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A GERMAN ANARCHIST IN THE CUBAN REVOLUTION: AUGUSTIN SOUCHY AND THE
(MIS)REMEMBERING OF COOPERATIVISM IN CUBA

“(...) in the Cuban cooperatives the membership trades its rural autonomy in return for greater economic security ... Is there not a danger of the happy marriage of bread and freedom being supplanted by the nasty alternative between one or the other?”

From Augustin Souchy's *Testimonies regarding the Cuban Revolution* (1960)¹

Between 1960 and 1970, the success of the 1959 Cuban revolution attracted a broad spectrum of figures from the Latin American, European and American left who were enthralled by the mystique of “a revolution 90 miles offshore of Yankee imperialism”. The study of that influx of intellectuals and their relations with Cuba's rulers and Cuban society has been tackled by Cuban academics such as Rafael Rojas², Iván de la Nuez³ and Liliana Martínez⁴, but, so far as we have been able to establish, a figure like Augustin Souchy has vanished from the map plotted by those studies.

Where this figure (forgotten these days) it is interesting to note differs from others visiting from Europe at the time – people such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Régis Debray, René Dumont, Max Aub, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, Allen Ginsberg, Oscar Lewis, Wright Mills, Adolfo Gilly or Waldo Frank – is that Augustin Souchy did not need to wait for the political turn of events in Cuba that resulted in the 1970s before losing his idyllic view of the Cuban revolution, which bedazzled most of those visitors. By the late 1960s, Souchy had his pamphlet *Testimonies regarding the Cuban Revolution* ready, a text of which only a part was published in Cuba before it was then yanked out of circulation by the new Cuban authorities, only appearing in its entirety thanks to the Argentinean Libertarian Federation (FLA)'s 'Reconstruir' imprint.

In contrast to most of those pilgrims, Souchy did not view the Cuban revolution as the opening of a brand-new phase, in the sense of a “revolution within the revolution”, as Régis Debray was to define it in a classical essay from that decade. Nor did he see it as part of a “battle against under-development”, the formula bandied about at the time by theorists such as Albert Hirschmann, Wright Mills or Sartre, one that prioritized all the developmental, industrial and modernizing ambitions that were cherished by every political persuasion at the time.

Souchy saw the Cuban revolution as part of a series of revolutions that had come about during the first half of the 20th century, in terms of its failures and aberrations, but also of the vivid flashes of liberation that it resurrected in the most far off and unexpected locations. As Souchy was to acknowledge in an earlier essay paying tribute to one of his main heroes, his contemporary, the legendary Jewish German anarchist Gustav Landauer, his view of revolutions was a millenarian view. As far as he and Landauer were concerned:

¹ Souchy's given name was Augustin but he was better known as Agustín among Spanish-speakers. [KSL]

² *Anatomía del entusiasmo*, in Nuevos Mundos, Nuevos Mundos, Symposium 2009

³ *La fantasía roja*. Debate, Barcelona 2006

⁴ *Los hijos de Saturno. Intelectuales y política en Cuba (1959-1971)*, Mexico, FLACSO-Porrúa, 2006

*"The revolution is a microcosm, an unbelievably brief circumstance, extraordinarily concentrated (...) it is the world of the possible made reality, sending out its signals through time like a beacon. In revolution, everything happens at an incredible speed, much akin to dreams, which seem free of earth-bound gravity, in order to make connections that even the dreamer is not expecting."*⁵

In the wake of the awful reprisals against Landauer and all those with him who spearheaded the 1919 Munich Soviet, something that Souchy witnessed at close quarters, and after his having been an eye witness to revolutions such as the ones in Russia, Germany, Spain and Bolivia, his poetic view of revolutions turned more austere, but simultaneously more focussed and, above all, his weather eye became sharper in the face of events that by the 1950s could be measured alongside others.

*"There is more to the Cuban revolution than just a change of political rulers. Socio-economic change on a grand scale has begun that bears a degree of similarity to what was done in Spain after July 1936. Nevertheless, there are some differences which can be ascribed to native idiosyncrasies. Whereas the Spanish revolution (...) was the handiwork of the broad masses of the workers and peasants, the Cuban revolution is instead driven by a minority of selfless revolutionaries and the subsequent differences between both those revolutions derive from those features."*⁶

In a contemporary context, the comparison with the Spanish revolution – the libertarian aspects of which have been so successfully misrepresented and downplayed by Stalinists, liberals, social democrats and the disillusioned of every persuasion – might seem to stand out, but it needs saying that the people who carried out the stalinization of the Cuban revolution, as well as many of those who opposed that process, had clashed before, in Spain. The Cuban case was viewed by many through the prism of Spain's past experience. Cuba being Act Two of the test-bed through which soviet, Spanish and Cuban Stalinists pursued their practices of post-revolutionary normalization.⁷

Whilst Souchy had neither the time, data nor intention to document that process during his time in Cuba, this comparative connection with Spain was an important key in the early decoding of his text, facts that would trespass against the liberating potential of the revolution, things that other visitors in turn were unable to detect:

⁵ Gustav Landauer. *La revolucion*. Libros de la Araucaria, s.a., Buenos Aires 2005, p. 112

⁶ *Testimonio sobre la revolucion cubana*, Ediciones Reconstruir, p. 13

⁷ A document that appeared at the same times as Souchy's text, like the *Statement by the Anarchists of Chile regarding the Cuban Revolution in the Face of Yankee and Russian Imperialisms* (December 1960) highlight the meaning of the Spanish revolution for contemporaries of the Cuban revolution and potential dangers: "We do not want to see the Cuban revolution go to waste like the one in Spain. The Spanish revolution was defeated, not just by fascist weaponry, but due to other facts as well: the republican State, Bolshevik intervention and inadequate international solidarity between peoples. The revolutionaries' heroism was undone by the scheming and mistakes of professional politicians who set their face against the popular spontaneity that was conjuring up a libertarian socialist world by way of replacement for the State, whilst the liberal, masonic bourgeois, the socialists and the Bolsheviks could not do without it. Russia charged ferocious prices for aid in the form of arms, transferring the Cheka on to Spanish soil, in order to murder anarchists, syndicalists and Trotskyists in order to destroy the farming communities and the libertarians' organization of industry; it also infiltrated itself into the government and into the army leadership through its Commissars whose only aim in Spain was to destroy the anarchist bulwark that would create a society beyond the reach of the USSR's supervision."

*"In Spain, collectivization was implemented. In Cuba cooperatives were set up under State direction (...) whereas in Spain, the land seizures were the doing of the rural population itself and the collectives the creations of the peasants, in Cuba there was no such initiative emanating from the people. Socio-economic change was instigated by Fidel Castro and his comrades-in-arms (...) Whereas in Spain everything had come from the bottom up, here everything came from the top down. In Spain it was the action of the masses that set the pace. In Cuba, legislation was the first step and the Agrarian Reform law set the parameters. In Spain, by contrast, the order for a redistribution of the land came after seizures carried out by the people. (...) In Cuba, there was very little initiative from the masses in the development of the revolution and no oversight from the people. Which may prove dangerous."*⁸

Souchy's "Hail to the Cuban Revolution", from which that extract was lifted, was published in the May 1960 edition of the newspaper *Solidaridad Gastronómica*, the mouthpiece of the catering sector trade union and it was to be the first public statement made by him during his visit to the island, where he was to follow a very busy schedule over his three month stay; as the editors of *Solidaridad Gastronómica* pointed out: *"he has given talks and lectures galore to a sometimes contradictory, wide variety of audiences and plans to tour the interior of the country in order to investigate for himself the outcomes of agrarian reform among the peasants, study the farming cooperatives and make an on-the-spot inspection of all the collectivist-type trials being mounted in various Cuban farming areas under the sponsorship and direction of the INRA."* [National Institute of Agrarian Reform]

From this intensive schedule of activity his pamphlet *Testimonies regarding the Cuban Revolution* would emerge. An abbreviated version of the text would be printed, flanked by other writings of his, in Cuba in late 1960 by the Havana-based publishers, Lex, together with the *INRA Executive Director's Report* written by Captain Antonio Núñez Jiménez and other classical texts about cooperativism. The publisher of the 'Library of Economic and Social Guidance Series' from Lex would give Souchy a very warm welcome referring to *"Souchy's plain and expressive style, his redoubtable talent for observation and his staunch libertarian beliefs and what he has to offer us in terms of his studies of cooperativism in Mexico, Spain, Israel and Cuba is greatly enlightening and essentially educative."*

Publisher Mariano Sánchez Roca set out the reasons behind the publisher's selection by candidly admitting that *"No matter what the outlook of the governing classes or leading minorities, the doctrine of cooperativism is uniform in terms of conception and invariably ambivalent in terms of its implementation. A cooperative comes together either through some ineluctable provision of State action or through the wholly free choice of whoever is to be its affiliate or member (...) the former being the case in Cuba (...) [nevertheless] both approaches are reflected in this volume."*

But ... who was this Augustin Souchy?

