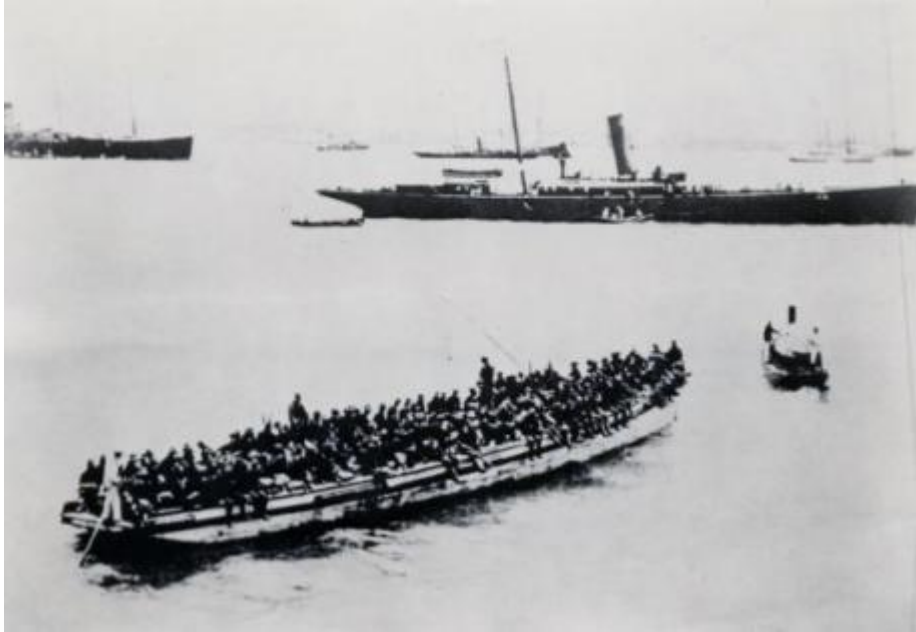


# Anarchy in Puerto Rico



A review by Rod Jackman of *Black Flag Boricuas: Anarchism, Antiauthoritarianism, and the Left in Puerto Rico, 1897-1921*.

Kirwin Shaffer's *Black Flag Boricuas* takes its title from the color of the anarchist flag, and the island on which the radicals organized: Puerto Rico. The black flag symbolized solidarity with "those most abused by the state, by capital, and by religion." A work of deep scholarship, Shaffer also offers a study that's accessible to the general reader. Its subtitle defines both the subject and period under study: *Anarchism, Antiauthoritarianism, and the Left in Puerto Rico, 1897 – 1921*. It spans, therefore, the end of Spanish colonialism (1898); the Cuban war for independence (1895-98); the Great War: World War One (1914-18); the Mexican Revolution (1910-20); and American expansionism — all pivotal moments in Caribbean social development.

It's a complicated time. Shaffer's analysis unfolds chronologically, and he grounds the reader in the struggles of a few major actors such as Santiago Iglesias Pantin and Juan Vilar, who rotted in jail. Iglesias is "a carpenter from Spain who had worked with anarchist groups in Spain and Cuba before fleeing the latter in late 1896 as colonial authorities ramped up their repression." He's a problematic figure. Depending on when you encounter Iglesias, he may espouse anarchist views or endorse electoral politics. He would win a seat in the Puerto Rican Senate in 1917. To the chagrin of many anarchists, he aligned his FLT (Free Federation of Workers) with the American Federation of Labor's support for the Great War.

Though anchoring his readers in a few fascinating personalities, *Black Flag* doesn't espouse a Great Man theory of history. Quite the contrary, this is a materialist analysis of the period. The island was just emerging from being an agrarian society. Large scale industrialization would accelerate at the turn of the century, as American firms absorbed the tobacco industry. At every inflection, Shaffer elucidates the conditions faced by workers — particularly those most oppressed.

