

## **Coup or Farce: Observations on Legal and Political Aspects of the Anarchist Insurrection of 1918**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The anarchist insurrection of 1918 in Rio de Janeiro is commonly understood in national historiography as a revolutionary movement. This premise is based on newspapers of the time, which classified it as such, relying on information from the police. However, it is questioned here whether there was a coup or an attempt, considering the reconstruction of the context and the roles of the Federal District Police and anarchist militants at the time. This questioning also stems from a more accurate reading of documents related to the investigation and judicial process that targeted anarchist militants accused of attempting to overthrow the regime. The revolution, which would arise in the context of a workers' strike, as observed from such sources, was not a concrete possibility.

**Keywords:** Anarchism, labor movement, unions, strike, insurrection, revolution.

## **Golpe de Estado o farsa: Observaciones sobre las cuestiones legales y políticas de la Insurrección Anarquista de 1918**

### **RESUMEN**

La insurrección anarquista de 1918 en Río de Janeiro es normalmente entendida en la historiografía nacional como un movimiento revolucionario. Esta premisa se basa en los periódicos de la época, que la clasificaron así, basándose en información policial. Sin embargo, se cuestiona aquí si hubo un golpe, o un intento, frente a la reconstrucción del contexto y los roles de la Policía del Distrito Federal y los militantes anarquistas de la época. Este cuestionamiento también se debe a una lectura más precisa de documentos referentes a la investigación y al proceso judicial que afectó a militantes anarquistas acusados de intentar derrocar al régimen. La revolución, que surgiría en el contexto de una huelga obrera, observada a partir de tales fuentes, no fue una posibilidad concreta.

**Palabras clave:** Anarquismo, movimiento obrero, sindicatos, huelga, insurrección, revolución.

## **Golpe ou farsa: observações sobre aspectos jurídicos e políticos da Insurreição Anarquista de 1918**

### **RESUMO**

A insurreição anarquista de 1918, no Rio de Janeiro, é consensualmente entendida na historiografia nacional como um movimento revolucionário. Esta premissa baseia-se nos jornais da época, que assim o classificaram, com base em informações da polícia. No entanto, aqui se questiona esta versão revolucionária, frente à reconstituição do contexto, bem como iniciativas da Polícia do Distrito Federal e de militantes anarquistas à época. Este questionamento também se deve a uma leitura mais acurada de documentos referentes à investigação e do processo judicial que incidiram sobre militantes anarquistas acusados de tentar derrubar o regime. A revolução, que surgiria no contexto de uma greve operária, observada a partir de tais fontes, não foi uma possibilidade concreta.

**Palavras-chave:** Anarquismo, movimento operário, sindicatos, greve, insurreição, revolução.

### **Introduction**

The Anarchist Insurrection of Rio de Janeiro on November 18, 1918, is marked by the confrontation between hundreds of striking workers and state forces in the Campo de São Cristóvão (a large landscaped leisure area in a traditional residential neighborhood, approximately 5 kilometers from the city center) lasting only a few hours. In the following decades, this "November 1918 strike would be almost erased from social memory," as Boris Fausto observed (2016, p. 193). However, starting in the 1960s, this event was revived as an object of academic research. It was then defined as something much larger than a mere street conflict: by consensus, researchers classify it as a revolutionary movement that, although poorly conducted or poorly planned, indeed attempted to overthrow the current regime to establish a "popular" government.

Moniz Bandeira described the "uprising in Campo de São Cristóvão," as well as the "general strike in 1918 and the attempt to establish a soviet in Rio de Janeiro" (1967, p. 58). In the following decade, Dulles stated that "with the help of bombs, the conspirators tried to recreate the events that occurred in Petrograd the previous year" (1977, p. 66). Maram (1979) defines the event as an "anarchist putsch." Boris Fausto classifies it as "insurrectional" (in quotes) and emphasizes that, in principle, the movement "was supposed to serve as a basis for a revolutionary insurrection" (2016, p. 193). Addor confirms these premises by stating that "the insurgents (...) based on a general strike, intended to overthrow the constituted government by force of arms"

(2015, p. 85). These authors are references for studies on the insurrection, as well as for the history of the Brazilian labor movement.

Among Brazilian historians, the canonical version is that this event was a failed revolution. However, here we will offer an alternate possibility. That this event was a large strike and street conflict, that was purposely labeled as a tentative revolution by the “powers to be” to justify a repressive movement against the recently organized labor movement.

This question arises from the fact that the reconstructions established in historiography over the last 50 years are based on newspapers from 1918. This news coverage, in turn, was mainly supported by information provided by the Federal District Police at the time. It was within the police that the version of it being a "revolution" originated. Initially, the voices of the strike leaders, as well as other participants, were hardly heard. In the subsequent months, possible evidence that an uprising to overthrow a regime was underway was also not presented.

Another reason for this questioning are the facts presented during the trials that followed the failure of the insurrection, which were not included in previous studies. For instance, while more than 100 suspects were arrested starting from November 25, 1918, until the end of the year only 55 of them were indicted and, among them, only 14 were formally accused of participating in a movement to overthrow the government. In April 1919, all were released.