In his introduction to the book, Mariano Sánchez Roca describes Souchy as an "eminent professor (...) a very prominent figure in Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, in spite of his German origins", which, whilst broadly accurate, leads to a certain lack of detail. Augustin Souchy was essentially a libertarian activist, moulded by the small but redoubtable German anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement,

⁸ Op. cit., p. 14

which faced tough opposition from German social democracy following the First World War and which was later pulverized in the reactionary Nazi storm of the 1930s.

Born in Poland and from the Silesia region, he relocated to Germany in his early youth and there became acquainted with the anarchists based there, especially the spiritual leaders Gustav Landauer and Erich Mühsam. It was through them that he came into contact with the brilliant libertarian writings produced by Landauer and Mühsam, Rudolf Rocker, Carl Einstein and Ret Marut, among others. In 1919, after returning from Sweden, where he had been jailed for distributing anti-militarist propaganda, he joined the editorial team at *Der Syndikalist* newspaper which was to serve as the mouthpiece of the Free Workers' Union of Germany [Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands, FAUD] up until it was shut down violently by the Nazis when they came to power in 1933.

In 1920 he travelled to Russia as a delegate to the foundation congress of the Third International and there he was to witness the establishment of Bolshevik ascendancy over that organization, an experience that he was to describe in his testimony *How Workers and Peasants Live in Russia*, the first publication to tackle the reality of life in soviet Russia from the vantage-point of a western worker. In 1922 he was to be elected one of the three secretaries of the resurrected International Workers' Association (IWA), alongside his comrade Rudolf Rocker and the Russian anarcho-syndicalist Alexander Shapiro. This organization was meant to resurrect the founding principles of the First International, prior to the bitter squabbling between the centralists and federalists that destroyed that internationalist association in 1872 and to oppose the Bolshevik State's plans for State control, as set out in the notorious 21 Conditions required for acceptance into the Third International.

In the context of the 1920s that commitment was hard to sustain, given the influence of the actual prestige enjoyed by the Russian leadership, but also because of the publicity machinery and State resources that they could harness in securing the upper hand. This ensured that by the start of the 1930s, the IWA had become an active but minority alliance made up of small organizations, the most telling and influential factor being Spain's National Confederation of Labour [CNT].

And so, by the mid-1930s, once all of the left-wing German factions had been destroyed by their internal frictions and by the violence of the Nazi machinery of repression, the runaway crisis in which the Spanish Republic was trapped and the revolutionary elan of the Iberian labour movement showed the way at a juncture that greatly favoured a rupture with the capitalist order which the Spanish ruling classes were trying to shore up.

The defeat that the people and proletariat of Barcelona inflicted upon the Spanish fascists' military revolt between 16 and 19 July 1936 brought the strength and organizational capabilities and response of the Spanish revolutionary trade union movement front and centre, confirming its status as the IWA's most significant branch. Augustin Souchy was to commit himself body and soul to that movement.

In the Argentinean edition of *Testimonies regarding the Cuban Revolution* issued under the "Reconstruir" imprint, there was an introduction to the pamphlet included and its author, signing as "Abel" – in all likelihood Abelardo Iglesias, a prominent if forgotten figure in Havana libertarian circles and a veteran of the so-called Spanish civil war – remembered Augustin Souchy.

*"(...) amid the confusion on the fourth floor of the Casa CNT-FAI in Barcelona, beaver away quietly and affably, surrounded by typewriters, copiers, stencils and heaps of paper, completely shunning the noisy discussions of his French, Italian and Portuguese comrades. In that context, laden with raised voices and interjections, Souchy was the living embodiment of a Nordic level-headedness and hard graft; he never lost his head and never wasted his time on discussions but put all his effort into serving the cause of the Spanish proletariat, wasting not one single moment nor a drop of his energy on trivialities."*⁹

The value of that recollection of Souchy during the Spanish revolution lies in its being one of the very few personal accounts available to us written by an actual Cuban, but the time lapse and above all the traumatic finale to that experience, through which Abelardo Iglesias also lived, had the effect of idealizing those bygone times as well as Souchy's performance, casting a blanket of oblivion over the complexities of those times and Souchy's place within them.

The Polish-German activist was not merely a servant of the Spanish proletariat's cause; he became a sort of an assistant foreign affairs minister for the CNT-FAI¹⁰, when, almost from the moment he arrived in Spain, he was appointed head of the Foreign Section by the CNT's Regional Committee in Barcelona – the biggest and most active CNT branch in the whole of Spain – and made a name for himself in Spanish libertarian circles due to his familiarity with the Spanish situation and his expertise in nearly ten European languages.

That post afforded him first hand knowledge of the libertarian practices being carried out by the urban and rural workers in the territories under republican control, but it was also a post that placed him at the heart of the frictions within the Spanish republican camp itself, as well as those in libertarian circles. Books such as *Collectivizations. The Spanish Revolution's Constructive Endeavours*, or *Among the Peasants of Aragon. Libertarian communism in the Liberated Territories* or *The Truth about Events in the Rearguard. The Incidents in Catalonia* represent writings of insuperable first-hand historical and documentary value that were to bring to libertarian literature a style that would become Souchy's personal calling card. At the time and even today these are writings that are indispensable if we are to grasp the transformative efforts made by the Spanish people and proletariat and they are part of the materials used to break through the media chorus established by the Stalinists, socialists and republicans regarding the social revolution that took place in Spain inside the republican camp concurrent with the war against the fascist camp.¹¹

But Souchy's intense involvement in the efforts of the CNT-FAI was also to draw him into the heart of the frictions between the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists and the International Workers' Association, especially after late 1936 and the CNT-FAI's entry into the republican government, whereby those

⁹ "Agustín visits Cuba" in *Testimonio sobre la revolución cubana*, Ediciones Reconstruir, 1960

¹⁰ See here the documented view in the book by Dieter Nelles *Antifascistas alemanes en Barcelona (1933-1939) El Grupo DAS: sus actividades contra la red nazi y en el frente de Aragón*, Editorial Cintra, 2010

¹¹ In terms of Cuban publications, the literary mastery of Leonardo Padura's in *El hombre que amaba a los perros* replicates the historical stereotyping and misrepresentations concocted by the Spanish stalinists, socialists and liberals regarding the place and extent of libertarian communist practices in the Spanish revolution, carried out by such differing segments of society as the peasants and miners of Galicia, Andalusian farm labourers or Barcelona industrial workers. In his efforts to be derogatory about the anarchists in Barcelona docks in the 1930s Padura depicts them as heroin addicts. See p 59, Maxi Tusquets Editores, 2011.

Iberian anarchist organizations breached the historical principle that the exercise of State power was not the way out of social conflict. As the main Spanish organizations opted for that course, Souchy was to stand with the CNT-FAI against the avalanche of criticisms and recriminations pouring from international libertarian circles, including his own German comrades.

In his post as virtual foreign affairs minister for the CNT-FAI, Souchy was not opposed to the growing gulf between those Spanish organizations and the IWA, but he was to strive hard to fill in the gaps left by that virtual separation. In which regard Souchy was to become the embodiment of the frictions between the German anarcho-syndicalists based in Spain and banded together into the small but busy DAS (Deutsche Anarcho-Syndikalisten) group and the CNT. Which made him a target for the harshest recriminations:

*“Souchy bears the main responsibility for the present divide between the CNT and the IWA” ... “The CNT has fallen victim to extortion and a tool of the sickly ambition of a person like Augustin Souchy”*¹² were some of the opinions about him voiced at the IWA Congress in Paris in 1937; they took on the tones of personal defamation, understandable in terms of the harsh polemics raging in Barcelona at the time of that Congress in France.