How does one organize workers who are predominantly illiterate? Anarchists employed two main methods. One was the professional reader, the *lector*, who kept the cigar workers informed. "The *lector* read what the workers chose, usually newspapers, novels, pamphlets, and short stories. In this way, workers heard liberal and radical critiques of society as expressed in those publications." An artisanal sector, cigar workers were among the first to be industrialized.

Cultural production is the second innovation which anarchists developed. Shaffer identifies a range that includes theatrical performances, dramatic production groups, poetry, fiction, non-fiction and journalism. CES branches — *Centro de Estudios Sociales* (Social Studies Center) — operated in many parts of the country. "No CES was worth its name without a band. ... Just as a CES needed music, it also needed plays."

That need would be filled by someone like Romero Rosa, who wrote *Le emancipacion del Obrero; Drama alegorico en un acto* (Emancipation of the Worker: An allegorical drama in one act). Or someone such as Juan Jose Lopez, whose poem titled *Lucha Rosa* (Red Struggle) urged people to “unite around her (anarchy)”. Lectors and the dramatic presentations of plays and poetry facilitated self-awareness within the island’s nascent labor movement.

Shafer does not overlook the craft centers (*casinos de artesanos*) and the social gatherings (*veladas*) which staged leftist drama. Anarchists targeted artisans; performances were in fact educational tools. This activity “played important roles in resistance and solidarity.” Not surprisingly, therefore, “artisans also developed theater groups to act out their growing understanding of exploitation and injustice.” Casinos offered night courses and built libraries — no minor accomplishment for the development of literacy, agency, and class consciousness.

Anarchists disseminated their ideas in periodicals, though often having the actual printing done overseas in vehicles such as New York City’s *Cultura Obrera* (Labor Culture) and *El Despertar* (The Awakening) as well as in Havana’s *Tierra!* (Land!). They pooled money to purchase copies of *El Dependiente* from Havana. They published a remarkable number of home grown papers, given the oppositional weight of the state and the clergy. Thus, one finds: *El Porvenir Social* (The Social Future) *Voz Humana* (Voice of the People) and *Ensayo Obrero* (Labor Experiment). Though many were ephemeral, the list in Shaffer’s bibliography almost fills one page. Leftist remissions also supported failing publications overseas, a laudable sacrifice given the island’s poverty.

While the anarchists were not prone to acts of violence, their writing was rife with it. Shaffer does not spend as much time in *Black Flag* on leftist literature as he does in his discerning 2009 essay: *By Dynamite, Sabotage, Revolution, And The Pen: Violence In Caribbean Anarchist Fiction, 1890s – 1920s*. It makes the case for how violence manifested itself in radical art, much more than in radical action. By the Caribbean, he means the Spanish speaking territories. Anarcho-syndicalism, the anarchist philosophy of labor organizing, did not express itself in the Dutch or French colonies. Contemporaneous Anglophone Caribbean radicalism was anti-colonialist and pan-Africanist.

Anarchists arrayed themselves against the Catholic Church. Ponce-based *La Conciencia Libre* (The Free Conscience) emerged as a “strident anticlerical voice.” The Church “remained not just a legacy of Spanish colonialism but also a backward, authoritarian institution that blocked scientific and democratic progress.” The Spanish-born but Puerto-Rican raised female freethinker, Belen de Serraga, condemned the Church’s mysticism and for “making women throughout the Latin world woefully unprepared for the surge in new radical ideas.” By attempting to separate Jesus from orthodox conservative Christianity, anarchists veered toward what would today be considered liberation theology.

Were there any ethnic or racial tensions among radicals in Boricua? Shaffer does not explore this. In his 2005 study of Caribbean radicalism titled *Anarchism and Countercultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba*, he spends an entire chapter on this topic — Anarchism in Black and White: race and *afrocubanismo*. Given the cross-pollination of ideology, ideologues and publications among the islands and the mainland, one wonders how the Puerto Rican experience differed. Was there perhaps the functional equivalent of *negrismo*, which asserted an Afro-Cuban cultural heritage? Shaffer asserts that unlike Cuba, “One finds no such adaptation [of global anarchist ideas] to fit ethnic diversity in Puerto Rico. Rather, the island’s anarchists were mostly homegrown and from a wide racial representation.” Perhaps true, but somehow it feels unsatisfactory.