## **Methodology**

We focused our work on three sets of primary sources that have been largely neglected by most of the studies on the anarchist insurrection over the past 50 years:

- The inquiry conducted by the police in the weeks following the insurrection and concluded at the end of December 1918 (which officially establishes the "revolutionary" version of the event and formally accuses 55 individuals);
- The testimonies of the accused and witnesses during the summary phase of the process;
- The two judicial decisions on the case, delivered by two federal judges in March and April 1919.

Referential works and academic research on the subject also support the present study. In addition to the already cited sources, the news reports of the time, which form the primary database on the insurrection and related events, are included. The survey of news reports focused particularly on the most important Rio de Janeiro newspapers of the time, whose collections are accessible in the Digital Newspaper Library of the National Library.

The methodology here initially consisted of gathering data from these sources. This survey provided information absent (and perhaps unprecedented) in historiography, allowing for:

- Comparing the information presented by the police with the alleged evidence of their accusations, as well as the statements of the accused;
- Reconstructing the conflict in Campo de São Cristóvão in more detail, searching for evidence of a supposed revolution;
- Reconstructing police actions, allowing for an evaluation of the legitimacy of their accusations against anarchist militants;
- Closely examining the roles played by anarchist militants in organizing an alleged revolution.

A second phase of the research consisted of a qualitative analysis of this information, which enabled a more effective understanding of the trajectories and actions of the different agents involved – police, workers, anarchist militants, judiciary, and the press. A cross-referencing of these data provided by different agents was also performed, enabling the challenge (or confirmation) of prevailing versions in the reconstruction of events related to the anarchist insurrection described in Brazilian historiography.

The fundamental objective of the research was to seek more consistent support for understanding events related to the history of the labor movement in Brazil and its relationship with anarchist militancy. The conflict, the characters, the labor mobilization (...) appear in Brazilian historiography in the context of a "myth of origin" of the political articulation of the working class – hence the relevance of deepening the understanding of their roles.

The initial premise of the research was to question the characterization of the 1918 insurrection as a revolutionary initiative. Given this, other secondary objectives were related to:

- Observing and analyzing the police inquiry into the event and the ensuing judicial process;
- Analyzing the conduct of the judicial process, as well as its context;
- Recovering and analyzing statements of the accused, voices often absent in historiography;
- Reconstructing the trajectories of decisive characters in the process (judges, police chief, anarchist militants, workers).

## **Results**

The cross-referencing of data and the analysis of the gathered information have opened a new interpretation of the events related to the anarchist insurrection of 1918. Subject to various

studies over the past 50 years, as previously noted, it has always been characterized as a revolutionary action led by anarchists. However, aside from a police inquiry (which indicated no more than a few hints and no proof), nothing seems to support this version.

The reconstruction of the context in which the insurrection occurred allows us to state that the Rio de Janeiro police, in the three years preceding the insurrection, showed particular concern about coups d'état: no fewer than five "conspiracies" against the government were "foiled" in Rio by the security forces from 1914 to 1916. Subsequent investigations proved nothing against the supposed "conspirators." In this sense, by misjudging a workers' strike in November 1918, the police were merely repeating a pattern of action from previous years.

The police's actions, however, were not the primary focus of the research. Its main result, possibly, was to challenge the version "eternalized" in Brazilian historiography that in November 1918 anarchist militants led a failed revolution in Rio de Janeiro, stemming from a workers' strike. The reading of primary sources confirms the street conflict but suggests that the "anarchist insurrection" was neither truly anarchist nor a insurrection.

The research conducted here reveals that the "revolutionary" version of the 1918 insurrection was created by the police, disseminated by the press, and decades later endorsed by historiography and a few witness statements. However, it is a version supported by a set of mistakes, incongruities, and contradictions, as will be seen.

### **Dissatisfied Workers and 'Social Revolution'**

Previous studies based on the newspapers of the time, cite that anarchists in Rio de Janeiro had been openly advocating regime change for several years. Their activism intensified the propaganda with the establishment of associations, schools, theater groups, newspapers, and their insertion into unions. On various occasions, especially in lectures and rallies, militants promoted anarchist doctrine and, of course, announced the inevitable "social revolution," which seemed even more feasible after the Bolshevik coup of November 1917 (Bandeira, 2017).

In parallel, both workers' demonstrations and anarchist proselytizing, present in Rio since the 1890s, intensified in the 1910s—especially after 1914, when World War I affected the global economy, with detrimental effects in peripheral countries like Brazil. These economic repercussions impacted the proletariat, and as a result, workers' mobilization intensified. Strikes, an essential strategy of anarcho-syndicalism, became increasingly frequent.

In October 1918, as highlighted by Dulles (1976) among other authors the so-called Spanish flu further worsened the living conditions of the proletarian classes in Rio, already

plagued by high costs of living and harsh working conditions. At that time, the textile workers (approximately 20,000 in the Federal District and the State of Rio de Janeiro, organized in the Union of Workers in Textile Factories (UOFT), presented demands to the employers, threatening a strike. These demands (reduction of working hours, wage increases, etc.) did not denote ideological issues. The failure of the negotiations led to the stoppage on November 18.

Anarchist militants linked to members of the UOFT leadership considered the textile workers' strike as a possible basis for a general strike—from which it would then be possible to overthrow the regime (Addor, 2015). To this end, again according to already cited works, in November 1918 these anarchists held meetings to promote the insurrection, under the guidance of Professor José Oiticica, the most notorious anarchist in Rio, who would come to be considered the "leader" of the movement.

