclusions. Email: R.M.Cleminson@leeds.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6241-4888>

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El Anti-estatismo anarquista y la cuestión colonial en Cuba, 1898-1902

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un estudio de caso específico —la problemática que surgió del colonialismo español y más tarde del imperialismo estadounidense— en Cuba a principios del siglo XIX a través de la lente del movimiento obrero anarquista. Los anarquistas en Cuba, muchos de los cuales eran emigrados españoles, argumentaron que la verdadera emancipación no provenía del patriotismo, el nacionalismo y la forma política del Estado, sino a través de la autoorganización y la transformación de “lo social”. Sin embargo, surgieron tensiones dentro de los periódicos anarquistas, en los que este artículo se basa ampliamente, en cuanto a si la búsqueda de la nacionalidad era una etapa intermedia en este proceso o una trampa ofrecida por las clases burguesas para domesticar las demandas de los trabajadores. No obstante, el Estado fue rechazado sistemáticamente como medio o destino final deseable.

Palabras clave: anarquismo, Estado, movimiento obrero, Cuba, imperialismo.

O anti-estatismo anarquista e a questão colonial em Cuba, 1898-1902

Resumo

Este artigo oferece um estudo de caso específico —as questões decorrentes do colonialismo espanhol e, posteriormente, do imperialismo norte-americano— em Cuba na virada do século XIX através da lente do movimento operário anarquista. Os anarquistas em Cuba, muitos dos quais eram emigrados espanhóis, argumentaram que a verdadeira emancipação não viria do patriotismo, do nacionalismo e da forma política do Estado, mas da auto-organização e da transformação “do social”. Tensões surgiram, no entanto, dentro dos jornais anarquistas, sobre os quais este artigo se baseia extensivamente, sobre se a busca pela nacionalidade era um estágio intermediário nesse desenvolvimento ou uma armadilha oferecida pelas classes burguesas para domesticar as demandas dos trabalhadores. O Estado, no entanto, foi consistentemente rejeitado como meio desejável ou destino final.

Palavras-chave: anarquismo, Estado, movimento operário, Cuba, imperialismo.

Introduction

Within studies of the development or consolidation of the state and state structures, it is rare to find research on movements which are explicitly anti-statist or which seek to replace the state as part of a formal political, representational or institutional body or set of social relations. Over the last decade or so, however, scholars within studies of statecraft have increasingly turned their attention to those political ideologies that have sought precisely to achieve such an objective. As a response to rekindled contemporary interest and ongoing historical analysis, the relevance of anarchism and its offshoots has become resurgent at a time when the nature and legitimacy of the state apparatus has been critiqued from both left and right across the political spectrum. The growing interest in anarchist ideas and modes of organization can be understood, as Morgan Gibson has suggested, as a response to the “failure of state-centric versions [of social movements] to bring about substantial, transformative social change once assuming power” (Gibson, 2019, p. 44), from those rooted in social democracy through to those characterised by Marxist approaches. Rather than being understood as a protective force for social welfare, the state is increasingly viewed as a “promoter of economic and financial globalization” with all its inegalitarian effects (Botici, 2013, p. 24). Overall, scepticism abounds regarding the capacity of state-centric movements, and indeed the state itself, as tools for moving towards “transformative social change” (Gibson, 2019, p. 55). Ultimately, such a stance, in Gibson’s view, “*vindicates the anarchist critique of the state*”, and encourages viewing the state through an anarchist lens (Gibson, 2019, p. 51; emphasis in original). Another author, David Graeber, has analysed both the counter-measures and alternatives to state authority and power in Chiapas and Madagascar (Graeber, 2004) as well as the explicit contestation against capitalist political authority in the global “Occupy” and related movements of the early 2000s (Graeber, 2014).

This article centres on the challenges made to the state –its structures, institutions and the relations it fostered– by anarchism in a locality traversed with nationalist, imperialist and developing capitalist models: Cuba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The authors argue that the specific response of anarchists based in Cuba, whether of Spanish or local origin, around the years 1898-1902, offered a set of productive critiques and organizational modalities that are of interest today to those studying state dynamics imbued with imperial and national characteristics in Central and Latin America.

Van der Walt and Hirsch observed that “the question of how anarchism and syndicalism approached issues of nationality, race and imperial power is one that has received surprisingly little attention” (Van der Walt and Hirsch, p. lv). This in spite of the fact that many anarchist movements have sought to engage with and navigate

nationalist currents, typically though not always through displaying their opposition to them. For example, the late nineteenth century anarchist Workers' Circle, or *Círculo de Trabajadores*, in Cuba was the first working-class organization to adopt an antiracist and antinationalist position (Van der Walt and Hirsch, p. lvii).¹ As this workers' circle illustrates, anarchism conceptualizes the state, nationalism and imperialism as inextricably connected. Anarchists, whether in small activist groups or via trade unions, sought to show workers in Cuba how the state was foundational to nationalism and imperialism. In response, they put forward an opposing discourse and programme of action that attempted to supplant the state and go beyond nationalism and imperialism in an emancipatory workers' movement dedicated to social revolution.