A woman as widely respected in libertarian circles at the time as the legendary Russian-American anarchist Emma Goldman, who was also in Barcelona while these bitter arguments were raging in the middle of the war against fascism offered us this profile of the German Pole, which displays all of the insights of a veteran activist:

*“I know that Souchy is ambitious and I know, too, that he is a reformist and good friends with everybody. That he has a tendency to bluster and thinks himself very important as long as he is at CNT headquarters, has not escaped me either (...) all of that I will gladly concede, but I detect no duplicity or ill intention in him.”*¹³

But, aside from the polemics surrounding Souchy, the debate about how he performed in the Spanish revolution looks beyond the man himself. The political gamble that he took along with the CNT ran into a deep and swift crisis that within a year reduced the biggest revolutionary syndicalist organization of its day into deferring to a republican government like the Spanish government which, whilst probably the most radical in its day, still toiled steadily and consistently to destroy the mighty organization of the Spanish revolutionary workers’ movement and to make it subordinate to the State, in concert with soviet and Spanish communists, invoking the war against fascism as pretext.

By mid-1937, the Spanish republican camp was showing the signs of a deep-seated crisis, the outcome of the clash between two diametrically opposing notions and means of thinking about the fight against fascism and appreciations of how the revolutionary turnaround taking place in Spain was to be construed. Whereas the Stalinist communists, liberal nationalists and, all in all, the socialists saw the bolstering of the power of republican State institutions – and demolishing the

¹² Minutes of the Paris Congress in the IWA Archives- Albert de Jong. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam. With thanks to Sarah Brull.

¹³ In *Antifascistas alemanes en Barcelona (1933-1939), El Grupo DAS ...* p. 105. See also Emma Goldman’s memoirs *Living My Life* (Spanish edition by the Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo, Madrid 1996) for other allusions to Souchy.

workers' movement's productive, defensive and cultural organization – as a guarantee of victory in the war, the majority of Spanish libertarians saw the bolstering and greater agency of the workers' and popular movements that had already seen off the fascist revolt in July 1936 in several regions around the country as the safest bet for victory in the war.

In May 1937, those two approaches clashed on the streets of Barcelona over who would be in charge of order within the republican zone: the resurgent State police or the workers' militias. The CNT National Committee, being part of the republican government was, with the support of its grassroots activists, to look for a compromise solution that would lead to a State take-over of internal order and an undermining of the People's Militias and their organizational outreach across the Republic as well as on the battle front. Souchy wrote about this issue in *The Truth about The Events in the Rearguard. The Incidents in Catalonia* but we have not had access to that text of his and are not familiar with where he stood on the matter, but, broadly speaking, we do know that he preserved his own commitment to the CNT right through to the Republic's defeat at the hands of fascism in 1939.

It was during the crucial times in early 1939 that the Spanish-Russian Stalinist crackdown brought its full weight to bear on all the activists and organizations that bridled at the republican State order and these included the German anarcho-syndicalists from the DAS group in Barcelona and the internationalists of the IWA, with relations between Souchy and his comrades being stretched to breaking point. One concrete indication of this situation was that Souchy, in spite of his sway within the CNT, had not been able to secure a passport for most of his comrades by 1939.¹⁴ Harried by the Stalinist machinery of repression and the Nazis, penniless and possessing no official Spanish documentation, a lot of his German comrades were swallowed up by the repression, many of them losing their lives in the process. Souchy was able to get out to France on a Spanish passport in the dying days of the Republic. In the south of France, he was arrested and placed in a concentration camp, from which he managed to escape in 1941, making for Morocco and thence to Mexico.

But regardless of Souchy's controversial time in Spain, he came away from it with the same beliefs as that legendary painter and decorator Jerónimo Gómez Abril who, rather than face a Francoist firing squad, took up an offer from the Conde de Romanones to act as the steward of his estates, which had been run so successfully during the Count's absence; his answer to the offer was: "Count, what you have seen on these estates is not my work alone but the doing of a collective of people bound together by a shared ideal, and such things, Count, are done, not for money but for ideas."¹⁵

The Other Souchy or the "Tourist of Utopia"

In July 1950, Albert de Jong, Souchy's comrade in Spain, wrote him a letter stating: "*I can still remember what I said to you in Spain 'If we lose here, an entire generation of revolutionaries will be lost'. Regrettably, I was quite right. To be sure, we have finished off Hitler (...) fascism, though, was defeated by military means rather than by the struggle of the masses. Now the honest masses,*

¹⁴ Correspondence between the CNT Regional Committee in Levante and Souchy's comrade Helmut Rüdiger who took serious issue with him in Spain regarding his uncritical stance vis à vis the CNT, drew attention to the CNT's treatment of the internationalists who espoused a more critical stance regarding that organization. See CNT Holdings, Microfilm 54, Insititute for Social History, Amsterdam. With thanks to Sarah Brull.

¹⁵ See Juan Gómez Casas *Historia del anarcosindicalismo español*, Ediciones CNT, Barcelona 1989

*especially in Germany, who believed in Russia and in the communists, are disappointed. Leaving us in doldrums from which we cannot escape. We are slowly petering out.”*¹⁶

Against the backdrop at which De Jong hints in his correspondence, a climate marked by exhaustion and paralysis into which the German libertarian movement slid after 1945, Souchy's trajectory was in stark contrast with that situation. Having established himself in Mexico, he was to become an outstanding report on labour and cultural affairs in labour circles and an influential advisor in charge of education and training for leading Mexican trade unions and cooperatives, as well as at the Mexican ministry of Culture which may well have been the most important one in the whole of Latin America at that time. This would turn him into a public figure with a high profile in trade union and leftist circles in the country.

The text “*Agustín Souchy*” is indicative of the prestige he came to enjoy there. Published by the Havana-based libertarian review *Estudios* in 1950, complete with a photograph, and written by the prestigious Aragonese jurist and writer Ángel Samblancat, renowned in 1920s and 1930s Spain for his excellent review *Los Miserables* and for his having acted as defence counsel for those tried for revolutionary acts (he had a special connection with the most outstanding Spanish libertarians¹⁷) he had known Souchy from his time in Spain and then shared much of his Mexican exile with him. Overcome with admiration for Souchy and his social endeavours, he was to say of him:

*“I have read quite a number of Agustín Souchy's writings and heard him speak at quite a few meetings. Luckily for him, Souchy is no classically fashionable orator (...) What surprises about Souchy is the flood of ideas (...) this universality in his focus elevates him in our eyes to the status of a guide, the right sort for a perfect internationalist and it places him in the ranks of the most heavyweight thinkers of the day. Souchy's mind is insightful, incisive and sharp, because of love. Otherwise (...) he would not be fraternizing with like-minded ragamuffins and would not be planting the seeds of the future at both ends of the hemisphere, which, to him, resemble two rooms in the same apartment. Agustín Souchy is a magnificent tourist of Utopia.”*¹⁸

By the time the Cuban revolution succeeded in January 1959, Souchy was a figure of worldwide renown in trade union circles, with a profound and broad knowledge of the cooperativist schemes being pursued in such dissimilar areas of the world as Israel, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Yugoslavia, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico itself. Which is why, when the youthful rebels who took over the government of Cuba indicated that they were in favour of cooperativism, the Havana Catering Workers' Union, conversant with Souchy's efforts and experience, suggested to the incoming government that it invite him to the island, and he accepted the invitation.

Souchy and Sartre: two contrasting views of cooperativism in the Cuba of 1960

¹⁶ In *Antifascistas alemanes en Barcelona (1933-1939)*. *El Grupo DAS* ... p. 195

¹⁷ Pepe Gutiérrez Álvarez: *Libertarios, libertarias, Un diccionario bio-bibliográfico*, Sant Pere de Ribes, 2007

¹⁸ *Estudios. Mensuario de Cultura*, No 4. This outstanding review was overseen by Marcelo Salinas, Abelardo Iglesias and Luis Dulzaides as a forum for libertarian views regarding the most ticklish topics of the day in such widely varying areas such as the plastic arts, literature, education, the crises within the labour movement, nature and Stalinism, etc., with contributions from outstanding visual and literary artists like Enrique Labrador Ruiz, Wilfredo Lam, Eduardo Manet and Roberto Diago, plus other outstanding Cuban creatives of the time.

In the summer of 1960 individuals like Augustin Souchy and Jean Paul Sartre had very little in common, other than they happened to be visiting Cuba at the same time. By then Sartre was the world's most popular philosopher. Souchy was an outstanding trade union activist with an international reputation only in kindred circles. At the time he reached Cuba, Sartre was intellectually flirting with Marxism in order to "turn history into something tangible", a "quasi-marxist project" that would allow an investigation of "the formal structures of history" (*Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*).