According to the press, on the 18th, at the scheduled time for the start of the strike (3 p.m.), the supposed leaders of the movement, anarchists, had already been detained or were being pursued by the police. Even so, workers (between 300 and 500) began to gather in Campo de São Cristóvão. According to this version, they intended to assault the Army Armory battalion nearby to obtain weapons and uniforms, with which they would supposedly gain the support of legalist forces sent to confront them. But, before that, still according to the newspapers, around 5 p.m., when ordered to disperse by a small group of police, the protesters reacted, starting the conflict: they attacked a police station with bombs, exchanged gunfire with a few police officers, but were dispersed with the arrival of an Army platoon.

On November 19, despite the intense newspaper headlines about bombs and gunfire, there were "only" four deaths—and none of them during the confrontation in São Cristóvão. In addition, it was also widely reported by the press that several hundred "seditious manifestos" had been seized. But the "arsenal" of the rebels, which according to the police was supposed to contain thousands of bombs, was never discovered. A few bombs were found in the streets, and two revolvers were found in the possession of two strikers detained at different points in the city—the only two weapons seized in the "revolution." In the suburbs, two bombs caused superficial damage to two transmission towers. Another bomb, exploding under a streetcar, caused minor injuries to three people.

According to historians of the second half of the 20th century (always supported by the newspapers), a little over 100 suspects were detained in the two weeks following the event. Days after the confrontation in São Cristóvão, the police prohibited meetings, and the government ordered the closure of the General Workers' Union.

## Aurelino's "Conspiracies"

During the time of the 1918 insurrection, the head of the Federal District Police was Aurelino Leal, a lawyer from Bahia. With ministerial status, he reported directly to the President of the Republic. Leal was the first to endorse (if not generate) the "revolutionary" version of the textile workers' strike, which was reported in the press of the time and reproduced in historiography. However, neither of these sources considered the context that Leal was experiencing. The insurrection occurred three days after a government change (Delfim Moreira assumed the presidency on the 15th), a time when replacements in government positions, including the head of the Federal District Police, were foreseeable.

Moreover, the historiography does not take into account another aspect: between November 1914 (when Aurelino assumed the position) and April 1916, the Rio police had "discovered" at least five "conspiracies" aimed at overthrowing the regime. The press reported, during this year and a half, the "sailors' conspiracy" (March 1915); the "conspiracy of the Republican Revisionist Alliance," also called the "conspiracy of the Águas Férreas" (August 1915); a "monarchist conspiracy" (December 1915); the army corporals' conspiracy (February 1916); and a "parliamentarism conspiracy" (April 1916). There were investigations, arrests, banishments, inquiries, and even prosecutions but they resulted in nothing.

There is no need to count other various rumors of insurrections brought to the pages of Rio's newspapers (always with the police as the source) that often turned out to be mere rumors. Or, as defined by *Correio da Manhã*, in a front-page editorial ("Conspiracy and Disillusionment", September 5, 1916): "From time to time, the police discover a conspiracy, make noise, great fuss, send the conspirators to Justice, but Justice always ends up verifying that the police did not discover any conspiracy. They forged it, invented it."

Some newspapers openly criticized Aurelino Leal's intentions, calling him a "stifler of imaginable mazorcas" (street disturbances). In early 1916, *Gazeta de Notícias* reproduced Aurelino's statements regarding the supposed conspiracies:

"The newspapers try to ridicule the police action, but I must confess that this is absolutely indifferent to me (...) Any spark of trouble that appears, I will find out what it is about (...) Besides, this thing about conspiracy here in Rio has always been like this: as soon as one ends, another is already formed. I know Rio de Janeiro well." (*Gazeta de Notícias*, p. 1).

This last statement was, at least, pretentious: Aurelino had lived in Rio for just under three years, half of which he had been "only" a lawyer, advertising his services in small newspaper ads.

In January 1916, just over a year in office, the head of the Federal District police, despite his self-proclaimed expertise on Rio, was again criticized in the *Gazeta*. The newspaper presumed the reasons why, with Aurelino in office, so many conspiracies had been discovered in such a short time: “When he notices that the president of the Republic no longer remembers him, Mr. Aurelino Leal soon discovers a conspiracy” (idem). The same *Gazeta* also suggested why the investigations never resulted in anything:

Aurelino Leal, pretending not to be able to prosecute the 'conspirators,' because only those caught in the street with weapons in hand can be prosecuted, shows his lack of spirit. Mr. Dr. Aurelino (...) cannot prosecute and has not yet prosecuted any 'conspirator' because he did not have the evidence to do so. (...) Here are some questions: if Dr. Chief of Police could not prosecute the 'conspirators' unless they were caught with weapons in hand, why did he not wait for that moment, making the conspiracy fail when mature and properly punishing, within the law, the enemies of order? Decidedly, Mr. Dr. Aurelino Leal is soft-headed, and his place is definitely not the one he occupies – it is in the asylum. (*Gazeta de Notícias*, 1916, p. 1).

On January 2, 1917, *Gazeta de Notícias* (to take just one example) summarized: “The number of discovered plots, revolutions, and riots with the intent to depose the president of the republic or to modify the existing institutions is already incalculable.” Throughout that year, however, the concerns of Rio’s police shifted to other targets – besides the inevitable themes of the time, like the *jogo do bicho* (a popular “numbers” game) and prostitution. “Conspiracies” against the regime disappeared from the newspapers, making way for news about tensions between security forces and labor entities. It was, then, the “peak of workers' mobilization”, according to Batalha (2000, p. 49).