Taking into account these concerns, this article seeks to deepen understandings, particularly in the context of Latin America, of the interplay between anti-state workers' movements and imperialist states. This article does not, however, argue that the anarchist movement traced an untrammelled route towards the dissolution of the state and the elimination of imperialist and nationalist endeavours. It illustrates the difficulties faced by anarchism in seeking to counter a political culture firmly anchored in Cuba's position as a colonial subject, one marked by widespread nationalist sentiment amongst the working classes which created a "nationalist movement of enormous popular vitality and political vigor" (Pérez, 1995). In doing so, the authors show that the interplay in Cuba between anarchism, the state and imperialism pivoted around the contested terrain of nationalism and national identity. Moreover, beyond drawing conclusions about paradigms within the region, this article invites reflection on several themes: what other utopian horizons were envisaged outside or beyond state structures by movements in the intersection between nationalism, anticolonialism and state building? How did the attempt to construct the state interact with a movement that sought its replacement? What lessons for state building do the labour movements of Cuba provide for today?

Bringing the State back into Anarchist History, bringing Anarchism back into the History of State-making in Latin America

Constance Bantman and Bert Altena have remarked that within transnational studies the role of formal organizations and supra-national institutions within a nation-state can be important for studies of how state policies have been formulated. They remark, however, that such concerns centre principally on state-led and state-influenced movements

1. These authors draw on Casanovas (1994, p. 8) for their analysis. For the published version of this thesis, see Casanovas (1998).

rather than those characterised by bottom-up ideologies and methods. Voluntary and non-hierarchical organizations are often left out of such studies or have only recently been incorporated into transnational histories. Within transnational studies of the operations of the state across borders, anarchism and syndicalism are especially suited to such an account “as the combined result of their anti-state ideologies and diasporic, network-based organization” opens up new routes to interrogate the state and its actions (Bantman and Altena, 2015, p. 7). Despite the promise of such an approach, the role of the state, somewhat surprisingly, is often played down within studies of anarchist movements in favour of those individuals, organizations and publications that actively sought to pass over the arbitrary divisions created by countries and “races”.

We need to acknowledge the very operations of the state in respect of the vigilance over and repression of anarchist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as repression, passport controls, infiltration of workers’ circles and similar tactics were increasingly implemented as part of a process of policing and “securitisation” (Jensen, 2013). Simultaneously, as Van der Walt and Hirsch have written, it is important to understand that these emerging global networks of the state offered great opportunities for anarchists: “the very circuits and centres of imperialism, industrial capitalism, and state formation provided the nexus in which their nemesis, the anarchists and syndicalists, emerged” (Van der Walt and Hirsch, 2010, p. xxxiv). The anarchist approach to the state allows for the creation of new knowledge and understanding of historical processes, particularly given the complexities of state formation and the hybridity of modernity within the Latin American continent (Canclini, 1990). A new focus on the issue of state construction and on the opposition to its consolidation, as Carl Levy has asserted, can “highlight an alternative history of modernity in which the state form is not the end point of all narratives” (Levy, 2011, p. 269). This alternative history can enable us to produce a “counter-history” of modernization and the state (Levy, 2011, p. 269).

The development of the state in Latin America has typically been interpreted through four main lenses (González Casanova, 1990). The liberal framing focuses on a minimal and stripped back state, which facilitates private enterprise, the Marxist-Leninist paradigm centres on the state as a vehicle for revolutionary action, whilst the social-democratic “welfare-state” champions the state as the caretaker and pillar of responsibility for the economic and social wellbeing of its citizens. Lastly, the anti-imperial nationalist lens focuses on how a strong state grounded in unified nationalist identity is a key tool for emancipation from foreign tutelage. This latter is expanded on by Pedro Narbondo who writes that anti-imperial nationalist tradition is predicated upon the view that it is imperative to have an “Estado fuerte para conducir el desarrollo y

evitar el asedio y desestabilización del imperialismo [...] y construcción de una sociedad civil homogénea a través de reformas económicas y sociales” (Narbondo, 1991, p. 678). In all of these framings, the value of the existence of the state itself is not questioned. However, Narbondo writes that in a contemporary context where Latin American states “han comenzado a superar la fase de transición a la democracia” the state model is increasingly being more closely scrutinized and “se plantea con más urgencia que nunca el problema de qué tipo de Estado se está forjando en esta nueva etapa de la historia de América Latina” (Narbondo, 1991, p. 677). This is reiterated by more recent literature asserting that “reflexionar acerca de la categoría del Estado latinoamericano en la actualidad, es quizá una de las necesidades más desafiantes en el mundo académico debido a su relación con el ejercicio del poder” (Lujano, 2008, p. 121). Deploying an anarchist lens that interrogates the value of the state apparatus therefore aligns with both recent socio-political developments as well as emphases in academic literature.

In understanding the type of state being formed in Central and Latin America, it is critical to understand its historical development. In particular, this article insists on the necessity of foregrounding the embeddedness of colonialism and imperialism within the Latin American state structure. Oszlak writes that the modern Latin American state was and is built on a “relación dependiente establecida en la etapa de expansión hacia fuera” which created a specific “dinámica interna” and a common set of “características que fue asumiendo el Estado en los países de la región” (Oszlak, 1978, p. 16). Moreover, Oszlak draws on Schmitter’s view that one of the defining traits of a state is the capacity to “externalizar su poder” and thus be recognized by other states (Oszlak, 1978, p. 12). As such, the very status of becoming a modern state was contingent upon the “formal reconocimiento externo de su soberanía”. Indeed, even after the moment of national liberation, the state remained tied to imperialism. For example, even though formal occupation ended, former colonised territories remained economically dependent on imperial powers. In Cuba, the United States’ nominal independence of Cuba from Spain was subject to the Platt Amendment which gave the U.S. the right to “intervene for the preservation of Cuban Independence” (U.S. Government, in Pichardo, 1969, p. 118). Cuban state development is thus impossible to conceptualize without foregrounding an analysis of imperialism.