In other words, in 1960 Sartre was trying to come up with his own theory of revolution, which drew him towards Marxism. Souchy had already lived through several revolutions as a libertarian activist and found Marxism repugnant. Despite these differences, they both were to display a common interest in the cooperativist approach being rolled out by the new revolutionary government at that point, but their very different personal trajectories would shape how they approached the matter.

As far as Sartre, wrapped up in his 'quasi-marxist' project, was concerned : *"In Cuba, the cooperative is written into the very nature of things. Sugar cane requires wide open spaces (...) the property per se with its millions of green stems could not be broken up without destroying sugar production. What matters is not principles or opinions: it is the ancien régime itself being transformed into a collective organization and for just one reason, because feudal ownership, in order to adapt to the requirements of sugar, was already organized into a working community. This is where Cuba is lucky (...) in the text of the Agrarian Reform one can readily see the quiet, surreptitious appearance of the word 'cooperative' and the law does not at any point bother to define it or justify it. The reason is very straightforward: being the product of tradition and necessity, the cooperative existed even prior to there being any inkling of it."*¹⁹

For Souchy who, as we have seen, saw the Cuban revolution through the prism of earlier 20th century revolutions, whenever he found himself at the San Vicente cooperative in Viñales, he noticed that *"(...) in the Cuban rural cooperatives, the members trade their rural autonomy for increased economic security. Their circumstances have improved upon what they previously were, but they are still inferior to those of a free cooperator, especially in psychological terms. Is there not a danger that the happy marriage of bread and freedom may not give way to the ugly choice between one or the other?"*²⁰

We have not been able to 'track' cooperativism as a theme in Jean Paul Sartre's thinking, nor are we aware of any other students of the topic having done so, but we can 'track' Augustin Souchy. In his book *Libertarian Socialism. A Contribution to a New Ethical and Social Order*, published by the Havana-based imprint Estudios in 1960, Souchy was to offer this definition of cooperativism: *"Cooperation is a voluntary consensus between free men and women to work in concert and claim equal or proportional shares in the fruits of those labours. (...) It is true to say that cooperativism is no overnight revolutionization of the world [but] subjectively speaking, the cooperativist has to have a revolutionary consciousness and a deeper socialist belief than the member of any other bunch of revolutionaries, as, through his labours, he makes his stand in the hostile climate of capitalism and*

¹⁹ Jean Paul Sartre *Huracán sobre el azúcar*, Merayo Editor, Buenos Aires 1965, p. 110

²⁰ Agustín Souchy *Testimonio sobre la revolución cubana*, Ediciones Reconstruir FLA, Buenos Aires 1960, p. 38

*requires, not just technical capability, but also moral qualities if he is to carry out socializing endeavours within the cooperative.”*²¹

Sartre and Souchy espoused two substantially divergent views of cooperativism. In Sartre’s view, legacy structures nurtured revolutionary changes, whereas in Souchy’s view change was favoured by the measure of consciousness in social actors. Whereas in Sartre’s view cooperativism in the Cuba of 1960 was a phenomenon conjured up by [Cuba’s good fortune in having] feudal ownership and her being “already organized into a working community in order to adapt to the requirements of sugar”, Souchy’s view was that cooperativism was where determination and consensus vied in order to make progress in terms of reconstruction, with an awareness that the collective has a fundamental part to play.

By way of gauging the pertinence or otherwise of each of these analytical approaches regarding cooperatives in 1960 Cuba, we can measure them alongside something that came to pass and was documented (as very few others did) at around the same date by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez: the failure of the sugarcane cooperatives. In his 1963 article “Four Years of Agrarian Reform”, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez pointed out that the idea had come from Fidel Castro “*not in the sense of the establishment of a cooperative of farmers, but rather in the form of farmworkers’ having joint ownership (...) In a society where there was no individualist peasant consciousness and no privately owned lots (...) the cooperative was thought of as a stage in the transition towards the State farm.*”²²

This solution, a halfway house between workers’ collective ownership and State ownership, with an administrator appointed by the INRA [National Institute of Agrarian Reform] who “acted as liaison between the cooperative group’s ownership and the State’s” was effectively sabotaged less than a year after its introduction by the sugar cane workers themselves, to whom “the uncertainty experienced by the [autonomous] individual farmer was less attractive than the living standards enjoyed by the better paid strata of urban wage-earners such as cigar-makers and brewery workers”²³, and so they saw no need for any “State cooperative” as a transitional phase on the journey to a venture wholly run by the State; they wanted to be waged labourers like all the rest, well paid by *their* revolution.

Rodríguez’s approach strikes us offering a relevant contrast with the outlooks of Sartre and Souchy, because it shows us that the peculiar revolutionary circumstance of 1960s Cuba and the structures it had inherited did not of themselves guarantee a shift into cooperativism in terms of a fresh working arrangement and that the content of the collective action of social actors was crucial when it came to setting the parameters and boundaries of liberating actions. In a more specifically theoretical sense, we could argue that in Sartre’s approach to the Cuban sugar-cane cooperatives, he was anticipating the analytical tools that some years thereafter would characterize French structuralism, especially as articulated by Louis Althusser, Lucien Goldmann and Maurice Godelier, with all of the damaging implications that this had in the analysis of historical subjects.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 139

²² See “Four years of agrarian reform” in *Letra con filo*, Editorial Ciencias Sociales, Havana 1983, p. 211

²³ Idem

As for Souchy, clinging to the principle that “socialism is feasible anytime, as long as and whenever men want it”, as set out by the German anarchists²⁴ and as an eye witness to and player in the Spanish revolution and as an indefatigable itinerant social and trade union activist, he was to share with Sartre an enthusiasm for the Cuban revolutionary phenomenon, but was alert to processes that nurtured or failed to nurture “social accountability”, a notion that was taking on a growing importance in his thinking prior to his arrival in Cuba.

Some of Augustin Souchy's Travel Notes regarding the Cuban Cooperatives

As part of his travels through the country, one of first three cooperatives Souchy visited was the Matanzas-based “Cuba Libre” cooperative which was seen in its day as a model experiment. On his return to Havana, he was to note:

“Hereabouts, the government is doing what the peasants and workers themselves are doing elsewhere. Any person of good will has to endorse the progress achieved in material terms. But I have to say that I have seen similar accomplishments elsewhere. The industrialist and socialist philanthropist Olivetti has done wonders for his workers in Italy. Some big foreign firms provide significant social facilities by way of a justification for their existence and in order to ensure their survival. I have witnessed some such achievements by the United Fruit Company in Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. The oil companies in Venezuela also strive to win sympathy through improvement for their workers, ensuring that they receive certain privileges not accessible to the employees of other firms.”²⁵

In what proved to be a forewarning in a Cuban context, Souchy drew attention lest the upsurge in the new State's making gifts to the worker be mistaken for socialism, but he failed to register the presence and widespread nature of such practices and impacts in Cuba, especially in a sector such as the sugar industry in the island, since it looks as if he visited no sugar-growing centre, the way that Sartre had done, and so he was unfamiliar with the micro-world of the *bateyes*²⁶ with their sophisticated social hierarchies and studied inequalities, whereby the mechanics, chemists and fixed service and maintenance employees in the *batey* were viewed as a labour aristocracy, equivalent to the ones he mentioned.

Alongside the worker elites in the cities, this range of workers with their privileges were a reference point for a huge mass of unemployed or those in seasonal or precarious employment, in a labour market like the Cuban one where the extreme mono-culture of sugar was behind much higher levels of proletarianization – 72.1% – than anywhere else in Latin America, second only to Chile²⁷, but, unlike Chile, the very low levels of industrialization generated by sugar production provided no outlet

²⁴ In part this notion fitted in with the sort of Marxism that at one point was suggested by Lukacs in his studies of class consciousness: councilists like Anton Pannekoekk, Paul Mattick and revolutionary Marxists – “Trotskyists” – such as Andreu Nin or Paul Thalmann who shared common ground with the anarchist “uncontrollables” who, in Barcelona, launched the small but telling ‘Friends of Durruti’ Group and organized in order to establish a revolutionary alternative to the widespread paralysis generated by the ‘governmental anarchism’ of the CNT-FAI, within which, as we have seen, Souchy was active at the time.

²⁵ Op. cit.

²⁶ Clusters that grew up around sugar refineries, many of them small-scale cities familiar with the most up to date mass cultural goods that industrial capitalism had to offer, but set in entirely traditional natural or social or under-populated contexts.

for this enormous mass of people in Cuba, whose labour power was their only means of sustaining themselves.