Prohibitions of rallies (or meetings) of a “subversive nature” (according to police criteria), as well as repression of strikes, would be constant in Rio from 1917 onwards. Especially from July, due to the so-called General Strike, which started in São Paulo, where there were deaths in clashes with the police. This movement, even after ending in the capital of São Paulo, reflected in Rio, with significant worker mobilization, demonstrations, and strikes. The Federation of Workers (Forj) was closed by the police. According to Batalha, it was a moment that “was the peak of revolutionary syndicalist influence and anarchist participation in the labor movement” (2000, p. 51). The tensions between labor entities, employers, and government (strikes, clashes, and police repression) would continue in a context marked by Brazil’s participation in the war, from October 1917, with increasing scarcity and cost of living, as well as the deterioration of already difficult working conditions, which would continue into the following year.



In 1918, the news of the Bolshevik Revolution began to appear in the labor press amidst great confusion about its significance. There were anarchists who believed it to be an anarchist revolution. Possibly inspired by the Russian example, in November of that year, in Rio de Janeiro, a heterogeneous group of anarchists, union leaders, and opposition politicians got involved in a clumsy insurrectional attempt. (Batalha, 2000, p. 53).

### **The Anarchist "Revolution" According to the newspapers of November 19, 1918**

The day after the conflict in São Cristóvão, Rio newspapers reported the insurrection primarily based on police information – where the version that it was an anarchist revolutionary action originated. *Correio da Manhã*, invariably sympathetic to the chief of police, confirmed, in support of the headline ("The serious events of yesterday afternoon"), that "The police uncover an anarchist plot." In the title of the traditional *Jornal do Commercio* ("Anarchist Ferments"), information about the attempted coup from the assault on the Armory battalion in São Cristóvão was reproduced.

The "revolutionary" version was endorsed by two notes released hours after the insurrection by the chief of police's office reproduced in several newspapers. The first note stated that "the police had been informed for days that the anarchists, who usually preach disorder and subversion of the legal regime, were preparing a movement, this time led by Dr. José Oiticica (...) The police knew about the planned assault on the Armory battalion." The second note informed that "the investigations were fully confirmed. The gathering point of the agitators would be the Campo de São Cristóvão (...) The public authority is, therefore, fighting against anarchists, almost all foreigners, who want to implant maximalism among us."

The government-aligned *O Paiz* was restrained ("A serious-looking workers' strike"), as was *Jornal do Brasil* ("Serious subversive movement"). But *Jornal do Brasil* was the newspaper that best described how the insurgents intended to overthrow the regime. The text is rich in detail – it even reproduces dialogues, denoting either the testimony of reporters or the speech of police who supposedly witnessed the events.

According to the news, the police reported that there was a "supreme council" of the insurrection, led by José Oiticica, assisted by Astrogildo Pereira and Manoel Campos (detained around 1 p.m., two hours before the planned start of the uprising). The "council," days earlier, had decided that on the 18th, workers from the textile factories of São Cristóvão, Andaraí, Vila Isabel, and the periphery should go to Campo de São Cristóvão at 3 p.m. to assault the Armory battalion, where they would obtain weapons and uniforms.

Once the insurgents were in uniform, and the army forces arrive, confusion would be established, and then they would wait for the soldiers to flip sides. They would head towards the city, and the first building to be dynamited would be the city hall. Then they would attack the Police Headquarters and then the General Headquarters of the Police Brigade. While they were carrying out this part of the plan, workers from Gávea and Jardim Botânico would attack the Catete Palace and then the Chamber, capturing as many deputies as possible. Then the Council of Workers and Soldiers would be proclaimed. ("Serious subversive movement." *Jornal do Brasil*, 1919, p. 5).

Other newspapers, although reporting the police version, were not as assertive in their headlines and, to some extent, questioned this information with headlines punctuated by question marks. This was the case with *A Época* ("Maximalism in Brazil?"); *Gazeta de Notícias* ("An aborted revolution? – the police claim it is a maximalist movement") and *A Rua* ("Are we over a volcano? – they are trying to give a very serious political character to the textile workers' strike. The police act in the dark. What is the truth?"). *A Noite* brought the headline "Regeneration to dynamite," but in the body of the text, it admitted not being able to define if the movement was "maximalist, anarchist, or political."

*O Imparcial* made no references to anarchists or revolution ("The textile factory workers declare themselves on strike"). And *A Razão*, clearly identified with the working class, openly questioned the police. The news with the title "A whisper of political disturbance explores the general strike of textile workers" informed that the movement "is not a maneuver combined with politicians; it is not maximalism." All Rio newspapers reported the "revolutionary" version provided by the police, whether to endorse it, merely to reproduce it, or to contest it (*A Razão*). However, no publication realized some notable inconsistencies in the reconstruction of the events from the previous day.

The first consisted of the fact that the Federal District Police, "for days" informed about the date and location of the beginning of a revolutionary insurrection, starting with an assault on Armory battalion, took no preventive measures. The omission is confirmed (still according to the police themselves) when, around 4 p.m., on the 18th, the delegate of the 10th District communicated with Aurelino by phone, warning about the concentration of workers at Campo de São Cristóvão: even if it was the supposed beginning of a "revolution," the delegate was only instructed to disperse the crowd (already numbering in the hundreds), with his small contingent (five soldiers). Similarly, no newspaper questioned the fact that hundreds of rebels, although intending to attack the Armory battalion (about 50 meters south of Campo de São Cristóvão), had headed towards the 10th District (about 450 meters away, westward).