Anarchism and Imperialism

Despite the burgeoning interest in anarchist history with respect to its parallels with the present-day dynamics of contemporary power, the interplay between anarchism and imperialism within Latin America and the rest of the Global South remains poorly documented

(Laursen, 2019, p. 150). Hirsch and van der Walt stress therefore that there remains a considerable amount of research to be carried out in dissecting anarchism's interplay with imperialism (Van der Walt and Hirsch, 2010, p. lxxviii). Similarly, the editors of a volume on anarchist methodology lament that the discipline "remains overwhelmingly focused on European anarchism". More specifically, they write, "anti-imperial and anticolonial contexts are unfortunately absent" (Bantman and Altena, 2015, p. 19). More recently, Gutiérrez and Kinna (2023) have argued that it is necessary to avoid the conflation of nations and nationalism with state-building processes (Gutiérrez and Kinna, 2023, p. 121), while at the same time noting that for some in the anarchist tradition, including Proudhon, nationhood "encapsulated a demand for freedom and independence that was negated by the state's hierarchical organisation" (Gutiérrez & Kinna, 2023, p. 123).

Such work is part of a developing interest and significant advance in studies of non-European anarchism. Hirsch and Van der Walt's collection on anarchism in the colonial and postcolonial world, and Craib and Barry's *Global Anarchisms* are the most comprehensive, including country-specific and transnational studies of non-European anarchisms (Craib and Maxwell, 2015). Ramnath's *Decolonizing anarchism*, focused on India, proposes a cross-fertilisation of knowledge which "brings an anarchist approach to anticolonialism and an anticolonial approach to anarchism" (Ramnath, 2011, p. 1). Similarly, Taibo's work furthers this process of decolonizing anarchist histories by foregrounding the tensions between Eurocentric anarchism and indigenous movements (Taibo, 2018). Adams (2017) has furthered anarchist histories by focusing on several Asian and African expressions of the movement, while Hirsch and Van der Walt's comprehensive volume spans multiple continents in tracing "the history of anarchist and syndicalist anti-imperialism -as it was manifest in both theory and practice" (Hirsch and Van der Walt, 2010, p. xxxii). Moreover, and of particular relevance to this article, laudable progress has been made in furthering the study of anarchism in Latin America since Cappelletti's original publication of *Anarchism in Latin America* in 1990 (Gómez Muller, 2009; Cappelletti, 2017; de la Forcade and Shaffer, 2015; Shaffer, 2005; 2019; 2020; Baer, 2015; Sánchez Cobos, 2016).

Given the emphasis on nationalism as an antidote to imperialism, in which "the depiction of decolonization as a linear transition from empire to nation has acquired the fixity of common-sense", anarchism tends to be obscured or pushed to the margins in anti-imperialist narratives (Goswami, 2012, p. 1462). Anarchism's principled opposition to state formation, and also to nationalism, means that it does not fit the standard model of anti-imperialism being protagonized by many nationalist movements. Indeed, even in those works which foreground anarchism's response to imperialism, the anarchists are portrayed as subsidiaries, or reliable and effective allies, to the nationalists (Anderson, 2005), despite the reality being much more

complex. In contrast, this article insists that anti-imperialism was not a “singularity of sentiment” limited to nationalist or nation-centred projects, with much to be gained from deconstructing the anarchist movement’s posture (Biccum, 2008, p. 176). In this article, this posture is shown to be one which insisted that an effective anti-imperialism necessitated the dismantling of the state apparatus. Though the anarchist movement conceded that an alliance with a form of nationalism that undergirded the Independence movement against Spanish colonialism was necessary, the subsequent transfer of power over Cuba from Spain to the U.S. vindicated their view that the state necessarily resulted in imperialism, and imperialism relied upon the state.

This fierce rejection of preserving state structures in national liberation movements lay not only with anarchist dogma, but also derived from the anarchist movement being instrumental in carving out space for José Martí’s more progressive form of nationalism grounded in social justice for all oppressed classes and races—a “Cuba para bien de todos”. This form of nationalism, though it sought the consolidation of the nation-state, was palatable to anarchists because it showed a commitment to structural and broader emancipation whilst eschewing exclusionary rhetoric. However, the fact that even this more progressive nationalism had only yielded a continuation of worker oppression, with the Spanish imperial power being supplanted by the U.S., only served to reaffirm the necessity of a more resolutely anarchist anti-imperialism (Poyo, 1985, p. 40). This “return” to a doctrinal anarchist position was reaffirmed on numerous occasions, not least between 1889 and 1891 (Casanovas, 1998, p. 203) and in the period studied here. The movement, in such instances, argued that nationalist independence movements that preserved the state, and the collective national identity which propped this up, were pernicious to the interests of the working classes and to solidarity across racial divides (Casanovas, 1998, p. 177). A focus on the period of 1898-1902 in Cuba, in the aftermath of Spanish rule, together with attention to the anarchist movement’s analysis of the imperial debacle, therefore informs studies of the Latin American state by illustrating how liberation from a foreign power was only deemed possible through the dismantling of the state along with the rejection of nationalism and national identity.

