

# **Art as a Weapon**

**Artists and Anarchism**

Anarchist Federation

1996

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## Part 1

THE CONCEPT OF counter-culture is essential to any understanding of anarchism as a movement of total opposition to authoritarian society. Not simply because anarchists reject the cruder forms of economic determinism, but also because anarchists want to extend the social struggle into all those areas of life in which capital is dominant. By “counter-culture” anarchists do not just mean an “alternative” culture, but one which challenges and confronts capitalism and authoritarianism in a way in which purely political and economic movements are unable to do.

Art is one of the many cultural forms in which it is possible to identify a distinctly anarchist approach. The way in which people see society, the way in which we express ideas and generate new modes of expression are essential to the development of critical opposition. Art, through its re-interpretation of reality helps to focus that opposition.

Many prominent artists have been closely involved with the anarchist movement, contributing leaflets, writing articles for the anarchist press, illustrating pamphlets, books and posters and their art has been merely one aspect of their involvement. Many anarchists have (the reverse side of the coin) been artists, in the form of illustrations, cartoons, montages and posters which have often been anonymous, but no less a part of anarchist artistic creation for that. Anarchist contribution to art theory has also been important, ranging from Kropotkin’s ideal version of socially integrated art, and his exhortation of the artists:

*“Narrate for us in your vivid style or in your fervent pictures the titanic struggle of the masses against their oppressors; inflame young hearts with the beautiful breath of revolution.”* (Peter Kropotkin: Paroles d’un Revolte)

to Herbert Read’s development of a theory of art as an agent for social change.

Read originally saw a need for an artistic elite but soon dropped the idea in favour of the concept of “every person a special kind of artist”, elaborating his views in Education Through Art, in which everybody’s artistic abilities should be matured to contribute to the richness of collective life. Attacking the repression embedded in contemporary education, Read advocated that art be placed at the centre of education to promote creativity, independence and strength of character.

Anarcho-syndicalism has provided one of the clearest practical expression of art’s social potential. Fernand Pelloutier, activist and theoretician of anarcho-syndicalism, believed that artists should directly join the class struggle. To art he gave the task of destroying the myths on which capitalism rested, and inspiring revolt instead of submission:

*“That which, better than all the instinctive explosions of wrath, can lead to a social revolution is the awakening of the mind to scorn and prejudices and laws and this awakening art alone can accomplish.”* (Fernand Pelloutier: L’Art et la Revolte, 1895)

Pelloutier placed considerable emphasis on the cultural role of the Bourse du Travail that was the pivotal organisational form of French anarcho-syndicalism. In Spain the anarchist “ateneo” provided a similar social focus for revolutionary art. The anarchist poster artist Carles Fontserè had described how the autonomy of a collectively organised artist studio linked to the Spanish CNT enabled artists to respond rapidly and spontaneously to the military revolt which triggered the Spanish Revolution, so that:

*“the revolution iconography of the posters which were plastered with amazing rapidity over the walls of the troubled city could be seen by all, panicking the bourgeois and revolutionary combatant alike, as an unmistakable symbol of a popular desire to crush fascism.”* (Carles Fontserè: “Catalan posters of the Spanish Civil War” in Non Pasaran! 1986)

Fontserè goes on to point out that these posters were the “work of painters for whom the poster was an avant garde art form, with social value as a means of mass communication in tune with the spirit of the age”.

## **Critical Edge**

For art to retain its critical edge there is a need to continually re-interpret the world, invent new concepts and ways of seeing, and to challenge the existing boundaries of establishment art. Without this capacity art and culture fall apart. A continuing struggle exists between change and tradition in art, and it is in this area that new ideas and values are generated. Here also the anarchist artists are usually to be found, their social radicalism and their artistic radicalism reinforcing each other. Artists identified with anarchism have usually been in the forefront of rebellious tendencies within art. This includes artists such as the French anarchist, Paul Signac who wrote:

*“The anarchist painter is not he who does anarchist paintings, but he who without caring for money, without desire for recompense, struggles with all his individuality against bourgeois conventions.”*

Courbet, the founder of realism, Seurat and his revolutionary theory of pointillism, Kupka, the pioneer of abstract art, Munch who synthesized symbolism and expressionism, Kandinsky, Camille Pissarro and even for a period Picasso, Frans Masereel, the Belgium Expressionist, are just a few of the many artists who have been involved with the anarchist movement, and who have utilised anarchist concepts in their art, their revolutionary politics informing and underpinning their artistic radicalism.