This factor gave rise to a brand of worker from the 1940s onwards who was less and less inclined to challenge capitalism and authority but ready to embrace and recognize as revolutionary the establishment of an interventionist State capitalism which, with varying fortunes, had been making inroads in Cuba since the late 1920s and Machado's times. A researcher like John Dumoulin was one of the few historians to analyse that process in Cuba, but in so doing he focussed his attention on the impact of material production and social conflicts and neglected how workers' subjectivity and imagination impacted upon production.²⁸

Four decades in advance of John Dumoulin research, Augustin Souchy did explore this matter from the vantage point of the social subjects living through the generalization of cooperativism in Cuba. In his trip to the west of the island, Souchy's visit to the "Moncada" cooperative in Viñales holds some interest as far as our analysis goes. That cooperative was one of the few in Pinar del Río that had started up under its own steam, as reported by the INRA delegate for that province. After registering, in a dialogue with one of the community's founders and his family, all of the visible improvements in the living conditions that had been achieved and confirming the voluntary nature of the cooperativization process, Souchy remarked in his notes:

*"(...) as far as the cooperative's organization goes, the modest guajiro was unable to offer me any detailed explanations. Nor were the other peasants present knowledgeable as to how it operated. I had to wait for the sergeant who was the INRA representative. The peasants knew only what related to their working in concert. When the sergeant turned up, his information related not to the initiative from the local cooperativists but to the administrative steps taken under instructions from higher-up bodies (...) the team of peasants working collectively at the entrance to the village, was the only novelty I saw on my visit, the only genuinely comforting and promising detail. As for all the rest, there was the sensation of the routine of a big, well-organized venture with lots of offshoots scattered around the country."*²⁹

In a society like the society of 1960 Cuba, with the extraordinary spread of waged labour, a spin-off from the most comprehensive sugar-based monoculture in the world and an accompanying endemic unemployment issue plus the great reliance upon outside factors and at the mercy of the avarice of Yankee monopolies, a considerable body of workers, as well as of the administrative leaders that emerged with the revolutionary upheaval in 1959, embraced and swallowed the notion of nationalization as offering a solution to the problems facing the country.

Such was the thrust behind this drive to nationalization at the point at which Souchy arrived on the island that he pointed out: "Cuba is probably the first country in the western hemisphere trying to introduce a State-run economy." And Souchy came upon a concrete and localized sample of this drive

²⁷ See the useful quantitative analyses offered by Jorge Ibarra in *Cuba 1898-1958. Estructura y procesos sociales*, Cuencias Sociales, Havana 1995, p. 143

²⁸ See "The evolution of the Cuban State: Regulation of Labour Relations and Sugar" in *Temas* No 22-23 (2000)

²⁹ Op. cit. p. 40

to nationalization in the shape of the State-run Manzanillo Footwear Manufacturing venture which had surfaced just months earlier as a cooperative of freely associated producers, as it shifted in the direction of swift State take-over due to the influence in the area of the cadres of the PSP [Popular Socialist Party] and their thinking, which was to amalgamate with the thinking of the INRA's leading cadres.

*"In lots of small shoe workshops, working with old machinery, there was the employer with a few workmen servicing a regional market. The workers were not highly paid and the small employers had no way of getting rich. After the revolution, when the workers pressed for implementation of the law in respect of social insurance payments and other demands, conflict erupted. The new revolutionary times had planted brand-new concerns in the men's minds and the employers and the workers decided to operate as a collective (...) Seeing free collectives and cooperatives as contrary to its own beliefs, the local chapter of the Popular Socialist Party [PSP] which is active in the city's trade unions, campaigned for the collectivized workshops to be handed over to the INRA (...) The revolutionary change within Manzanillo's footwear industry is illuminating. The movement started off with the abandonment of private firms, shifted to a free cooperative and ended up with their being swallowed up by the INRA."*³⁰

In addition to the structural constraints upon the expansion of cooperativism in Cuba, and contrary to Sartre's vision of the island's *structural good fortune*, the cooperativist movement in the Cuba of 1960 was shot through with the then more powerful and prestigious notion of nationalization. In *Testimonies regarding the Cuban Revolution*, Souchy had a few comments to make on this matter, but in his book *Libertarian Socialism. Contributions to a New Ethical and Social Order*, as mentioned earlier, he was more specific on the matter:

*"Nationalization is not to be regarded as the path to socialism. Consisting of statist administrative measures adopted and implemented from above, by the administration rather than by the people, they help preserve the authoritarian mind-set, whilst simultaneously eroding popular initiative (...) The understanding and appreciation that nationalization per se does not spell socialism is of itself a step forwards, paving the way for fresh possibilities."*³¹

Unfortunately, these views were not widely shared by the revolutionaries of the day, let alone in the Cuba of 1960. Which is why, when it comes to his testimony regarding the footwear workshops in Manzanillo city, as well as lots of other examples, such as the La Polar brewery which went through a similar experience at the same time³², the flimsiness of the documentation regarding resistance to nationalization does not loom large in workers' memories.³³ The fact is that Souchy understood

³⁰ Op. cit. p.45

³¹ Op. cit. Editorial Estudios, Havana 1950, p. 104

³² From the testimonies of Serafín 'Tato' Quiñones and Santiago Lugo we have an insight into the now forgotten experience of the workers of that large factory who, between 1959 and 1960, managed the firm for themselves until it was taken over by the State.

³³ The massive trade union backing for nationalization in Argentina and above all in 1950s Bolivia, is further evidence of the popularity of that particular Statist exit from social disputes. In Bolivia society's debate about nationalization was something that rendered social conflict violently polarizing. One small but specific indication of this is in the article *The State and the Directed Economy* by the Bolivian liberal intellectual Luis Terán, written for the January/February 1956 edition of the Havana-based review *América*.

nationalization in a very narrow sense, linked to the European historical experience, as “*a measure whereby the State captures the economic might of society and of all the efforts of its citizens.*”³⁴

Without looking any further than places like Cuba or Bolivia, and just to stick to a Latin American setting, they show that expressions such as “society’s economic might” and “the efforts of citizens” can serve as generic terms disguising colossal forms of socio-economic and political sway exercised by a range of foreign ventures over an entire country, generating such jagged deformities and social inequalities that nationalization looks like a corrective measure embraced by broad swathes of society, as happened in early 1960s Cuba. Libertarians like Augustin Souchy, however, deserve credit for having drawn attention, more than a decade ahead of time, to the social impact that nationalization would make in Cuba and throughout the entire so-called Third World a few years later.³⁵

Augustin Souchy, the (mis)remembering of cooperativism in Cuba and the Cuban libertarians

There is a paradox in the fact that *Testimonies Regarding the Cuban Revolution*, a book that was censored and withdrawn from distribution at the instigation of the Cuban revolutionary government in late 1960, bears out the official version of the history of cooperativism that has come to prevail in today’s Cuba.

A researcher like Avelino Fernández has encapsulated that prevailing view, whilst tacking on some observations which others have failed to mention. “*There was no actual growth (...) in the cooperative phenomenon in Cuba. [Cooperativism] was used by tiny economically and socially marginalized sectors as a tool for struggle and survival. As well as by favoured groups when it came to feathering their nests on the prebends dispensed by whichever government was in place. [On the other hand] there was no development either (...) not even in terms of any granular underlying legislation as provided for under the 1940 constitutional mandate (...) legal and practical shortcomings remaining restricted to generic associations that did nothing to facilitate the introduction of a cooperative culture, nor was there any doctrinal development underpinning it, nor, of course, any methodical marriage of social solidarity and the willingness to combine such as might have implanted or achieved progress in that direction (...)*”³⁶

Despite its valuable contribution to our knowledge of a crucial juncture in the history of cooperativism in Cuba, Souchy’s book contains nothing telling that might contest the prevailing view set out above, one that is to be found in the official discourse as well as in the social research into the topic currently under way on the island.