Cuban Anarchism

Cuban anarchism, though certainly eclipsed by studies on Cuban socialism from 1959 onwards, has been treated by several authors. These works, however, do not tend to focus on the anarchist analysis of imperialism; in cases where it is mentioned or analysed, they tend to do so through an exposé, without foregrounding the challenges

and uneven trajectory of the Cuban anarchist anti-imperialism, not least how the context of nationalism constrained this anti-imperialism (Sánchez Cobos, 2016; Shaffer, 2005, 2019, 2020). Alternatively, they argue that anarchism manipulated nationalist independence discourse and motifs to its advantage (Shaffer, 2000). Fernández's short book offers a strong overview of the movement throughout Cuban history, but as well as being very broad in its themes and time-period, it does not delve thoroughly into anarchism's relationship to the nation and nationalism. It explains that the "divided feelings about the Cuban separatist war" and the contentiousness of national identity manifested itself on the one hand in international displays of neutrality and anti-militarism, and on the other hand in firm solidarity for militarised independence struggles (Fernández, 2001, p. 44). However, it does not draw on primary sources, nor does it analyse this tension in depth. Sánchez Cobos' work (2016) focuses on the impact of Spanish migration on the Cuban anarchist movement, though rather than drawing out how this fostered and reinforced national identity tensions in the anarchist movement, and in some ways constrained their project, it focuses on how this transnational process was positive for the development of Cuban anarchism. While not an aspect discussed in this article, it is also worthy of note that most published work on the rise of nationalism, while highlighting the connections between Cuban and Catalan nationalism, does not focus on linkages between both countries' labour movements (Smith, 2017).

This article uses extensive primary source analysis to unpack anarchists' oscillating and tense relationship with national identity in constructing an anarchist anti-imperialism, manifested in compromise and sacrifice as they momentarily allied themselves to Martí's project for independence, followed by a reversion to doctrinaire opposition to nation building and anti-imperialism. In doing so, this work recentres the importance of anarchists in constructing a critique which stitched together the state, nationalism and imperialism as a mutually reinforcing triad. This anti-imperialism, which put forward an emancipatory project rejecting both the state and nationalism, set the anarchists apart from the dominant national liberation current. The article also teases out how Cuban anarchists' grappling with national liberation, and indeed their concessions towards it in the build up to independence, was a phase in the consolidation and retrenchment of an expression of anti-imperialism centred on class struggle and social revolution. As such, this article demonstrates that though the anarchist approach convincingly called into question the notion that anticolonialism must be accompanied by the creation of a nation-state, this was not without its difficulties given the context of nationalist attachment in Cuba stemming from the colonial experience and independence.

The periodicals employed in this article are *El Nuevo Ideal*, *El Rebelde* and *El Despertar*. *El Nuevo Ideal* was a Cuban anarchist newspaper which “first appeared the same month that the United States took formal control of the island” in March 1899 and produced regular weekly publications until August 1901 (Shaffer, 2020, p. 5). The paper was founded by the Spanish-born anarchist Adrián del Valle (1872-1945), also known by the pseudonym of “Palmiro de Lidia” (Casanovas, 1998, pp. 178-202), who moved to Cuba in 1895 where he set up *El Nuevo Ideal* (Fernández, 2001, p. 45). Luis Barcia, another Spanish anarchist who migrated to Cuba and the US, also formed a part of the editorial board of the paper. Similarly, *El Despertar* and *El Rebelde*, were edited by Del Valle and Barcia. The Spanish dominance in all of these periodicals is of key significance, particularly given this article’s emphasis on national identity for understanding the anarchist challenge to imperialism. Though it is difficult to ascertain the exact composition of the anarchist movement, scholars have argued that the movement’s leaders were “mayoritariamente españoles” (Colodrón, 2015, p. 8) and “los cuadros dirigentes anarquistas estaban formados por blancos y la mayoría –o todos a decir de algunos autores– eran españoles” (Sánchez-Cobos, 2013, p. 249).

Cuban Anarchism and Anti-imperialism

The end of Spanish colonialism in 1898 was marked by the transfer of power over Cuba from Spain to the US, which occupied the country following the war. The island, in the view of one writer for the *Nuevo Ideal* –a Cuban anarchist newspaper which “first appeared the same month that the United States took formal control of the island” in March 1899 and produced regular weekly publications until August 1901 (Shaffer, 2019, p. 5) – was “completamente arruinada” and was the site of “gran miseria” (Lidia, 1901a). Between 1899 and 1902 the Americans formally occupied the country, a period in which they would maintain “strict supervision over the affairs of Cuba until a republican form of government has been adopted by the people thereof” (Brooke, 1899, p. 21).

Anarchists in different periodicals and publications in Cuba argued during this period that the principal issue affecting the working class lay not in domination of Cuba by Spain or the U.S. specifically, but with the structures of the state themselves. In so doing, the United States ceased to be the specific object of attack. Anarchists argued that the United States, like Spain, intervened in Cuba due to the logic of the state and support for capitalist interests impelling it to do so. Palmiro de Lidia, writing in *El Nuevo Ideal*, observed that the prospect of a non-violent and non-expansionist state was impossible since “el estado de guerra es el estado natural y permanente de las modernas

naciones, que fundan su existencia y poderío en el antagonismo de clases, en la lucha económica, en la expansión colonial y en el dominio fuerte sobre el débil” (Lidia, 1901b). The inexorable connection between the modern state form and expansionist practices is thereby firmly posited. In his personal memoir, Luis Barcia (an anarchist of Spanish origin who was a founder of *El Nuevo Ideal* and key to the Caribbean network) wrote that “el Estado es la guerra en el exterior y la opresión en el interior” and as such “Los Estados Unidos, al guerrear con España y apoderarse de sus posesiones, no hizo otra cosa que lo que han hecho y están haciendo otras naciones incluso España [...] Cuantas naciones, pequeñas e insignificantes hoy, han sido grandes imperios en otros tiempos” (Barcia Quilabert, 1957, pp. 32-33). In other words, imperialism in the U.S., rather than being particular to this country, was a natural consequence of the state as the central structuring apparatus for society.