No scholar can assess history today without being conscious of gender. Shaffer does not ignore the contributions of female anarchist writers and organizers. One finds Luisa Capetillo animating women’s issues as early as 1910. Born in the district of Arecibo she was “the twenty-five year old mother of two children when she launched her anarchist literary career by collaborating on workers newspapers in Arecibo in 1904.” No easy task when women’s literacy, at 70%, was eight points higher than that of men. A sought after speaker, she was also a prolific writer whose work included *La humanidad en el futuro* (Humanity in the Future) as well as her two-act play “*En el campo, amor libre*” (Free Love in the Countryside) which advocated free unions. It did not endear her to a Church already unhappy that one third of the country’s unions involved what were euphemistically termed “consensual marriages.”

Anarchists in Puerto Rico occupied an unusual space. With the end of Spanish dominance, America exerted its neo-colonial suzerainty; agrarian society declined as industrial production supplanted it; wars of national liberation were undertaken nearby; women challenged patriarchy; clericalism was on the defense; intra-Caribbean and global relationships were evolving. Despite intense repression, anarchists capitalized on the social, political, and economic fractures to promulgate their ideas and build institutions. Shaffer includes a map of the island's municipalities, and identifies where anarchists operated. It becomes visually evident that countercultural politics extended beyond the urban centers, to become a widespread phenomenon.

In his prior study of anarchism in Cuba, Shaffer included a chapter on the *Cuban Melting Pot*. The Cuban elite saw Spanish immigration as contributing to the "whitening" of Cuba. One also learns that Haitian and Jamaican workers engendered working class antagonisms. Though *Black Flag Boricuas* looks at migration of anarchists to and from Puerto Rico, Shaffer does not evaluate its ethnic ramifications. We do not discover if notions of *raza latina* — an overarching conception of ethno-racial identity — played out among anarchists in Boricua, as it did in Cuba.

Autonomy versus American integration sharply divided leftists in Puerto Rico. Reformists, such as Iglesias, advocated rejected independence "and promoted the island's special relationship with Washington." Some, like Angel Dieppa, "applauded the U.S. democratic system, which he thought was the best government people had yet encountered." Others, like Luis Munoz Marin, pointed to the American occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1916. He feared that Puerto Rican independence would unleash something akin to the Platt Amendment (1901) which legitimized unilateral American intervention in Cuba. Platt is still felt today. It mandates negotiation over the Guantanamo Bay naval base.

It's impossible to separate leftist and antiauthoritarian work from the frenzy of contemporaneous domestic and international activity. Shaffer articulates the impact of those intersecting forces — a complex situation which requires a capable guide — without losing grip on his narrative thread. As he points out in his earlier essay, *By Dynamite*: "One-hundred-year old Caribbean anarchist fiction is not easy to acquire. Most surviving copies are preserved in institutes and libraries in Europe, Cuba and Puerto Rico." Those conditions also apply to anarchist non-fiction. Therefore, scholars face an extraordinary challenge.

*Black Flag* is a valuable addition to an emerging body of work on leftist radicalism in the Hispanic Caribbean. Shaffer succeeds in his goal of "recovering anarchists from their largely forgotten history." Quibbles notwithstanding, he provides a substantial companion to his previous treatment of Cuban radical organizing. One hopes that he'll next tackle anarchism in the Dominican Republic.

**Discussed in this essay:**

*Black Flag Boricuas: Anarchism, Antiauthoritarianism, and the Left in Puerto Rico, 1897-1921* by Kirwin R. Shaffer. University of Illinois Press. 2013. 240 pages. \$65.

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