³⁴ Op. Cit. Editorial Estudios, Havana, 1950, p. 103

³⁵ An anti-colonial activist of the intellectual stature of Martinique-born Frantz Fanon, with his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, which was a huge inspiration for anti-colonial movements of the 1960s and 1970s, showed the sparkling confluence of ideas that could be generated between radical revolutionaries, in spite of any difference they might otherwise have. In Fanon’s opinion “plainly, nationalization must not take on the aspect of rigid State control (...) Nationalizing (...) means democratically arranging purchasing and selling cooperatives. De-centralizing such cooperatives and involving the masses in the running of public affairs”, In op. cit., p. 139

³⁶ “Keynotes of the legal status of cooperatives in Cuba” in *Colección Jurídica*, No 37, 2006

But outside of the issue of how true or untrue Avelino Fernández's statement may be, indications like the ones coming from him are indicative of the current state of knowledge on the matter, but, above all, of the whole nature of the research strategies being employed in exploring the history of cooperativism in Cuba. The downplaying of the qualitative in favour of the quantitative, behind which there lurks a sustained scorn for analysis of the role played in history by the conscious minorities among the populace; a legalistic, judgmental understanding of social processes, that thinks that established legal norms are the only determinants of coexistence, downplaying the weight of cultural practices and legitimate moralities; these are a few of the cognitive factors that have stymied the emergence among us of a social history of cooperativism to match our needs as well as the belated obligations of Cuban society vis à vis its own unaccountability.

Whilst, as the researcher Avelino Fernández indicates, there was no legal stride made by cooperativism in Cuba, we should not blind ourselves to suggestions put forward in the heat of practical impulses that employed dissimilar work- and territory-based collectives down through the decades in different locations around the island, using the legal formula of cooperative associations, which have been recognized under the law in Cuba since 1888 and which, even though they may have provided cover for fraud and thieving from persons in want, also offered scope for genuinely socializing, solidarity-based projects.

Newspapers such as *El Siglo* (1865-1868), speaking for a segment of Havana's reform-minded bourgeoisie, anticipating the class struggles on their way to the island of Cuba, implemented some of Proudhon's ideas in a Cuban context: *El Productor* (1887-1892) and *¡Tierra!* (1902-1915) and (1924-1934) or *Luz Nueva* (1923-1929) – the latter papers being anarcho-syndicalist in persuasion³⁷ – acted as promoters of and spokesmen for cooperativist schemes and their pages were active forums for debate as to the suitability or otherwise of such schemes in the eyes of the workers' movements of the day. Social and political researchers with a range of different ideological leanings produced texts about the cooperative phenomenon in Cuba. There was Rafael Montes de Oca [1938] in Nuevitas, Camagüey³⁸; Miguel Valdivia Martínez [1927] in Pinar del Río; Juan Bruno Fernández de Castro [1946] in Bayamo and House Representative Marino López Blanco [1928]; in Havana there were Manuel Pérez Picó [1939], José Luciano Franco [1932], Evelio Álvarez del Real [1931] and Francisco Bretau [1939] – just some of the names of the writers who refute the notion that there was never any interest in Cuba in establishing cooperativism as a social and legal option.

On the other hand, claiming, as the afore-mentioned author does, that there was never any cooperativist culture in Cuba is an assertion made from an elevation that by itself precludes any approach to the topic from the vantage points of regional or occupational dynamics in which cooperativism was or was not a feature. From that point of view, experiments such as the "Cooperative Mutual House-building Cooperative of Santiago de Cuba" (1921-1942), the "Banes Mutual Aid Cooperative Society" (1911-1928), the "Victoria de Las Tunas Notaries' Cooperative" (1938), the "Santiago de Cuba Railworkers' Mutual Aid Cooperative" (1938-1947); the "Manatí

³⁷ Research into the relations between the anarcho-syndicalists and notions about cooperatives has yet to be carried out, not just in Cuba but also in places like Spain where anarcho-syndicalism has come in for more systematic scrutiny than in Cuba. See "José Peirats and Cooperativism" in *CNT* No 262

³⁸ The dates after each name refer to these authors' years of publication.

Central Farmers' Cooperative" (1939)³⁹; the "Virama Rice Farmers' Cooperative" (1940-1945) in Las Tunas; or the "Barajagua, Mayarí district Union of Peasants, Small Share-croppers and General Peasants" (1941-1943) – to quote just a few from the eastern part of the island into which we have looked – have evaporated from collective historical memory and an image of the topic has been embedded that starts all over again from butts, as if we were breaking some sort of new ground here.

In spite of Souchy's diligent investigative commitment, we will find not the merest footprint of any of the cooperative experiments listed above mentioned in *Testimonies Regarding the Cuban Revolution*. He does not even allude to the "Farming Collective of the Morón Casa de Cultura and Social Assistance" an experiment that involved the Power Plant Workers' Union in which well known libertarians, known to Souchy, people such as Francisco Bretau were involved: Bretau wrote extensively about that experience in 1939 in the article "An Interesting Experiment: The Morón Farming Cooperative".⁴⁰

Souchy's silence with regard to pre-1959 cooperativist experiences in Cuba is unsettling, but it is, unfortunately, not the only silence in the history of the Cuban libertarian movement. At the beginning of the 20th century, the editorial team at *¡Tierra!*, the main workers' newspaper at the beginning of the 20th century, made but few references (not to say none at all) to the social struggles of the late 19th century and to its own great journalistic predecessor *El Productor*. The outstanding review *Estudios* in 1950 never uttered a word about the efforts of its colleagues at *¡Tierra!* or *El Productor*. Nor did the Third National Libertarian Congress in 1950, which signalled a discreet uptick in anarchist opinion in trade union circles, show any signs of knowing that it was heir to a social movement that could be traced back into the 19th century.⁴¹

For now, we have no explanation for this memory failure on the part of Cuban libertarians regarding their own presence and influence within Cuban social movements, let alone how Augustin Souchy inherited and replicated that social amnesia in 1960, but we can say that this left the way open for the vanishing of the Cuban libertarians from the history of social struggles in Cuba. With regard to the history of cooperativism in Cuba, this had a direct impact, since no other school of ideas on the island displayed any interest in collating the available experiences and expertise in order to organize a fraternal and just coexistence born of popular initiatives, the sort that was required for any sound cooperativist mentality. In the absence of a libertarian perspective on the social history of

³⁹ Interesting to note that in the Minute of the Initial Meeting leading up to the establishment of this cooperative, reference was made to the case of "the Japanese cooperative operating on the Isla de Pinos, the organization of which has proved a complete success and so, if the members of this cooperative can persevere we can expand it with beneficial outcomes for the membership." The text also alludes to the existence of "other foreign cooperatives operating on national soil that started their operations with very meagre assets, in terms of membership numbers and capital and which are thriving today ..." In *Cooperativa de agricultores del Central Manati. Archivo Histórico de Oriente. Leg. 2428, Exp. 7 Registro de Asociaciones*. Which raises yet another unprecedented insight into the history of cooperativism in Cuba.

⁴⁰ "An interesting experiment: the Morón farming cooperative" in *Las máquinas y los trabajadores*, Empresa Editorial de Publicaciones, Havana, 1939

⁴¹ "National labour update. Libertarians staking their claims" in *Estudios. Mensuario de Cultura*, No 2, Havana, February/March 1950

cooperativism in Cuba, it has been reduced to a jumble of ministerial efforts to breathe life into one from the work desks of the revolution's major planners.

Augustin Souchy's Outlook vis à vis the Basic Cooperative Production Units

After Souchy wrote *Testimonies Regarding the Cuban Revolution*, what Souchy had divined in 1960 as the temptation for Cuban revolutionary leaders to turn Cuba into "the first western hemisphere country striving to establish a State-run economy" matured, three decades later, into a concrete reality, palpable even in the language used in everyday life: just as Souchy had forecast in mid-1960:

"In the space of the year and a half that has elapsed since the victorious revolution, everyday language in Cuba has changed just like the new politics, with old words being invested with a brand-new meaning. In certain parts of the country 'diet' is the term favoured over 'wages'; monologues emanating from the leaders of the revolution are described as direct democracy (...) the repeated slogan 'consuming what is produced at home builds up the homeland' is a well-meaning but misconstrued intention that should be saying 'producing what we consume at home' ...; many Cubans associate and construe the word cooperative as equivalent to the INRA's construction of housing clusters and other semantic oddities of the sort."

By 1993 the "semantic oddities" that Souchy had mentioned in 1960 had become common parlance in Cuba, but the reality that had spawned them, namely the unwarranted, artificial and sustained growth of the Cuban State that year lapsed into a huge contraction, dragging the whole of Cuban society after it. At which point the State spokespersons tried to explain away the setback as an "economic crisis", but, from the vantage point of the mind-set possessing the vast majority in 1960 Cuba, it had more to do with the defeat of the collective dream of a homegrown socialist nationalism heralded by Souchy, the dream of making Cuba the first country in the western hemisphere where the sovereign State would be a huge, monopolistic, justice-delivering, modernizing undertaking.