Even prior to experiencing U.S. occupation, anarchists in Cuba critiqued the possibility of a U.S. intervention. In part due to their understanding of the U.S.’ relationship to the Philippines and Puerto Rico, anarchists were sceptical of the U.S. as a benevolent actor which would prioritize the interests of the Cuban people. In their periodical *El Rebelde*, an anarchist paper based in the U.S. that appeared throughout 1898, anarchists wrote that whilst the U.S. portrayed itself as a “nación humanitaria” which went to war in order to “libertar á las colonias oprimidas” (Anon, 1898a), such an outcome was viewed as improbable since “se anexa Puerto Rico” and “quiere apropiarse las Filipinas”. Anarchists, both in Cuba and in the US, were thus resolute in their rejection of the potential for U.S. governance to be of benefit to Cubans. They wrote that the U.S. “tiende sistemáticamente á anexarse en el porvenir la misma Isla de Cuba que tanto ha luchado y sufrido por su independencia” (Anon, 1898a). This is grounded in their fundamental distrust of the state as an entity being capable of pursuing benevolent ambitions: “no son tan generosas las naciones [...] Las guerras humanitarias y civilizadoras son un mito, una farsa”, narratives deployed to “encubir sus egoismos” (Anon, 1898b). In essence, even prior to experiencing U.S. occupation, the anarchists utilized their distrust of the state, as well as their knowledge of the U.S.’ foreign policy, to put forward their scepticism of the intervention being anything other than a self-aggrandizing and exploitative mission.

Similarly, in a piece addressed towards Spanish and Cuban anarchists at the 1893 anarchist international conference in Chicago, Pedro Esteve, a Spanish anarchist who spent a portion of his life as an active anarchist in the U.S., had noted that in spite of the purportedly more benign model of republicanism as the basis for “organización política y económica del país”, the U.S. still exhibited the traits of an exploitative state, demonstrated by the fact that “no ha impedido el acumulamiento de la riqueza y el poder en pocas

manos”. He observed that the current situation in Cuba was dominated by “autoridades despóticas y religiosos hipócritas; periodistas venales [...] magistrados complacientes con los ricos é inflexibles con los pobres” (Esteve, 1900, p. 16). Summarizing, Esteve explained that “la explotación y la tiranía” are rife, leading to the existence of a “miseria horripilante”. In spite of this, there remains a perception of workers that they are “los hombres más libres y felices del mundo” (Esteve, 1900, p. 13). This piece of writing authored by Esteve is dated from 1893, and thus prior to the period following independence. Despite the ambiguities contained in other anarchist publications, such as *El Productor* (1887-1893) (Casanovas, 1998, pp. 184-185), Esteve’s words demonstrate that the transnational network of anarchism stretching from Cuba to the U.S. was in the process of constructing an anti-imperialist critique even prior to the official intervention by the United States. Crucially, this lay the groundwork for an anti-imperialism consisting of pinpointing the flaws of American republican democracy, thus preempting the U.S. intervention as being self-interested rather than being in the interests of the Cuban majority.

Cuban Anarchism, National Identity and Nationalism

The anarchists had a broad view of the imperial state as an entity which also manifested itself at what Ferguson describes as the “meso level” of relationships between individuals (Ferguson, 2022, p. 24). Anarchists identified national antagonisms as a component of state oppression; in other words, they viewed nationalism in general, and tensions between workers on the basis of nationality specifically, as being attributable to the state, as well as being counterproductive in their endeavours to subsume the state. As such, anarchists viewed the state as an oppressive apparatus whose power was consolidated through the appeal to national identity of Independence, and the subsequent political climate of nationalist antagonisms amongst workers. Not only were these antagonisms perceived by the anarchist movement as bound up with the state apparatus generally, but they viewed them as being bound up with the *imperial* state. Honing in further, the anarchists understood this link between national identity tensions and the imperial state to be of a dual nature: the imperial state brought about these divisive relations, and simultaneously these divisive relations served to legitimize and prop up the imperial state.

At the same time, there were elements of the anarchist movement in Cuba, and indeed internationally, which drew a distinction between nationalism as a nefarious ideology and tool for elite rule, and nationalism as a cultural, place-based phenomenon compatible with anarchist theory. Bakunin describes the process of identifying oneself with the nation by “common people” as “a natural, real love”. It is only when attachment

to the nation becomes “political patriotism, or love of the State” that it is no longer its “faithful expression” (Maximoff, 1953, p. 324). Cuban anarchists expressed this by conceptualizing nationalism as a form of “amor a la casa donde nacimos” allowing the nation and nationalism to be viewed as “la extensión de la idea del hogar” (Anon, 1898c). Indeed, Shaffer also argues that the anarchist incorporation of independence motifs into their discourse demonstrated that their nationalism could be “cultural”, divorced of state connections and could therefore align with anarchism (Shaffer, 2000).