Perhaps Aurelino intended to catch the rebels "on the street, with weapons in hand," in order to finally prosecute them. If this was the intention, it was a goal that did not rely on the facts. This is because, even though they knew "for days" who the "leader" of the "revolution" was, the police only detained him a few hours before its beginning - before he was "on the street, with weapons in hand." And, even though they had been "informed for days" about where the "leader" of the insurrection would be, the police first went to his residence, but he wasn't there. Received by the professor's wife, who told about his husband whereabouts, the police would find Oiticica eight kilometers away, in a room downtown, where for months, regularly, he gave private lessons at that time.

### **The inquiry**

The investigations were assigned to Nascimento Silva, head of the 1st Auxiliary Police Station, directly subordinate to the Police Chief. Published in some newspapers in full, the final report of his investigations on December 28 reaffirmed the revolutionary nature of the insurrection.

Tasked with "interviewing the organizers of the rebellion," Nascimento Silva, in his report, seems to lament that "all the people who were interviewed insisted on showing themselves completely oblivious to any subversive movement (...) From the most senior involved in the mutiny to the most modest." And he explains why "the police were previously aware of all the steps of the anarchists" in preparing for the revolt: "Second Lieutenant of the Army Jorge Elias Ajús pretended to be a conspirator and intruded into seditious meetings with the pre-established purpose of making the police chief aware of everything that was happening" ("Still the latest anarchist events". *Correio da Manhã*, December 29, 1918, p.1)

In the report, the delegate summarized Ajús' testimony: the lieutenant had shared a room with Ricardo Corrêa Perpétua, a Portuguese shopkeeper, and supposedly one of the organizers of the insurrection, for four years. Suspecting Perpétua's political inclinations, Ajús pretended to be an anarchism sympathizer to be invited to participate in the "seditious meetings" preparing for the coup. Perpétua would have taken him to Oiticica's house to be introduced to the professor on the morning of November 13. In the evening, in the same place, he participated in a conspiratorial meeting, where he heard that "it was necessary to create a genuinely popular government like in Russia, made up of representatives of workers and soldiers" (ibid). Ajús also reproduced a supposed explanation by Oiticica about the action plans (attacks on the Armory, as well as on the Catete Palace and the Army Ammunition Factory, in Realengo). According to the lieutenant, Oiticica asked him to "resolve difficulties with elements of the Army," also indicating him as the leader of the movement.

In other words: according to such statements, the false conspirator, newly introduced to the "leader" of the insurrection five days before the uprising began, became a leader himself in less than a day.

According to this testimony, on November 15, Ajús would have participated in a second meeting, with about 40 other conspirators, mostly leaders of the textile and metallurgical industries. Confirming the coup plans, Oiticica would have declared that the movement scheduled for the 18th had "four thousand workers willing to do anything, 1,600 bombs (...) and six cars" (ibid). At this moment, in Ajús' words, the plan also included "blowing up the power towers," cutting telephone wires, taking over the central telegraph agency, setting fire to the City Hall, Army Headquarters, and Police Central. The lieutenant would have passed on this information to his superiors in the Army and to police agents in the early hours of November 18.

Ajús' statements would be the basis for the police accusations - and for the "revolutionary" version. In his report, Nascimento Silva stated that, in the face of the lieutenant's information, the accused were re-interrogated, and eventually (with the exception of Oiticica) confessed that they intended to overthrow the government. This statement is emphatic, but it is not even corroborated by the report itself. In it, the delegate reproduced statements from 16 workers who admitted to distributing leaflets, as well as participating in meetings and the strike. Nascimento Silva also mentioned by name several other detainees, accused by colleagues of being "troublemakers," "dynamiters," and anarchists. One worker admitted to overhearing colleagues talking about the Russian revolution. But, as for confessions of coup plans, to "overthrow the regime," or "to implement a government similar to that of Russia": not a word.

Still, Nascimento Silva's report concluded that 56 of the accused were liable under Article 107 of the Penal Code: "To attempt, directly and by facts, to change by violent means the political Constitution of the Republic, or the established form of government. Penalty: banishment, to the ringleaders; and to the accomplices - imprisonment for five to ten years." The conclusions of the delegate, as well as all the pieces of the inquiry, were forwarded to the Criminal Prosecutor's Office, which, two days later, filed charges against the accused. It is curious that the delegate and the Prosecutor's Office used this article and not, for example, that of sedition or unlawful assembly (whose penalties were much lower). Furthermore, Article 14 of the Penal Code of 1890 was ignored in the inquiry and indictment: "Attempt (of crime) is not punishable in the case of absolute inefficacy of the means employed, or of absolute impossibility of the end intended by the delinquent."

Not all the accused were detained - and not all remained in jail. Perhaps anticipating the sentence, the Rio de Janeiro police had already "banished" Oiticica to Alagoas, his home state. Other accused were still fugitives. And others, by the understanding of the Prosecutor's Office,

would be released. But these and another 50 detainees (approximately) who were not mentioned by Nascimento Silva still had to wait 6 days to leave the Detention House, on January 5, 1919.

