The emergence of Brazilian anarchism and syndicalism

Anarchism, revolutionary syndicalism, and socialism were important elements in the making of the working class in late 19th and early 20th century Brazil, as elsewhere. Anarchism was an important chapter in the history of political thought and action in Brazil and—with syndicalism and socialism—shaped the workers’ movement in a number of ways, and also influenced a range of workers’ social, recreational and cultural activities. The circulation of anarchist, syndicalist, and socialist ideas through campaigns, demonstrations, newspapers and other publications (as well as through recreational activities and autonomous forms of popular and proletarian organisation, drawing on various religious and cultural traditions) demonstrates the numerous channels and tools that were involved in this politicization of social relationships.

These movements transmitted values and behaviour that questioned and challenged established social hierarchies, and the traditional mentality that served to exclude most workers to stay out of politics, institutional or not. In the late 19th century, Brazil underwent important transformations, with the abolition of slavery (1888) and the establishment of the republican regime (1889); however, these did not affect the extremely unequal social structure. Although the end of the monarchy resulted from quite a heterogeneous movement, with some popular participation, the victorious republican project was quick to eliminate the more radical proposals. It was closely linked to the interests of coffee planters living in São Paulo, who drew from liberal thought only what they needed, rejecting any expansion of the republican project that would open up broad political participation.
The spread of republican ideas was accompanied by accelerating modernization, involving secularization, industrial development, urbanization, and immigration. These historical processes occurred most intensely in some regions, particularly the southeast, between the years 1880 and 1920. They changed traditional ways of life, and led to the development of new social actors, especially in the cities: the industrial bourgeoisie, and the proletarian and middle classes. However, slavery left an imprint, decisively influencing the very process of becoming a citizen; older power relations and behaviour continued in the new context. In a society long dominated by the patriarchal family, the predominance of private power and with a weak distinction between public and private, there was a marked imbalance between the vast rural areas and the increasingly influential cities, which had profound social effects.

Those who turned to anarchism in different parts of the world were part of a common international project, but in each country workers used the language and methods of anarchism to provide answers to concrete local problems and concerns. The franchise rules in the Republic established a restricted citizenship based on a franchise qualified by economic and literacy criteria. Since liberal democracy was then a sort of farce, those excluded from citizenship sought other means of political action. Thus, anarchism and syndicalism—mainly the latter—appeared as effective and concrete forms of political action, as Sheldon Maram, Angelo Trento and Michael Hall, among others, have stressed.

It was precisely growing disillusionment with the First Republic (1889–1930) that led many to embrace the radical ideology of anarchism. This is clear, for instance, from the trajectory of two important libertarian militants in São Paulo, the lawyer Benjamín Mota and the

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4 Benjamín Mota, a young republican lawyer from São Paulo, formed a revolutionary group on his return from a trip to Paris, and from 1897 adhered to anarchism. The following year, he wrote one of the first books by a Brazilian author on anarchist