However, this is to underestimate the insistence on class struggle and rejection of national identity within anarchist ranks. The most recent scholarly literature on the anarchist movement’s relationship to the nation argues that the anarchist movement’s ideals of internationalism and class struggle “did not posit the transcendence of ‘national’ differences through the attainment of class consciousness” (Kinna and Gutiérrez, 2023, p. 127). The case of Cuban anti-imperialism, nevertheless, shows that national identity was indeed critiqued and rejected, and class unity was viewed specifically as a means to neutralize or transcend the affinity with national identity. As a result of this, the constituent parts of the anarchist movement’s anti-imperialism—class struggle and social revolution—distanced the dominant strand of Cuban anarchism from other worker organizations and political movements in Cuba, as well as more broadly from the dominant mode of nation-state centred anticolonialism in Latin America. Particularly after the failure of independence to bring about workers’ emancipation, anarchists insisted that national identity and nationalism as oppressive forces were incompatible with an emancipatory project. By focusing on the anarchist conceptualization of this link between national identity tensions and the imperial state, this article teases out a view of the state as being more than an institutional body: it is also an entity that filters down into relations between individuals. This is particularly pertinent in developing understandings of the state in Latin America, a region in which national identity has also typically assumed an emancipatory anti-imperialist function for the popular classes, rather than being, as the anarchists viewed it, a conduit or legitimizing force for the imperial state.

The build-up to the U.S. intervention was a period in which the anarchist movement had allied itself to the anticolonial national liberation and Independence movement. Though subject to fierce internal debate within Cuba (Sueiro Seoane, 2018) as well as in the anarchist movement globally (Fernández, 2001, pp. 45-46), the position of a temporary and tactical endorsement of national liberation which contradicted anarchist principles was eventually adopted (Fernández, 2001, p. 33). Palmiro de Lidia affirmed that despite anarchists being “enemigos del parlamentarismo y de los procedimientos

electorales hoy imperantes” they would lend their support to Cuban independence. He explained that this support for political independence was contingent on a continued effort to pursue social revolution after Spanish departure. He wrote that “después de haber sacudido el yugo español” the movement must focus on challenging the “yugo” of the “americanos” so as to ensure that efforts towards “emancipación social” remain a focus (Lidia, 1900). In essence, whilst anarchism challenged the national liberation project’s ultimate objective of the formation of a nation-state, it viewed this as a lesser evil than the perpetuation of colonialism. The same logic was reaffirmed by Barcia:

Lucharé por la independencia y tan pronto como se consiga ésta, antes de que se constituya definitivamente la República cubana sobre las ruinas de la colonia, habrá terminado mi misión, y separándome de las filas del ejército que hasta entonces habrá sido revolucionario, entraré de nuevo en la plenitud de mi vida de anarquista, continuando la lucha franca por el Ideal. (Barcia, 1899)

In this way, anarchists in Cuba conceded that independence could act as a prerequisite for freedom and liberty. They wrote that “las luchas por la independencia no pueden ser indiferentes a los amantes de la verdadera libertad”. Struggles for independence such as the anticolonial struggle against Spain were “usurpaciones de la autoridad, contra la autoridad misma” and in this way a defence of the nation-state form became a necessary sacrifice in the name of liberty. Stripped to their core, independence struggles are “la afirmación [...] del principio libertario que profesamos [...] de la libertad de un pueblo a regirse por sí mismo” and the “negación de la autoridad ejercida por un poder extraño” (Anon, 1901a). Therefore, in spite of the ideological conflict involved in supporting independence, by viewing it through the prism of freedom from domination by a foreign power, it could be reconciled at least as a temporary stage with the anarchist opposition to politics, national identity and the state. Crucially, as Poyo (1985) and Casanovas (1998, pp. 221-222) explain, the Cuban independence movement’s centering of social justice was itself a consequence of anarchist campaigning. In this way, the anarchist movement had worked to imbue the independence movement with its ideals, such that an alliance was not entirely antithetical to anarchist principles.

However, the U.S. intervention shifted the Cuban anarchists’ perspective. The new context led the anarchists to adjusting “algunos de sus postulados” and “adecuándolos a la nueva realidad política y social”, showing how dynamic such an ideology proved to be in light of changing political realities (Sánchez Cobos, 2016, p. 80). Palmiro de Lidia, in *El Ideal del siglo XX*, writes that the latter third of the nineteenth century, not least the independence process from Spain in Cuba, was a key moment which demonstrated

the pitfalls of “revolución política” (understood as a revolution connected to state or party political processes) for advancing anarchist objectives. By contrast, it was the “revolución económica y social” which “fermenta en el corazón de todos los pueblos” and which would provide the route towards emancipation. This is reiterated by an article which insists that, political processes of “discursos, leyes y decretos no se han logrado nunca mejorar la condición económica de los desheredados” (Lidia, 1899). The futility of “politics” (denoting once more the processes associated with the state such as electoral politics and nationalism/ national identity) as a means of achieving genuine improvement of quality of life for workers, or in progressing towards anarchist objectives, is further captured in the following: “deben unirse, asociarse, organizarse todos, posponiendo las cuestiones de detalle (las políticas) a la gran cuestión (la económica)” (Anon, 1899a). In a piece which summarises the anarchist opposition to state politics and how this was critical for an effective anti-imperialist politics, the author writes “si el yankee abandona a Cuba no será, ciertamente, en manos de ningún partido socialista de desheredados, por más incontestable, dulce y generosa que sea su fuerza” (Anon, 1899b). Whilst in some ways independence from Spain had allowed for increased freedom for anarchist organizing (Sánchez Cobos, 2016, p. 43), the anarchists stood against the idea that “la Revolución nos ha emancipado a todos los cubanos” given that “los obreros siguen tan explotados o más que estaban” (Anon, 1899c). In sum, the anarchists diagnosed the independence process as proof of the numerous flaws in parliamentary reformist politics, as well as the counterproductive impact of the invocation of national identity. The fact that political independence had yielded a seamless transition from subjugation to Spain towards subjugation to the U.S. provided greater impetus for an anti-imperialism which sought for a rupture in the form of social revolution, rather than compromises which reified the state such as nationalism and electoralism. At this juncture, the anarchists reverted to their steadfast opposition to the state, and in doing so rejected national identity which they viewed as a corollary of the state apparatus.