Indeed some writers such as Renato Poggioli have suggested a basic identity between the artistic avant-garde and anarchism:

*“The only omnipresent or recurring political ideology within the avant-garde is the least political or the most anti-political of all: libertarianism and anarchism”* (Renato Poggioli: *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1968)

## **Part 2**

Although anarchist artists have come from a variety of countries and artistic schools, the anarchist aesthetic which unites them has three major characteristics, succinctly described by Michael Scrivener:

“(1) an uncompromising insistence upon total freedom for the artist, and an avant-garde contempt for conservative art; (2) a critique of elitist, alienated art and a visionary alternative in which art becomes integrated with everyday life; (3) art as

social change — that is since art is an experience, it is a way to define and redefine human needs, altering social-political structures accordingly.” (Michael Scrivener: *An Introduction to Anarchist Aesthetic*)

The catalyst for the continuing alliance between art and anarchism has frequently been provided by the anarchist periodicals. In France, magazines such as *La Revolte* and *Les Temps Nouveaux*, both edited by the anarcho-communist Jean Grave, *Pere Peinard*, an anarchist weekly written entirely in slang, and edited by anarcho-syndicalist Emile Pouget, and *La Feuille*, edited by the flamboyant individual Zo d’Axa, all succeed in attracting the most innovative and class conscious artists, including Maximilien Luce, Paul Signac, Grandjouan, Kupka and others. In Germany, Franz Pfemfert’s *Die Aktion* combined the revolutionary nature of expressionist art and literature with the revolutionary writings of Muhsam and Bakunin, and a strong anti-militarist sentiment, to produce one of the most influential and political art magazines of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Among many artists who illustrated *Die Aktion* was Franz Seiwart, who provided graphics to Ret Marut for use in the clandestine *Ziegelbrenner*. Marut edited *Die Ziegelbrenner* while hiding from the Freikorps, having narrowly escaped execution for his role in the Munich Republic of Councils, 1919, and is better known for the many novels he wrote as B. Traven.

In the Netherlands, Bakunin’s biographer Arthur Muller Lehning edited a seminal *I-10 Internazionale Revue*, which treated art, science and philosophy as key factors in the evolution of all political and economic situations. Informed by Lehning’s anarchist background *I-10* provided the artistic avant-garde of the late 1920’s with a vehicle for international communication attracting contributors such as Walter Benjamin, Piet Mondrian, Kathe Kollwitz, Kandinsky, Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky and Malevich. Other members of the editorial collective included the architect J.J.P. Oud, and the Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Lehning summarized the policy of the review:

“The charter and meaning of this magazine are not set forth by any dogma stating what a new culture shall or will be, but rather a illustration of how each expression of contemporary life becomes aware of its own choices” (*I-10*, issue no 13, 1928)

## **Working Alliance**

It is interesting to note Malevich’s continually connection with the anarchist press, as during the Russian Revolution he had originally written about his artistic theories for the anarchist press, until the Bolsheviks closed down the anarchist papers.

In London, the anarchist magazine *Liberty*, edited by the tailor, James Tochatti, and its contemporary *The Torch*, edited by the young Rossetti sister, Olivia and Helen, briefly forged a working alliance with some of the more socially aware artists of Victorian England. Walter Crane designed the *Liberty Press* logo and contributed a poster design depicting the Haymarket martyrs to *Liberty*. G.F. Watts also contributed illustrations to *Liberty*, while the young Lucien Pissarro provided a series of graphics to the *Torch*.

Walter Crane’s connections with the anarchist movement are usually ignored by his biographers, but were in fact central to his concept of socialism. Not only did he contribute to *Liberty*, but also to *Freedom*, and to the anarchist influenced *Commonweal*, the newspaper of the Socialist League. In 1896 he made an unsuccessful attempt to have the anarchist accepted by the Second

International. Immediately after the Haymarket incident, he wrote a poem on the “Suppression of Free Speech in Chicago”. Crane wrote another poem “Freedom in America” expressing his disgust at the travesty of justice in the Haymarket trial, and attended the protest on Bloody Sunday which was attacked by the police. He narrowly escaped injury and arrest. On a subsequent trip to America Crane was a speaker at a commemoration meeting in honour of the Chicago anarchists, appearing on the platform with Benjamin Tucker. Attacked by the press for his stand he wrote in his own defense in the Boston Herald:

“Anarchism simply means a plea for a life of voluntary association, of free individual development – the freedom only bounded by respect for the freedom of others.”