Against that harsh climate, the Basic Cooperative Production Units (UBPC) were launched in 1993 as yet another initiative coming from the revolutionary government, bearing out the assertion that a society afflicted with amnesia in terms of its knowledge of its own achievements, dooms its rulers to revert to their past solutions.⁴² The aims set by the State for these UBPC, according to experts in the field, were "to diversify forms of production and agents of production, reallocating areas under cultivation [as well as] the need to sponsor new incentives to recruit and retain the sector's workforce."⁴³

In the academic debate sparked in the country in the 1990s about these UBPCs in Cuba, several shrewd researchers offered suggested definitions for this "new" style of agricultural production. Pérez Rojas and Torres Vila (1994) reckoned that "their establishment amounts to a rescue package

⁴² A book such as *Cuba: país de poca memoria* (1951), written by the perspicacious Italian journalist Aldo Varoni during his stay on the island, might be a good starting-point for analysis of the symptom of memory lapse and its impact on Cuban society and might also apply to the specific instance of memory lapse regarding cooperativism in Cuba.

⁴³ Victor Figueroa Albelo "The new agrarian model in Cuba under the aegis of economic reform" in *Desarrollo rural y participación*, Ediciones Universidad de La Habana 1996, p. 7

for State cooperativism, one that is hybrid in terms of its structural and functional dualism".⁴⁴ Figueroa Albelo (1996) pointed out that in operational terms the UBPC sits between a commercial unit and a technical productive unit and, in terms of its structure, is a halfway house between State enterprise and a genuine cooperative".⁴⁵ The late sociologist Hugo Azcuy (1997) stated "The cooperative status of the UBPC lies solely in its production being co-operated."⁴⁶ Juan Valdez Paz (1993) opined "the definition of a UBPC depends on the producer's actual in-put into economic management".⁴⁷

The striking thing about these definitions offered about the UBPCs in the 1990s is the absence of any analysis of the nature of the alleged novelty of this form of agricultural management in Cuba. Writing essentially as sociologists, none of the authors cited made any reference to the Sugar Cane Cooperatives that had been in existence at the beginning of the 1960s, nor did they compare the documentation produced by the 1st and 2nd *National Convention of Sugar Cane Cooperatives* held in the city of Manzanera in 1961 and 1962, with the *Documents on the Creation and Functioning of the UBPCs*, drawn up by the Ministry of Sugar's Legal Directorate in 1993.

As a result of that omission, they also failed to analyse the root causes of the issues facing the UBPCs. Especially the sugar cane growing ones, comparing these to the one that Carlos Rafael Rodríguez had pointed out previously back in 1964. Thus, whereas, In Rodríguez's opinion, the failure of the sugar cane cooperatives could be traced to the attitude of the sugar cane workers themselves, who stood ready to trade the uncertainty involved in being free producers, and become instead the privileged waged labourers of their new revolutionary State: researchers into the UBPCs in the 1990s seem to have ignored a shrewd analysis such as was offered by Rodríguez and focused their attention more on the State machinery of subordination and control that prevented the workers from becoming free producers, as if the harmful effects of the wage focus displayed by the sugar cane workers in the 1960s had ceased having any impact over the decades.

In 1996 one former union leader made a statement which, at the time, showed a clear commitment to the interests of the Cuban state, but which, two decades on from then, might raise a crucial query in divining the future of the Basic Cooperative Production Units and cooperativism in Cuba: Are labour disputes within the UBPCs due to the lack of autonomy or are they down to the failure fully to make use of it?⁴⁸ Answering that question is important in determining where the responsibility lay for the failures of socialist production efforts in Cuba, but also in highlighting one of the most

⁴⁴ "Participation and agrarian production in Cuba: the UBPCs" in *Temas, Cultura, Ideología, Sociedad*, No 11, 1997, p. 71

⁴⁵ Victor Figueroa Albelo "The new agrarian model in Cuba under the aegis of economic reform" in *Desarrollo rural y participación*, Ediciones Universidad de La Habana 1996, p. 9

⁴⁶ Hugo Azcuy interviewed by Niurka Pérez and Miriam Garcia on 27 April 1994. In "Participation and agrarian production in Cuba: the UBPCs" in *Temas, Cultura, Ideología, Sociedad*, No 11, 1997 p. 75

⁴⁷ Talk given by Juan Valdez Paz to mark the Tenth Anniversary of the Rural Studies Team, Havana University, 24 December 1993. Held in mimeograph format in the Library of the University of Havana's Faculty of Philosophy and History.

⁴⁸ The comment came originally from Pedro Ross Leal, former general secretary of the CTC and currently Cuba's ambassador in Angola: "Inside the UBPCs (....) there is no conflict because of lack of autonomy, but mainly, because full use is not being made of it." In "Report from the Workers' Central of Cuba [CTC] to the National Conversation with the workers from the cane-growing UBPCs" in Canaveral, Minaz, January/March 1997.

palpable effects of centralization and State hypertrophy in a society such as Cuba; the habit of blaming government for all of its ills, whilst covering up or downplaying the portion of the blame society bears for its own problems. Unfortunately, for many academics this remains “a matter of debate”⁴⁹ and as yet there has been no definite answer forthcoming.

On that score, Souchy, standing up to the casting of the worker as victim which was around in his own and lingers on into our own times, pointed out over 60 years ago: *“The worker’s responsibility vis à vis society is a psychological factor to which the workers’ movement has not paid the attention it deserves. One result of that is a deplorable decline in socialism’s message of renewal. The wage-earner feels no responsibility for the work that he performs, since it is the boss that bears the responsibility. This is why the dairyman waters the milk, the baker produces poor quality bread, the bricklayers use shoddy materials in building homes for their very own brethren and all of this serves as an instrument of the worker’s own oppression (...) Capitalist and Statist society certainly bears the responsibility for the social ills afflicting us. Oppressive institutions curb enthusiasm and thwart the emergence of precious initiatives (...) but the individual too ought to be regarded as a crucial factor in human growth.”*⁵⁰

“Free Producers” and “Food Sovereignty” from the Vantage-Point of Souchy’s “Free Cooperativism”

Very few people in today’s Cuba doubt that cooperativism is a step forwards along the road to a society that overcomes the horrors of capitalism in its private, monopolistic or Statist varieties, but the revisiting of cooperativism by the State and academia has still been marked largely by short-term productivist and economicist concerns.

To such circumstantial factors must be added the fact that as currently promoted and encouraged, cooperativism is the confluence of old and new concepts that may well trespass against cooperativism’s full potential. Souchy’s view of “free cooperatives” allows us to identify and overcome the liberating constraints implicit in some of these notions. It is not hard to find present-day texts that are gung-ho about the subject and notions that cooperativism encourages a society made up of “free producers” and encourages “food sovereignty”. Those are two particularly telling notions because, between them, they encapsulate much of the history of cooperativism per se, as it has been marked since its origins by the imagination of the European workers’ movement⁵¹, up until it became global in the so-called Third World societies which are doomed to the food dependency criminally introduced and contrived by European colonialism in Africa and Asia.

But if we take as valid Souchy’s definition of cooperativism as “the willing consensus of free men and women to work in concert and enjoy equal or proportionate shares in the fruits of their labours”⁵² we have to say that neither of those two notions fit perfectly with the reality of a free cooperative. The first notion, of the “free producer”, one devised by the 19th century workers’ movement, because the human being invoked by the label “producer” is the individual reduced by capitalism and statism to the status of labour power and has historically and for the most part delegated the tough task of

⁴⁹ A claim made towards the end of the article “Participation and agrarian production in Cuba: the UPBCs” in *Temas, Cultura, Ideología, Sociedad*, No 11, 1997, p. 73

⁵⁰ *Libertarian Socialism* ... op. cit. p. 157

⁵¹ See Paul Lambert “Cooperativism and workers; movement” in *Reconstruir*, No 10, 1963

⁵² *Libertarian Socialism. A Contribution to a New Ethical and Social Order* [in Spanish] Op. cit., p. 142

self-governance and achieving freedom, due to physical exhaustion and much lauded specialization. That second notion of “food sovereignty”, which comes from European and American NGOs, in that it presupposes that a resolution of the problem of hunger is feasible, without the hungry recapturing sovereignty over every other facet of their lives, leaving the oppressive conditions imposed by transnational companies and neo-colonial States untouched, especially when they target the communities (especially the rural communities) in the Third World.

