

Fernando O'Neill (1924-2005)
Revolutionary and Historian of Anarchism in Uruguay

By Carlos Caillabet



Fernando O'Neill (1924-2005)
(*Photograph by Carlos Caillabet, 2003*)

O'Neill Cuestas, Fernando [Zapicán] (1924-2005), revolutionary and historian of anarchism in Uruguay, was born on 15 September 1924 in Mercedes, capital of the Department of Soriano, Uruguay, the eldest son of Fernando O'Neill Parada (1890-1976) and his wife, Aurora Cuestas Acosta (1897-1977). O'Neill's first known ancestor in Uruguay on his father's side is his grandfather, Daniel O'Neill. Daniel O'Neill, an Irish immigrant and non-practising Catholic, settled in the countryside of the Department of Flores around 1870. There he married a Spanish-Uruguayan, Rosa Parada, and the couple had eleven children. The second youngest, Fernando O'Neill Parada, worked as an *estancia* foreman before becoming a landowner and attaining a comfortable economic position in Soriano. Fernando O'Neill Parada married a woman from Mercedes, Aurora Cuestas Acosta, with whom he had four children: Fernando (1924-2005), Amanda

(1927-2003), Jorge (1929-1999), and finally, Teresa (b.1934), a piano teacher living in the city of Paysandú.

Fernando O'Neill Cuestas, nicknamed Zapicán since his early years, attended primary school in the Salesian College of San Miguel de Mercedes and received a Catholic education, which he later renounced. Of a rebellious character, he did not complete his secondary education as he was expelled from school for bad behaviour. Many of O'Neill's relations were involved in violent incidents; an uncle on his mother's side was stabbed to death in a dispute with a neighbour, two uncles on his father's side committed murder and a third was killed in the battle of Tupambaé (24 June 1904) during the last Uruguayan civil war. Before reaching the age of twenty, O'Neill was involved in many knife fights in Mercedes, earning him fame as a man of arms from a young age. In the course of various confrontations and in defence of what he considered family honour, O'Neill killed one person and gravely injured two. Convicted of murder and grievous harm, he was incarcerated in Miguelete Prison, and subsequently in Punta Carretas Penitentiary.

O'Neill acknowledged that before serving time in Miguelete Prison, he had had little interest in political activism and that his life 'was that of a middle-class boy who felt a deep rejection of, or indifference to, the moral values of his class: economic success, attainment of a respected position in society and a university profession' (O'Neill 1993: 57). In Miguelete Prison, the Catalan anarchist Pedro Boadas Rivas developed a friendship with O'Neill. Boadas, together with other active anarchists, served a sentence for various attacks, murders and armed robberies, among them that of Cambio Messina in 1928 in Montevideo. This group was recaptured subsequent to undertaking a bold escape in 1931, led by Argentine anarchist Miguel Arcángel Roscigna and Italian anarchist Gino Gatti. The group had escaped through a tunnel leading to Carbonería El Buen Trato, a coalyard situated opposite the penitentiary. On foot of conversations with these anarchists and reading the books with which they provided him, O'Neill adopted a libertarian ideology and supported direct action as a method of political agitation. This was despite the fact that during that era in Uruguay, anarcho-

syndicalism - a movement pursuing industrial actions, especially the general strike - predominated over active anarchism.

Released in 1952, O'Neill joined the ranks of Libertarian Youth in Montevideo. That same year he published a 48-page pamphlet entitled *Un ex penado habla (An ex-prisoner speaks)* in which he denounced the terrible treatment meted out to prisoners in Uruguayan prisons. He further accused the police and political authorities of committing acts of corruption. The pamphlet, which was widely distributed, provoked a debate in the press. O'Neill's accusations landed him with a lawsuit for defamation and slander.

During those years, O'Neill went to live with his family, who in 1951 had settled on rented land about fifteen kilometres from the city of Paysandú. There he cultivated sugar beet and established contacts with a group of independent leftist intellectuals, whose principal reference was Carlos Quijano (1900-1984), lawyer and founder-director of the Uruguayan weekly paper "Marcha".

Returning to Montevideo in 1956, O'Neill participated in ten days of debate culminating in the foundation of the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU). Catalan anarchist refugees from the Spanish revolution (1936-1939) and some Argentine active anarchists had a particular impact on this organisation. The Uruguayan anarchists who had founded the Community of the South in 1955 did not join the FAU. They set up a printing press and moved to the outskirts of Montevideo, where they dedicated themselves to working the land on a communal basis. Others, dubbed orthodox or pure anarchists, similarly refused to join the FAU as they opposed an organisation which required obedience to leaders. O'Neill, despite voicing his dissatisfaction with the lack of clear and concrete political projects on the part of the FAU, remained within its organic structure until 1968.

Because of his methodical character and his passion for books, between 1965 and 1967 the FAU entrusted O'Neill with sorting and categorising the International Anarchist Library Archive with headquarters in Montevideo. This undertaking had been commenced by the Romanian Eugen Relgis (1895-1987), an anarchist and pacifist intellectual taking refuge in Uruguay. At the same time, O'Neill

worked in a union with an anarcho-sindicalist slant, centred around the workers of FUNSA, a Uruguayan tyre factory. During this period, he established close relations with some of the most prominent libertarian activists of the era: brothers Gerardo and Mauricio Gatti, Carlos Mechoso and Ruben Barcos, among others.