Artistically his most interesting contribution to the anarchist cause was the cover he produced for the prospectus of the International Socialist School run by Louise Michel while she was in London. The guiding committee of this school included Kropotkin, William Morris and Malatesta.

Many of the artists who were involved in the anarchist movement took their involvement well past the point of contributing the occasional illustration, often at considerable personal risk. Maximilien Luce, for example was placed on trial for his anarchist beliefs and activity, in the Trial of Thirty, which took place in 1894 in the wake of several bombings by Parisian anarchists. Luce and most of the others were acquitted, but the incident is recorded in *Mazas*, an album of lithographs depicting life for the imprisoned anarchists awaiting trial in the infamous Mazas jail. In the same year, the Italian divisionist painter Plino Nomellini was placed on trial in Genoa, with several other Italian anarchists including Luigi Galleani, for conspiring to overthrow the state.

## **Prison**

Another artist Aristide Delannoy, was imprisoned for his anarchist art. Delannoy was a prolific contributor to anarchist periodicals, ranging from the satirical *L'Assiette au Beurre*, to the revolutionary *Les Temps Nouveaux*. Together with the journalist Victor Meric, Delannoy produced the magazine called *Les Hommes du Jour*, and in the issue of October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1908, he portrayed General d'Amade, the occupier of Morocco, as a blood stained butcher standing amidst his colonial victims. This illustration cost Delannoy a 3,000 franc fine and a one year prison sentence. Public pressure, including mass protest meetings addressed by Anatole France, eventually forced a pardon. On his release he was soon in trouble with the authorities again, this time for a series of anti-militarist drawings, but the months in La Sante prison had aggravated a hereditary lung condition, and he died on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1911, aged just 37.

The basis of involvement by artists in the anarchist movement has been summarized by the Italian artist Enrico Baj, in an interview of *A-Rivista Anarchica*:

“There is one driving force of an artist that always has a basis in anarchism; that is, the desire for freedom and the rebellion against the dictates of conformity in art. We can say that every artist has a certain degree of the anarchist spirit and, in me, it is perhaps the greater because I have considered by ideas deeply and I have cultivated this sensation which, for other painters, is only superficial. In order to invent one must break the bonds that bind us to pre-determined formulae. The most important thing is not to passively submit but to understand what is happening around us. I believe that an artist must build and signify his own freedom.”

Baj's anti militarist collages have been both controversial and internationally acclaimed, but he is best known for the long series of works around the theme of the police murder of Giuseppe Pinelli, Baj's major work on the theme "The Funeral of the Anarchist Pinelli" was the subject of censorship in 1972. Earlier works were also the subject of censorship and right wing attacks in both Italy and Brazil. Among Baj's recent work was the vivid depiction of liberty and authority for the poster advertising the anarchist gathering in Venice in 1984.

One time merchant sailor Flavio Constantini has, like fellow Italian Baj, depicted the murder of Pinelli. The stark simplicity of the image of Pinelli's broken body contrasting sharply with the artists more ornate and brightly coloured depictions of other scenes from anarchist history. Constantini's work has appeared in numerous anarchist publications in many different countries and a second edition of a collection of the illustrations, *The Art of Anarchy*, has been published by Black Flag to raise funds for the Anarchist Black Cross. In a short autobiographical article published in the now defunct *Wildcat* (not to be confused with the current magazine with the same name), Constantini writes of "an isolated but insistent voice, an ancient Utopia" which presents an alternative to capitalism and communist authoritarianism. "I have tried" he writes, "within the scope of my own possibilities, to publicise this uncompromising alternative".

## **Innovative**

In France several innovative artists are associated with the anarchist movement, including cartoonist/illustrators Cabu and Tardi. The exciting graphic artist Luciano Loicono has been a member of the French Anarchist Federation for many years contributing to many of their publications including *Le Monde Libertaire* and *Magazine Libertaire*. Luciano's single most powerful work, was a poster he designed in the immediate aftermath of a police raid on Radio Libertaire. The police smashed the transmission equipment, hoping to put the radio off air. Within 24 hours more than 5,000 took to the Paris streets in protest, many of them carrying Luciano's posters which also covered the Paris walls, depicting a young woman with a padlock through her lips, symbolising the brutal denial of speech.