This demonstrates how the anarchist movement conceptualised national identity and national liberation as inextricably tied to the fortification and perpetuation of imperialism. By abandoning national identity and the nationalist cause in favour of a uniform worker identity predicated on “class”, the anarchists sought to transcend the bitter national identity divisions, thus strengthening the workers’ movement. This, they posited, was a key prerequisite to a form of national liberation, which would realise José Martí’s vision of an independence process characterised not just by political reform, but deep-seated social and economic justice. Underpinning the anarchist rejection of national identity was its illegitimacy and antiquatedness. In other words, whilst it had

previously held value as a revolutionary tool, and legitimacy as a rationale for hostility, in the new imperial context it was judged to be a relic of the past with no relevance or utility. Proclamations by anarchists proposed that workers put to the side “pasadas pendencias” and that “las causas funestas que en el antiguo régimen dieron motivo á odios, querellas y divisiones entre los trabajadores de Cuba, desaparecieron, barridas por el nuevo estado de cosas, para nunca más volver” (Anon, 1899d). The changing circumstances mean that the ties to national identity are no longer warranted since “Las causas que en mala hora pudieron dar origen a tales antagonismos, son causas muertas” (Anon, 1899d). In other words, the end of Spanish colonialism nullified the rationale for hostility between Cubans and Spaniards. Instead, they favoured what they understood as the unifying and transcendental potential of the universal categories of “class” and “the worker” over any affiliation to national identity. The anarchist movement insisted on class solidarity and unity as being crucial for advancing working class interests, since this was the only way of reconciling the toxic division which an attachment to national identity yielded, and thus combatting the imperial state:

Hacer comprender a esta parte inconsciente del proletariado, que la etiqueta nacionalista bajo la cual son clasificados en cada país [...] es una ficción que no debe prevalecer sobre la realidad de los intereses que por encima de las fronteras unen solidariamente a los hombres de las mismas clases. (Anon, 1901b)

The anarchists contended that imperialism and the state were culpable for worker division and lack of revolutionary vibrancy. One account of the period following independence from Spain is critical of the “pueblo” which the author describes as divided and lacking in “conciencia”, but does so by portraying them as a vulnerable grouping which is a victim of the “política maquiavélica desarrollada [...] por los politicastos americanos” and the “Jefes de la Revolución” (Anon, 1901c). With regards to this latter, the author suggests that the working class and pueblo have been duped or “deslumbrado” by independence forces complicit in the failure of true emancipation and implementation of U.S. imperialism: “nos sentimos entristecidos porque vemos a nuestro pueblo que sufre y trabaja, sugestionado por teorías incomprensibles, deslumbrado ante los *idolos* que legó la última contienda” (Anon, 1901c). This “contienda” is in reference to the tension emanating from the ‘betrayal’ of independence and imposition of U.S. imperialism. It is this new situation of subjugation to U.S. imperialism, facilitated by the *idolos*, which is cited as responsible for the climate of “desconfianza entre ciertos hombres” (Anon, 1901c). The author proposes, as in all cases of “pueblos que degeneran” in an environment of division and disillusionment, that “la Razón” should prevail (Anon, 1901c). Though not

mentioned explicitly, it is possible to infer from the schema of anarchism in this period that “Razón” is an allusion to class solidarity and “rational” thinking. Without thinking through the divisions in the working class and the lack of revolutionary commitment to counter imperialism, any emancipatory movement would be effectively strangled.

This anarchist diagnosis of imperialism as stemming from the state apparatus is what enabled a deep skepticism of the notion that being of Cuban national identity was automatically an anticolonial subjectivity. In doing so, they used this to reassert their opposition to the dominant current of national liberation as a means to challenge imperialism, thus diverging from conventional Latin-American anti-imperial discourse and praxis. Importantly however, it also shows the barriers faced by an anarchist movement seeking to instil a radical programme of anti-imperialist class struggle in a context of nationalist rivalry and tension.

The “Sterilization” of Revolution: Cuban Complicity in Imperialism

The anarchist movement also aligned with Van der Walt’s view that imperialism was carried out by “foreign and local elites” (Van der Walt, 2016, p. 356), as well as Ramnath who foregrounds both “external forces” and “local reactionary elements” meaning that “any anarchistic movements against colonial regimes requires also an overhaul of internal oppression alongside the elimination of the external one” (Ramnath, 2019, p. 677). In relation to Cuba specifically, as Rivero Muñiz explains, the “autoridades” during this period were understood as “no sólo a las estadounidenses sino también a muchas de las cubanas que cooperaban con ellos en el gobierno de la Isla” (Rivero Muñiz, 1961, p. 35). Leaning on Legg’s assemblages theory as a way of converting imperialism from an abstract monolith to being characterized by specific identifiable traits, we can argue that the view put forward by the anarchist movement of Cubans as imperialist actors brought imperialism closer to the everyday reality of anarchists and workers. In this way, the anarchists in Cuba “de-reify structural processes into specific manifestations, studying the ‘global’ through its local sites and workings” (Legg, 2020, p. 7). By foregrounding the active role that those of Cuban nationality played in the perpetuation of imperialism, the anarchist movement destabilizes the view that imperialism was the preserve of “foreign” nationalities. Instead, by foregrounding Cuban elites in the imperial process, as well as critiquing the worker affinity to the state-led ideology of national identity, it is the state structure which is shown to be the primary governing and legitimating force of imperialism.