The notions of “free producers” and “food sovereignty”, measured alongside Souchy’s “free cooperatives” hints at their introducing a production- and food-centred bias that replicates the deadly dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, successfully implanted in capitalist culture inside the workers’ movement by means of the wage system and modernizing Third World State regimes spawned by glorious anti-colonial movements.⁵³ Thus, where the need is for thought about the centrality of personal interactions based on self-governance, brotherhood, mutual aid and moral betterment in inter-personal relations, which imply pursuit of the willing consensus of free men and women to work in concert and enjoy equal or proportionate shares in the fruits of their labours, the stress is placed on the impact on production, implicitly reducing human well-being to boosting productivity, regardless of the means.

Neither bridging arrangements, nor socialism, nor cooperatives are sovereign realities; they are fragments, rendered magnetic by the energy that either emanates or not from the new forms of coexistence.

On the Limits of Souchy’s “Free Cooperativism” or Outlines of a Fresh Boost from It

But the new forms of coexistence that are the surest basis for a society that transcends the logic of capitalism can only come about in the context of the “free cooperatives” that Augustin Souchy praised so highly in his day. We can see through these ideas to the polemics of the so-called Cold War, marked by the rhetoric about the conflict between “totalitarianism” and “freedom”, with the former being understood as referring only to the activity and encroachments of the State, on which score the libertarians of those times agreed with a lot of honest liberals. But – more than a half century further on – and having sampled the social impact of the so-called “shock therapies” sponsored worldwide by neo-liberal theorists and all the harmful consequences thereof, that notion of totalitarianism has widened beyond the action of the mega-States and today is absorbing the lessons learnt regarding the damaging impact of markets upon society, and especially upon cooperatives.⁵⁴

⁵³ The former has been wonderfully and bravely analysed by Felix Rodrigo Mora in his wide-ranging and controversial output and particularly in *El giro estadolatrico. Repudio experiencial del Estado de bienestar*, Malddcap Ediciones, Alicante, Spain, 2007 and *La democracia y el Triunfo del Estado. Por una revolucion democratica, axiologica y civilizadora*, Editorial Manuscritos, Morata de Tajuna, Spain 2010. The latter topic was explored equally bravely and masterfully by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

⁵⁴ One contemporary and quite possibly countryman of Souchy’s, Karl Polanyi, had a much shrewder critical view of the market that might have been expected from social activists such as Cold War era anarchists. In that regard, even prior to 1944 we find Polanyi offering this sort of an outlook: “The notion of the self-regulating market (...) could not survive for long without leading to man’s destruction and turning his eco-system into a wasteland (...)” In *La gran transformación. Crítica del liberalism económico*, La Piqueta, Madrid 1989. p. 26

The definition that Souchy offers of cooperatives as a space where there emerges “the willing consensus of free men and women to work in concert and share equally or proportionately in the fruits of their labours” is not necessarily a guarantee of a coexistence freed from the logic of capitalism; instead, it conjures up the conditions for a harmful collective capitalism, as already witnessed in the self-managing Yugoslav firms several decades back or in the renowned Mondragón cooperative in the Basque Country with its offshoots in the Third World.

In our context, a researcher such as the sociologist Camila Piñeiro Harnecker has been the person who has most clearly identified these issues, looking past the analytical approaches adopted by Cuban researchers vis à vis the UBPCs of the 1990s and bringing fresh fuel to the debate around cooperativism in Cuba on foot of her study of the experiences of cooperativism in Venezuela as sponsored by the government there between 2002 and 2006, roughly. From Piñeiro’s vantage point, she has pointed out that “whilst workers’ involvement in the democratic operation of their firms has the potential to promote the expansion of their personal and collective interests in such away as to include broader social interests, this is not necessarily the case” and, as a result, “the vesting of legal ownership of firms in their workforces (...) is not the same thing as social control and no guarantee that they [cooperatives] can produce enough to meet the needs of society.”⁵⁵

Which is how, in her on-the-ground researches in Venezuela, Camila Piñeiro arrived at the hypothesis that “shared practice between democratic firms and other communities is more important than participation within those forms – worker democracy – in promoting the workers’ solidarity vis à vis those communities”, but, her work on the ground being focused mainly on those cooperatives promoted by the Bolivarian government, she was unable in that context to find cooperative experiences that operated along those lines.⁵⁶

Tackling this remarkable research from the vantage-point of Souchy’s “free cooperativism”, we can see that the researcher has stressed the quantitative over the qualitative, as indeed, do other Cuban researchers, letting slip a chance to engage in comparative study of concrete cooperative experiences prior to the 2001 boom.⁵⁷ On the other hand, she injects a restrictive condition into the analysis by emphasizing one factor in the way Venezuelan cooperatives operate, whether the communal creation of cooperativists or not, over other equally significant factors such as the existence or non-existence of clear-cut agreed rules within the collective, gradations of sovereign self-organization or

⁵⁵ “Social consciousness and democratic planning in the Venezuelan cooperatives” in *Temas*, No 54, April/June 2008

⁵⁶ Op. cit. p. 21

⁵⁷ By selecting as an analytical sample only those cooperatives established at the instigation of the government, a text like “Social consciousness and democratic planning” missed out on the chance to analyse what might be regarded as probably the most successful and enduring experiments in cooperativism in Venezuela, the Lara Central Social Services cooperative (or CECOSOLA). See *Buscando una Convivencia armónica*. Escuela cooperativa ‘Rosario Arjona’, CECOSOLA, Barquisimeto, 2003. Then again, a study conducted by the Venezuelan cooperative movement’s researcher Luis Alfredo Delgado estimated the number of cooperatives active in 2009 at twenty thousand. Within that overall figure, he reckoned that cooperative organization in existence from before the year 2001 accounted for most of the volume in turn-over and in the numbers of male or female members. See Luis Alfredo Delgado Bello “Venezuela; Have cooperatives failed? [previously on-line at ACI Americas, May, 2008 (consulted July 2009) <http://www.aciamericas.coop/>]

the presence of coordination with other areas of self-organizing, factors that other researchers into the phenomenon of cooperativism and, more broadly, economies based upon shared assets.⁵⁸

Comparing contemporary research efforts being mounted by Cuban researchers alongside texts such as *Testimonies Regarding the Cuban Revolution* may prove a substantial and useful effort in the framing of a thinking and practices other than the familiar variants of capitalism, such as should not only be rooted in economics, but they should also take heed of anthropological, historical and even biological considerations, because cooperativism seen as a way of boosting sales and increasing profits might be a fashionable label hung upon yet another failure. Because cooperativism also has to do with sociability, self-education and individual and collective recapture of sovereign control of their lives.

So we can state that a Polish-German anarcho-syndicalist activist like Augustin Souchy, with his book *Testimonies Regarding the Cuban Revolution*, for all its light and shade, not only prompts us to rethink cooperativism's history in Cuba, but also to be mindful of the ways in which past failures may be replicated. Grounds for pushing beyond the supposition that old solutions might be drafted in to solve old problems.⁵⁹

Together with the July 1960 *Statement of Principles by the Libertarian Syndicalist Agrupación of Cuba*⁶⁰ and the August 1960 *Declaration by the Anarchists of Chile regarding the Cuban Revolution*, the book is the third of the early historical documentary sources relating to a crucial time in the Cuban revolution, and they represent a debatable contribution open to dialogue between revolutionaries, but replete with liberating potentiality to be reimplanted in cooperativism, socialism and personal and collective emancipation today.

Havana, 15 December 2013

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⁵⁸ Fundamental contributions made on this matter by Kropotkin, Tomasello, Razzett and, more recently, Ellinor Ostrom lead us to think of such variables as being equally significant in any analysis of cooperative experiences. The media and academic absence from our media of academic contributions such as those coming from researchers into this particular topic is unsettling, particularly given the relevancy of Ostrom's *The Governance of Shared Resources*, especially with her being the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics recipient.

⁵⁹ In a text such as "Participation and agrarian production in Cuba: the UBPCs, op. cit., one can divine the explanatory limitations upon the analytical tools employed in the 1990s by Cuban academics as they grappled with the UBPCs and their impact: "The supposition was that the new de-centralizing and organizational restructuring processes would help secure greater levels of participation in decision-making"

⁶⁰ See *Reconstruir*, No 10, Buenos Aires 1963