The next phase was that of the indictment - a moment when a judge would hear witnesses, questioned by prosecution and defense lawyers. The hearings, as reported by several newspapers, began on January 10, and the courtroom of the 1st Federal Court was too small to accommodate 39 of the accused and their lawyers, escorted by approximately 100 police officers. Nine depositions were taken, from witnesses and police officers, on January 10, 15, 22, and 28. The first to testify was Lieutenant Ajús, who initially did not want to make any statement - he intended only to confirm everything he had already reported in the inquiry. He was challenged by defense lawyers and, finally, had to answer the questions put to him, not without falling into some contradictions.

On the 15th, it was the turn of a Security Corps agent, Júlio Rodrigues, who "supported the police so much in the case in question." The officer said that for two months he had noticed "agitation" among the workers and hinted that meetings of workers (which he did not attend) during this period had political purposes. But "asked (...) if he knew what the purpose of these meetings was, he said that, for a double reason of superior order, he left such a question unanswered." Similarly, "asked how and why he knew that the purpose of the agitation was to change the form of government, the witness continued to say that, due to orders from his superiors, he could not answer, but that he only knew that the rebels wanted to implant among us a government of soldiers and workers." He reiterated that the insurgents intended to create a soviet in Rio. Asked to explain what a soviet was, he couldn't answer.

On the 22nd, Lieutenant Coriolano Dutra, who commanded the platoon responsible for dispersing the demonstrators in Campo de São Cristóvão, was heard. The officer stated before the judge that he was "at home, resting" when he was called to the Armory battalion. He had been in the barracks for some time when he was informed by a sentinel that a crowd was heading to the 10th Police District. The lieutenant gathered 30 soldiers and went to the scene, noting that "when the people arrived there, they threw two or three bombs, which caused insignificant damage." He stated that "when he ordered the force to disperse the mob, it immediately dispersed, without offering resistance." And, above all, "he could not affirm that the group or part of the group had gone to the batallion" and that "in any way the strikers expressed an intention to attack the Armory battalion", thus contradicting Nascimento Silva's version.

These witnesses' statements (which, in principle, could have confirmed the police's "revolutionary" theory) did not go unnoticed by the working class - especially for those who, having witnessed the hearings, remained in the Detention House. A letter published in the newspaper *A Razão*, supposedly written by the prisoners, criticized the "methods" of the police, which had been

"employing, to achieve its ends, slanders and lies." Regarding the indictment and other events associated with the case, the letter writers observed, ironically:

The very witnesses for the prosecution undid these slanders before the judge (...) Now, Mr. Editor, the unfolding events demonstrate whether we are simple victims or not. The police knew everything (of course); they knew that bombs were being distributed (naturally); they knew about the "revolutionary plans" (of course): in short, they knew the day, the hour, and the place where the "explosion" was to occur, whose authors were to take advantage of the weavers' strike (...) The anarchists were arrested... before the "revolution"... an attempt was made to assault a police station and the Intendancy and... no one dies, no one is caught in the act and... the police are in control of everything (*A Razão*, 1919, p. 4).

The indictment was closed on February 2, and a new phase began: the judge would have either to consider the accusation against the detainees valid (and thus, those indicted would go to trial in the Jury Court of the 1st Court); or for their innocence. In February, for a few days, the process was paralyzed: The Judge Raul Martins, as well as his substitute Henrique Vaz Pinto Coelho, were on vacation. The second substitute, Benjamim de Oliveira Filho, conducted the indictment - but, at the end of this phase, he declared himself disqualified. The decision would ultimately fall to the third substitute, Sylvio Pellico de Abreu. It took him approximately 45 days to decide. And he considered 14 accused to be indicted, liable under Article 107. In parallel, he ordered the release of 42 other implicated in the process, as reported in *Correio da Manhã* (on March 25, 1919, p.2, "Judge Pellico de Abreu issued his decision yesterday in the anarchist trial").

Abreu's decision was rendered on March 24. On the 28th, the titular judge Raul Martins resumed his duties. Three weeks later, on April 22, he annulled the decision of his substitute. He pointed out flaws in the conclusions of the inquiry, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies in the depositions obtained in the indictment. And, as stated in the full reproduction of the decision (*Jornal do Commercio*, May 9, 1919, p.7), "there is no legal way to convince of the existence of the crime under Article 107." Curious choice of term: apparently the police not only failed to prove, but also failed to convince of the existence of the crime.

Nevertheless, Nascimento Silva's report concluded that 56 of the accused were subject to the penalties of Article 107 of the Penal Code: "To attempt, directly and through facts, to violently change the political Constitution of the Republic, or the established form of government. Penalty: banishment, for the heads; and for the accomplices - imprisonment for five to ten years." The delegate's conclusions, as well as all the pieces of the inquiry, were forwarded to the Criminal Prosecutor's Office, which, two days later, filed charges against the accused. It is curious that the delegate and the Prosecutor's Office used this article and not, for example, sedition or illegal

assembly (whose penalties were much lower). In addition, Article 14 of the 1890 Penal Code was ignored in the inquiry and indictment: "The attempt (of a crime) is not punishable in case of absolute inefficiency of the means employed, or of absolute impossibility of the end to which the delinquent proposes himself."