The triumph of the Cuban revolution and the subsequent ideological and political declarations of its leaders provoked divisions in the Uruguayan anarchist movement, despite the fact that all of those involved supported some of the political measures adopted by the Cubans, such as agrarian reform. In 1968 O'Neill found it contradictory to consider himself an anarchist and at the same time to support the Cuban revolution. The revolution was defined as Marxist-Leninist and had embarked upon a process to consolidate a State sought to combat all forms of opposition.

The anarchist doctrine negates the existence of the State whether it be capitalist or socialist and the FAU proclaimed that 'its fundamental political aim is the destruction of the State in the form of institutional political domination, as well as the suppression of governmental forms of power' (FAU 1986: 18). For this reason, and because the anarchists' aims seemed to him confused, O'Neill decided to distance himself from the FAU. In 1968 he approached the Tupamaros National Liberation Front (MNL), an urban guerrilla organisation founded in 1966. The organisation was initially intended as a form of resistance to the repressive excesses of political power and to the threat of a coup d'état.

The Tupamaros, a revolutionary leftist organisation, predominantly comprised middle-class activists with university education. O'Neill felt comfortable within this organisation in spite of the fact that distancing himself from his old comrades in the FAU had produced a conflict of loyalties that plagued him throughout his life. O'Neill participated in Tupamaro activism such as bank robberies, and worked for the information service of that organisation. Despite being detained by the police in 1969 and confined to a barracks, his connections with the Tupamaros could not be proven and he was released after a few months.

In 1972, faced with a military offensive against the Tupamaros, O'Neill decided to move to Chile, carrying a letter of recommendation from the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano addressed to the then socialist president Salvador Allende. When general Augusto Pinochet staged a military coup on 11 September 1973 and overthrew Allende, O'Neill managed to obtain refuge in the Argentine embassy and was moved to that country in January 1974. O'Neill settled in Buenos Aires but did not participate in Argentine guerrilla movements. His intention was to enter Uruguayan territory via the north coast, but he desisted when he learned that his name was included in the list of people persecuted by the Argentine-Uruguayan paramilitary commandos which operated in that city. When a number of his companions were kidnapped and 'disappeared', O'Neill took refuge in the Swedish embassy in November 1974. In December of that year he arrived in Sweden as a political exile and settled in Stockholm.

From Europe, O'Neill repeatedly planned to return to Uruguay in secret to join the resistance movement against the dictatorship in power in Uruguay since the coup d'état of 27 June 1973. Nevertheless, his attempts to return failed because of practical impediments and the defection of some of the exiles who accompanied him. O'Neill then concentrated on becoming active in campaigning for the release of Uruguayan political prisoners and denouncing his conditions in prison. In 1982 he moved to Spain. In Madrid O'Neill sold toys, and later in Málaga he sold refreshments on the beach. There he contacted anarcho-syndicalist elements and initiated and collaborated enthusiastically in the first stage of the publication of the *Rojo y Negro* newspaper. 'O'Neill was a person much loved by the CNT activists of those years in the city of Málaga, where he left his mark and was exemplary for his honesty' (Peña 2005). In 1984 O'Neill travelled to Portugal. In Lisbon he made the acquaintance of Otelio Saraiva de Carvalho, one of the leaders of the Claveles Rojos' revolution of 1974, and engaged in activities for this movement.

In 1985 Uruguay recovered its democratic institutions and in mid-1986, O'Neill returned to his native country, settling in the Montevideo district of Cerro. There he re-established relations with members of the Tupamaro movement and FAU activists, organisations which had been legalised by the government chosen in the

national elections of November 1984. In Cerro, O'Neill organised a residents' civil defence movement to combat delinquency in the district, for which he was questioned by his anarchist companions. Distanced from them, in 1997, he settled in Paysandú, where he gradually abandoned political activism, but supported the leftist coalition of Frente Amplio, which triumphed in the 2004 elections.

He wrote and published *Un ex penado habla* (Montevideo: author's edition, 1952), *Anarquistas de acción en Montevideo 1927-1937* (Montevideo: Recortes, 1993); *El caso Pardeiro: un ajusticiamiento anarquista* (Montevideo: Testimonio, 2001) and *Búsqueda y captura del comandante Doblaz* (Montevideo: Fin de Siglo, 2004).

O'Neill was a particularly slim man and his friends gave him the nickname "Finito" (Little Thin Man). He was a kind and formal person, methodical in the extreme and possessing incisive reasoning. O'Neill was a compulsive reader, an autodidact who searched tirelessly and in vain for responses to the ambiguity of the human condition. During the closing years of his life, O'Neill concluded that humanity was still not mature enough to generate just and peaceful societies and he disavowed totalitarian world views.

In his last testament Fernando O'Neill stipulated that religious symbols should not be used during his wake, that any feelings of sadness should be avoided and that those attending should take their leave of him simply as a departing friend.

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(translation, Claire Healy)

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