Among the many contemporary artists who link their art with the need for revolution is the American avant-garde artist Carlos Cortes. Cortes has produced exciting posters of anarchist heroes like Ricardo Flores Magon and Joe Hill, but is also involved in community struggles through the Industrial Workers of the World, and through Chicano groups. His posters and graphics are fly posted at night protesting about police brutality, racism and social injustice, and articulate the fear and anger of the repressed.

As anarchists our concern cannot just be with the past or the present, but must also be with the immediate future. Speaking personally it seems that our central concern must be to democratise artistic creation. Posters, comics, postcards, magazine illustrations, and other forms of art have helped to spread and democratise the consumption of art, but as a movement we have yet to put Herbert Read's idea of "every person a special kind of artist" into practice. We should attempt to organise workshops to explain techniques and methods and establish collectively-run resource centres in each community. If, however, these are to avoid the degeneration experienced by the arts lab movement they must have closer links with the social needs of the community and with the revolutionary movement. We must also begin to redefine what we mean by the term artist, so that the artist ceases to be a person apart. We all need to develop the artist's skills and vision.

### **Part 3: War Artists of the Class War**

The role of the revolutionary artist is to reveal the real nature of capitalist society, to attack the system that causes poverty, hunger and death; to rip aside the mask that conceals systematic corruption, heartless bureaucracy and biased laws; to remind people that they are not alone, that their individual acts of resistance can be more effective as collective action taken with other people.

One such artist is 69 year-old Carlos Cortez. His lino-cut posters attack the evils and hypocrisy of capitalism. They are fly-posted around the Chicago streets at night and provide illustrations to accompany articles in the revolutionary press. Taking the heroes of revolutionary anarchism and the quiet daily heroism of the oppressed as his themes, his art is popular and populist.

The son of a Mexican Indian, who was an organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World (the I.W.W. also known as “wobblies”), and a German socialist mother, Cortez has been a “harvest hand, construction worker, loafer, jailbird... vagabond factory stiff”. He joined the I.W.W. after World War 2 and his articles, poems and illustrations have appeared in its paper, ‘Industrial Worker’ ever since.

#### **‘La Lucha Continua’**

Cortez draws on his Mexican Indian origins and his involvement with the wobblies for his visual images. Typically these ideas came together in a woodcut entitled ‘La lucha continua’ (‘the struggle continues’). Based on photographs of a peasant demonstration in Bolivia, Carlos added two skeletons and a pregnant woman, indicating that the struggle is something that takes in the past, present and future.

One striking woodblock poster depicts a Meztizo family, standing in front of a pyramid at the side of a stalk of maize, with the wording “Somos de la Tierra – No somos ilegales” (“we are of the land – we are not illegal”). Produced to protect against the harassment of undocumented immigrants from Mexico by the U.S. immigration authorities.

“Imagine those whose ancestors came from another continent telling the natives of this continent that they do not have the right to move around in their own land. Migrating to better their economic conditions is precisely what brought the Europeans over to this hemisphere”, Carlos explains. A similar point was made on a small card advertising an exhibition celebrating “500 years of Resistance” which portrays a group of American Indians laughing at a portrait of Christopher Columbus.

#### **Central America**

American imperialism in Central and South America has been a favourite target for Cortez. One poster depicts a nursing mother and child, holding the slogan: “Miru como trabajan tus impuestos, CABRON!” (“look how your taxes work, cuckold”). Behind the mother and child tower skeletons in helmets marked “Policia”. This poster was designed to draw attention to the way the taxes of U.S. workers are used against workers in Central America, in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. A smaller poster depicts parents grieving over a flag-draped coffin and lists the number of U.S. soldiers killed in wars of intervention. Printed down the side is the slogan: “Draftees of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your Generals!”



One woodcut has been based on the collective experience of Guatemalan women whose husbands had ‘disappeared’, after being taken from their houses by armed gangs. Cortez gathered their stories together, and synthesised it into the depiction of a family house invaded by a death squad, a masked informer points the woman’s husband out to the killers.