Not all the accused were detained - and not all remained in jail. Perhaps anticipating the penalty provided in the Penal Code, the Rio de Janeiro police had already "banished" Oiticica to Alagoas, his home state. Other accused were still fugitives. And others, by the understanding of the Prosecutor's Office, were to be released. But these and another 50 detainees (approximately) who were not mentioned by Nascimento Silva still had to wait 6 days to leave the House of Detention, on January 5, 1919.

### **The 'revolution' as farce**

There was at least one "confession" that could have corroborated the police accusation. In the inquiry phase, Ricardo Perpétua allegedly admitted that the insurrection intended to "subvert the order with the goal to create a government of workers and soldiers, like in Russia" (cit in Moniz Bandeira, 1967: 592). However, even though this admission of guilt was so clear, it was not even mentioned in Nascimento Silva's report, in the prosecutor's petitions, or throughout the summary of guilt. Possibly because suspicions raised by allegations of coercion during interrogations. As a worker stated, in a declaration reproduced by Raul Martins in his final decision on the case:

His statement given to the Police does not express the truth, the deponent noticed, when the statement was read, that it did not match what he had said, however, signing it because he had been threatened by threats of beatings ("Crime process. Justice, the author. Drs. José Rodrigues Leite Oiticica, Agripino Nazareth and others accused" in *Jornal do Commercio*, 1919, p.7).

Other statements, however, could clarify the intentions of the anarchists. *Correio da Manhã* published, on December 23, 1918, what would have been an interview granted by José Oiticica to the State of Bahia's newspaper *A Tarde*. This interview would have taken place on the ship that took the professor to Alagoas, during a stopover in Salvador. Here is what Mr. Oiticica told that published it on the 14th december:

"As known by the newspapers, textile and metalworkers were threatening a general strike ... Lately this discontent was of such proportions that the anarchists thought of organizing a movement that would relieve the worker (...) we did what is called an anarchist

conspiracy. We held several secret meetings, combining the movement that would erupt within 6 months, next year, therefore”.

"I insist on this point: the anarchists did not intend to dynamite public buildings or shoot at the police. And, within this program, we proposed to replace the current regime with a socialist republic."

"It was easy to execute this plan and we trusted a large part of the federal troops and the police, who were on our side. In the last meetings it was especially recommended that weapons should only be used in case of resistance".

#### *Why did it fail*

"There was a traitor" - Dr. José Oiticica told us ... "A guest of the chief of police whom we took for a decided companion, attended our last meetings and knew our plans in detail" (Mr. José Oiticica makes statements to 'Tarde', from Bahia. *Correio da Manhã*, 1918, p. 1).

That is to say: considering such statements to be true, the "movement that would relieve the workers" (whatever that may mean) was scheduled for April 1919. Still, paradoxically, Oiticica attributed its failure to betrayal, six months before the scheduled date for the coup. In it, the rebels wouldn't even need to face security forces. It would be "easy to execute" to create not a soviet, but a "socialist republic". Oiticica's "revolution," as described, seems as plausible as the "revolution" announced by Aurelino.

Almost 30 years later, already in the 1940s, Oiticica would refer to the 1918 insurrection as "a strike, thwarted by Lieutenant Ajús' betrayal" (1946). The professor omits the fact that the "thwarted" textile strike, even with the imprisonment of anarchists, still lasted another 12 days, without any other "coup" manifestation. In the 1950s, Oiticica would define the insurrection as a "general strike, with a revolutionary character" (1957). He then dispensed with explaining what this "revolutionary character" was - or how a "general" strike could be promoted that counted, besides textiles, with the adhesion of only three other categories. "Virtually erased from social memory," as Boris Fausto characterized it, the 1918 insurrection also seems faded or distorted in the memory of its protagonists and, often, in the history of the relationship between the workers' movement and political militancy.

Astrogildo Pereira, arrested and "pronounced" as one of the leaders of the uprising, at the end of 1919 would move away and, later, break with anarchist militancy, to take another direction - that of alignment with the Soviet regime, being one of the seven founders of the Communist Party of Brazil, in 1922. In the 1950s, with a trajectory of ups and downs in the party,



Astrogildo, prolific in a literary production that exalted the revolutionary capacity of the working class, made a brief reference to the events of 1918:

Two months and a little later, the movement of November 18 erupted, in which several workers' unions were involved, at the forefront of which was the textile workers', also including factories in neighboring locations located in the State of Rio. In many of these factories violent conflicts provoked by the police took place, with deaths on both sides. Hard street fights also marked the beginning of the movement, that afternoon. The movement failed due to disastrous organizational failures, but it served to test the acute spirit of revolutionary combativeness that the workers were possessed of. This was also evidenced by the outcome of the criminal case brought by the police against the leaders of the movement: under pressure from the working masses, who openly manifested their solidarity with the incriminated comrades, they were acquitted, after about six months of imprisonment, and in time to participate in the great demonstrations of May 1, 1919 (Pereira, 1952).

Already distant from his anarchist past, the communist Astrogildo attributed the failure of the coup not to a betrayal, as claimed by Oiticica - but, rather, to failures in its organization. Although contemporary with the events, he did not witness them (he was imprisoned). Perhaps for this reason his description is at odds with information from the Judiciary, the police, the press, and witnesses. Namely: in the strike, there were not involved "several unions" (besides textiles, only three others announced adhesion). There were no "violent conflicts provoked by the police in many of these factories" (there was one, without police involved); and even less so, "deaths on both sides." There were no "hard street fights" - the closest to that was the dispersal of the crowd that attacked the 10th Police District. There is also no evidence that judges from the 1st Federal Court bowed to any "pressure from the working masses." Moreover, no one was "acquitted," since no one was brought to trial.