Anarchists critiqued those Cubans who sustained imperialism by their participation in political processes, namely the Platt Amendment. Approved on March 2, 1902, the Platt Amendment was a piece of legislation which was the result of the U.S. imposing the precondition on their departure from Cuba being that they would retain the right to intervene. In essence, the Platt Amendment ensured political control of America over Cuba, enshrined by Article Three which stated that “the government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban Independence” (U.S. Government, in Pichardo, 1969, p. 118). The anarchists drew a clear link between the specific actions of Cubans, the political processes such as the Platt Amendment which facilitated this, and ultimately the subjugation of Cuba to U.S. imperialist hegemony. Writing in 1901 whilst the Platt Amendment is on the verge of becoming enshrined into constitutional law, one anarchist affirms that “los políticos cubanos van muy pronto a estar a la greña con los políticos americanos” resulting in the question being posed of “¿Que conducta debemos seguir las masas productoras, el verdadero pueblo, ante esa lucha de clases o sea esas diferencias entre los gobernantes cubanos y los gobernantes yanquis?”. Framed in terms of class struggle, the anarchist writes that from the perspective of the working classes, there is no distinction between Cubans and Americans: “no han dado prueba los gobernantes cubanos de ser más justicieros ni menos tiranos que los gobernantes americanos” (Anon, 1901d). In a sarcastic jibe at the flaws of electoral politics, another column reads: “La Convención cubana aprobó la enmienda Platt”, which, according to the logic of “teoría democrática”, means that the “pueblo soberano lo quiere”. Of course, the anarchists stood in ardent opposition to the potential of representative politics for highlighting the preferences and concerns of Cubans, leading them to summarize sarcastically this process as one whereby “muy democráticamente, Cuba será una simple dependencia de los Estados Unidos” (Anon, 1901e).

Moreover, the anarchists saw the Cubans who became a part of the armed forces in the service of U.S. imperialism as evidence of Cuban complicity. They lamented the fact that those who “lucharon bravamente en defensa de los ideales de independencia y libertad” (Anon, 1899e) subsequently fought against the interests of workers. This author sees these Cubans as those who “sirvan hoy de instrumento [...] para ahogar la voz de los oprimidos, las protestas de los débiles, las reclamaciones de los desheredados” (Anon, 1899e). This critique was primarily directed at members of the Cuban elites, such as General Menocal:

No menos indignación como obrero y vergüenza como cubano experimenté yo cuando poco después de la evacuación de las tropas españolas, supe que el patriota general cubano Sr. Menocal daba orden a sus soldados para que fueran a ocupar los puestos de los infelices trabajadores que [...] se habían declarado en huelga. (Anon, 1901f)

The anarchist movement's critique of the role of Cubans in the consolidation of imperialism is corroborated by the statements of U.S. authorities. Brooke's account of the collaboration between Cubans and the U.S. explains that broader pattern in which "Cuban officers were selected to take the higher positions; inspectors, captains, lieutenants, and the like", whilst "for the main body of the force applications were invited from all quarters" (Brooke, 1899, p. 22). Many of these individuals came from the Cuban army, such as "General Menocal an officer of high rank in the Cuban Army" who "speaking English fluently, and with an American education as an engineer, was invited to take the position of Chief of Police and accepted it" (Brooke, 1899, p. 22). The anarchist movement was aware of, and intent on critiquing, this process of Cubans propping up U.S. imperialism, and as such it formed a key part of their anti-imperial conceptualization and critique. Combining their critique of both Cubans complicit in the consolidation of U.S. imperialism, and the political processes which "esterilizó [...] lo que la revolución conquistó" (Anon, 1901f), the anarchists constructed an anti-imperialist discourse which highlighted the way that Cubans were integral to its perpetuation, thus destabilising the view that imperialism was only waged by actors outside of Cuba, insisting instead also on the Cuban state's complicity in order to solidify their unique anarchist posture on imperialism which understood the state, nationalism and imperialism to be intertwined entities.

Conclusion

Before the U.S intervention, the anarchist movement advanced the argument that such an action would give way to a similar state of subjugation of the Cuban people as had been the case under Spanish rule. This was largely based on their detailed analysis of the expansionist imperatives of all states, adamant that it is not possible to differentiate between them. The notion of a "humanitarian intervention" was dismissed as inconceivable when its protagonist was a state which has as its grounding principle the need to dominate markets and acquire territory.

The colonial foundations of the political culture of Cuba dictated the extent to which anarchism, as a movement which rejected the state and the nationalist ideology, and viewed this latter as an arm of the state, could pose an anti-imperialist challenge. Indeed, this was illustrated by the anarchist movement endorsing national identity and nationalism as a necessary phase towards worker emancipation. However, this position shifted after the supplanting of Spanish imperialists by the U.S. which served to re-install the anarchist core position: following the movement's tenets, opposition to national identity was a critical way of dismantling the hegemony of the state; national identity served to consolidate the hegemony of the imperial state by splintering the workforce.

The example of Cuba analysed in this article shows how, at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it was possible to argue in favour of a political position that was both anti-imperialist and anti-statist. Evidently, in the process of doing so, anarchists ran up against many obstacles, not least patriotic sentiment among the working classes that they sought to influence, but also a degree of ambivalence as to “national” independence within their own ideology. The case study presented here is illustrative of these tensions but also casts a new light on what appeared to be possible within the political panorama that developed in Cuba during this period. Lessons can therefore be learned about the validity and the construction of the state form and its desirability and applicability in Latin America, not only historically, but also today.

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