Living in Chicago, Carlos is active with the Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCH). One poster printed for MARCH is of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexican engraver Jose Guadalupe Posada, embraced by one of the calaveras (animated skeletons) for which he was famous. Mexican artistic influences shape Cortez’s work and the striking black and white images recall those of the revolutionary Mexican artists grouped around the paper *El Machete*.

## **Resistance and Community**

The depiction of Posada is one of many portrait posters, which include the legendary song-writer and wobbly agitator Joe Hill, the Mexican anarchist-communist, Ricardo Flores Magon, and Lucy Parsons, a former slave, who dedicated her whole life to revolutionary action. In all these portraits Cortez combines image and text, and the subject gazes out with a direct honesty which confronts the viewer.

In Britain the artist most closely identified with anarchism is Clifford Harper. An illustrator whose work frequently appears in the national press, Harper’s graphics have celebrated resistance and community, providing a critique of all that is wrong with capitalism, attacking all forms of authoritarianism and projecting a utopian vision of possible alternatives. Born into a west London working-class family, his schoolboy rebelliousness – truancy, expulsion and petty crime – grew into involvement with the sixties counter-culture and increasing political awareness. This included a period of living in a commune which provided glimpses of life’s potential – a potential described in one of his first major works ‘Class War Comix’ and a frequently reprinted series of illustrations commissioned for ‘Radical Technology’, which presented utopian ideas in a practical early obtainable manner – terraced houses with collectivised gardens, community workshops and medical centres in which the sexual division of labour had been transformed. These visions were contrasted with the reality of capitalism portrayed in *Patriarch Street Scene*.

## **Stirring Depiction**

The idea that anarchism is realistic, is attainable, that its many strands make a vibrant alternative to capitalism was reinforced by the cover of a 1976 catalogue for *Compendium Bookshop*, which featured pictures of windmills, waterfalls working and demonstrating women alongside some of the historical figures of anarchism.

It is also the theme which runs through ‘Anarchy; a Graphic Guide’, which was published in 1987. This was written and illustrated by Harper, and provides one of the best introductions to the ideas of anarchism. All the variants of anarchism are explored, and represented as valid alternatives to capitalism. The illustrations draw on the various styles and artists connected with anarchism in the past, Farns Masereel being one obvious example. He also uses the traditional iconography of anarchism: Light, chains, hammers, prison bars, flags, crowds and barricades all reinforce the ideas explained in the text. In chapter 4 an explanation of the Paris Commune is accompanied by a stirring depiction of women in assertive and revolutionary roles.

Much of Harper's graphic work celebrates resistance. One of his most effective works was the black and white cartoon-strip tribute to Jim Heather-Hayes, the young anarchist poet who committed suicide in Ashford prison after serving four months in solitary confinement for fire-bombing a London police station in 1982. The cartoon-strip is a format he frequently uses, sometimes to illustrate poems, such as Siegfried Sassoon's anti-war poem 'Fight to a Finish', in which the returning soldiers turn on the press before driving the "butchers out of Parliament".

### **Rebellious Spirit**

Harper's recent work includes the illustration and design of 'Visions of Poetry' an anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> century anarchist poetry, which he also helped edit. This and a slimmer volume published at the same time, the 'Prolegomena to a study of the Return of the Repressed in History' are skilfully designed and crafted, with text and illustration working together in harmony. The illustrations of the 'Prolegomena' stand in the edge of abstraction, yet provide the perfect foil for the bitter denunciations of authority found in the text.

In stark contrast to this move towards the semi-abstract are his series of picture-card portraits of 36 anarchists, men and women who have dreamed of a different way of life, including Emiliano Zapata, the Chinese writer Ba Jin and John Cage, the musician. Harper's work has been diverse, and he has illustrated book jackets, LP covers, magazine articles, but his best work has often been that which has related to a particular struggle, such as the poll-tax rebellion. His image of angry peasants captured the rebellious spirit of the mass of ordinary people, and linked it to similar revolts of the past. Little wonder that his particular image was reprinted again and again. Cortez and Harper live on separate continents, yet both are united in their opposition to capitalism by a determination to document the class war as it happens — in doing so they have created art with greater meaning, relevance and engagement than all the arid portraits and landscapes that fill the gallery walls.

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