The imprecision of Oiticica and the "creativity" of Astrogildo, manifested decades after the events of 1918, to cite only these two protagonists, seem to reflect not only the distance in time (and in memory) of almost 30 years, between the facts and the narratives. To some extent, they reflect the gap between the ideals of anarchist intellectuals and the reality of the workers they were trying to "lead":

Anarchists did not have control over the labor movement. Thus, they attempted to make the situation as tense as possible so that the actors involved would radicalize their positions. When the confrontation became imminent, the anarchists would then try to direct the actions of the workers according to their objectives ... The anarchists who planned the insurrection then attempted to channel popular dissatisfaction according to

their interests. They tried to transform generalized dissatisfaction into an attempt at revolution. (Barbosa, 2009, pp. 167-168).

The author highlights a elitism in the speeches and actions of Rio de Janeiro anarchists like Oiticica and Astrogildo - and, furthermore, the fact that their "revolutionary" interests were not coincidental (perhaps not even convergent) with the aspirations of the working class.

The anarchists, like the elites, believed they knew better than the workers what they should do to improve their lives. The elites and the anarchist leaders had, after all, something in common. They were arrogant towards the workers. It's truly remarkable how groups that considered themselves so different, on certain issues, could think so similarly ... These two groups attempted to manipulate the workers according to their interests. (Barbosa, 2009, p. 169).

Such attempts would prove fruitless in various aspects and under various circumstances. This is also because, as Francisco Weffort stated, "the labor movement cannot be seen merely as dependent on the history of society, but as the subject of its own history" (cit. in Chalhoub, 2009, p. 89).

## **Final Considerations**

The premises highlighted here challenge the "revolutionary" version of the 1918 insurrection. Dreamed and propagated by anarchists; valued by the police; exploited by the press; ratified by academic studies; and instrumentalized as an "origin myth" in the history of the relationship between political factions and workers, the narrative of a coup in 1918, in these terms, does not hold up.

As intense as they were, the relations between anarchists and labor militants were still insufficient for a significant portion of workers to mobilize for a political cause. The most notable example is in the textile workers' strike itself: the strike led to the insurrection that was suppressed within a few hours. But the strike, motivated by better working conditions, would continue for another 12 days - without adding to the list of demands any references to the anarchists arrested on November 18. The thousands of workers "ready for anything," as supposedly assessed by Oiticica, apparently were not so willing after all.

It is also true that, in the following years, Rio witnessed some significant street clashes between workers and the police, during strikes, demonstrations, or protests. Although the police attributed such confrontations to the anarchists, and despite there being several wounded on both

sides and hundreds of arrests, none of these clashes were attributed to political motivations. And none of them would be designated as "insurreccional" or "revolutionary" either.

According to Tarrow, "it is only when collective action against antagonists is sustained that a confrontation episode becomes a social movement" (2009, p. 23). This understanding therefore emphasizes confrontation as a milestone for categorizing the phenomenon at hand: "Collective action becomes confrontational when it is employed by people who do not have regular access to institutions, who act on behalf of new or unmet demands, and who behave in a way that fundamentally challenges others or authorities" (2009, p. 19). And political confrontation, the author asserts, requires conditions that the Rio anarchists were still unable to meet:

Political confrontation occurs when ordinary people, always allied with more influential citizens, join forces to confront elites, authorities, and opponents. Such confrontations date back to the beginning of history. But preparing for them, coordinating them, and sustaining them against powerful opponents is the unique contribution of social movements - an invention of the Modern Age that accompanied the emergence of the modern state. (Tarrow, 2009, p. 18).

Brought to trial, the 1918 insurrection resulted in two contradictory decisions. Initially, the scant "evidence" presented by the police was sufficient for a second substitute, a lawyer who had graduated just over six years ago, acting as a federal judge, to formalize the charges against 14 of those involved. When the titular judge Raul Martins reassumed his position, he annulled this decision, pointing out the flaws in the investigation. If the police or the government had political intentions in the episode, the judge did not consider them. Taking the defendants to trial would mean considering "evidence" based on two inconsistent statements from police officers and a confession obtained under suspicious conditions. Declaring them not guilty, as he did, probably contradicted the interests of the government (as Martins had already done in several other judgments against the Union) and the conservative segments that made up the political class at the time.

By November 1920, the scenario for anarchist activism would be quite different: by that time, dozens of bombs had already exploded in the Federal District and dozens of militants had already been arrested. At that point, it would still not be possible to assess, but anarchist initiative was beginning to decline until, virtually, disappearing over the course of the decade that was beginning.

In November 1920, Raul Martins took his own life. Raul Martins committed suicide, according to conjecture from a newspaper of the time (*Correio da Manhã*, 1920, p. 3), "to avoid facing criticisms of his last acts as a judge." At the time, he was adjudicating controversial cases involving powerful economic agents. If, in the case of the 1918 rebels, he had the courage to

discredit a political farce, a year and a half later he succumbed, apparently facing more powerful antagonists than Aurelino Leal. Shortly before poisoning himself, he wrote: "I confess myself defeated, with no more strength to fight against human perfidy."

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