

Against the Hammer and Sickle

Reflecting on symbolism in Anarchy

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Through years of reading groups, labor efforts, and political organizing, the question inevitably arises “You’re an Anarchist-Communist, why don’t you use the Hammer and Sickle?”

At first, I was happy to explain that Bolshevik-types don’t have a monopoly on Communism, and that the anarchist tradition has a swathe of its own unique symbols. Of course, I don’t deny that the Free Territory utilized the hammer and sickle on its currency stamps¹ or that the CNT had its own use of the Hammer and Sickle². That said, that doesn’t mean I believe we should continue using that icon. Of course, we know the Free Territory was a heavily decentralized affair, meaning there were different currency stamps, places there was no currency, etc. I don’t believe that anarchist project can be criticized as deeply, in retrospect. The CNT-FAI, too, was not homogenous, with various factions within the CNT, from liberal republicans to truly anti-Bolshevik Syndicalists. There is much to learn from both projects, and their use of the Hammer and Sickle is simply one I find to be a historical dead-end. From there, a simple anarchist critique of Bolshevism would likely arise.

I would explain it just about this way for some time, to varying responses. Many, especially non-anarchists, shook their heads in the affirmative. Others, especially State Communists would shake their heads in a begrudging sense. Naturally, they took offense to me claiming they betrayed Communist principles of worker self-abolition and their ideas were covered in the blood of workers and peasants the world around. The most frustrating response was the same dismissing motion, from other anarchists! “But, the symbol represents the worker-peasant alliance,” or “We can reclaim it from authoritarians,” were quick to follow.

Was it rude to laugh in their faces? No, not really. It is historically ignorant to claim we should use the hammer and sickle for its symbolic purposes, as if there are no other options! The hammer and plow, while more closely tied to Irish Republican Socialism at large, is one such non-hammer and sickle symbol that shows the same notions. And while there is value in signifying solidarity between industrial workers (hammer) and rural peasants or displaced individuals (sickles), this relationship is confined to only conditional regions. There is no peasantry in the United Kingdom or United States, for example. Yes, a peasantry exists in places across Asia, South American,

¹ Wikimedia Commons has an example under the name “File:Makhnovist Emblem.svg”

² The 1937 “Almanaque Lacio” poster includes a Hammer and Sickle alongside a CNT-FAI flag.

Africa, and so on, and it is up to anarchists there to design their own symbols of solidarity. Also, the limiting of symbolic solidarity between industrial workers and agricultural ones is limiting and excludes classes such as the lumpenproletariat.

Perhaps I am too on the nose with this, but the notion that we can reclaim the hammer and sickle from Marxism-Leninism or any of its derivatives is like claiming Lenin was a libertatian socialist. In fact, the history of this symbol is directly tied to Lenin, “In 1917, Lenin held a competition to create a Soviet emblem. The winning design was a hammer and sickle, with a sword. Lenin decided to get rid of the sword because he wanted to portray the nation as peaceful. Then, the Moscow artist Yevgeny Kamzolkin designed the image of a crossed hammer and sickle for a May Day poster. In 1918, this version was adopted officially by the Soviets.”³ Perhaps if we were to ‘reclaim’ the hammer and sickle, we could rehabilitate Trotsky as a friend to the anarchist revolutionaries of Ukraine!

I mentioned above a history of anarchist symbolism. The black flag is the most recognizable, next to the ‘Anarchy is Order’ Symbol: Ⓐ. Both have a deep history, the former coming to popular use by the efforts of Louise Michel, revolutionary member of the Paris Commune. She once bore the red flag before turning to anarchy during her time at a penal colony. Speaking of which, she once said of the red flag, “Lyon, Marseille, Narbonne, all had their own Communes, and like ours [in Paris], theirs too were drowned in the blood of revolutionaries. That is why our flags are red. Why are our red banners so terribly frightening to those persons who have caused them to be stained that colour?” While the Paris Commune is often found in Marxist discourse, it is heavily analyzed by the Anarchists, too, as some Communards were indeed anarchists. So while the red flag is a more general socialist symbol, it has a place among anarchist tradition, especially in its synthesis with the black flag as the bisected red and black flag, which grew in popularity due its use by the CNT-FAI in Spain.⁴ Both the red, black, red-and-black, and the letters’ own derivatives (the anarchist flag is really just a coloring book!) are all fair use, in my view.

The Ⓐ symbol, as just mentioned, is also widely popular among anarchists, perhaps more so than the flags we fly. While it calls forth a strong negative reaction, what else would we expect from mainstream society under a neo-liberal regime? Surely the hammer and sickle wouldn’t fly any better, as we know. The symbol represents Proudhon’s notion of “Anarchy is Order,” but it’s history is less well-known:

However, the origin of the “circled-A” as an anarchist symbol is less clear. Many think that it started in the 1970s punk movement, but it goes back to a much earlier period. According to Peter Marshall, “[i]n 1964 a French group, Jeunesse Libertaire, gave new impetus to Proudhon’s slogan ‘Anarchy is Order’ by creating the circled-A a symbol which quickly proliferated throughout the world.” [Op. Cit., p. 445] This is not the earliest sighting of this symbol. On November 25 1956, at its foundation in Brussels, the Alliance Ouvriere Anarchiste (AOA) adopted this symbol. Going even further, a BBC documentary on the Spanish Civil War shows an anarchist militia

³ Webmaster. “The Spectre of Hammer and Sickle.” 1965 Tribunal, 13 Sept. 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150914194725/http://1965tribunal.org/the-spectre-of-hammer-and-sickle/>.

⁴ “Anarchist Writers.” Edited by Iain Mckay, AFAQ Appendix-The Symbols of Anarchy Anarchist Writers, 10 Nov. 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201005101602/https://anarchism.pageabode.com/afaq/append2.html>.

member with a “circled-A” clearly on the back of his helmet. Other than this, there is little know about the “circled-A”s origin.⁵

As a most offensive act, some anarchists overlay or combine the anarchy flags and symbols with the hammer and sickle! A simple image internet search of Anarchist Communism shows a black flag with the hammer and sickle, or the latter put together with the @, like some sort of chimeric design!

To ground this article in proper discourse, to move away from abstract or hypothetical responses, let us refer to Non-Compete. “Anarchist” Non-Compete has argued that it’s understandable that anarchists reject the use of the hammer and sickle, though he himself uses it, stating, “If you’re an anarchist and you don’t want to incorporate communist symbols into your praxis, then I absolutely support your decision. As for me, I am an anarcho-communist.”⁶ This is another historical and theoretical flaw, though I would expect as much from someone who gets cozy with supporters of a state bureaucracy masquerading as a proletarian vanguard. Conflating Bolshevism with Communism, or to put it another way, to accept Bolshevism as a valid Communist theory and movement, is anti-anarchist. His tag-line for a photo in which he wears a hammer and sickle shirt by an anarchist flag is, “Hey! You got communism in my anarchism!” Wow, really stunning anarchist principles. The hammer and sickle is not representative of communism, but anti-communism. Communist-Anarchism is not the synthesis of Anarchism and Marxism, but as Nestor Makhno said, “Anarchism is naturally innate in man: communism is the logical extrapolation from it.”⁷

Another option from the anarchist symbolism is the Black Cat / Sabo-Tabby. Designed for use for the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), a revolutionary industrial unionist organization located in several countries, most known for its origins and activities in the US. Anarchist presence in the IWW is not unknown, and while the organization itself is not anarchist in name, it has much in common with socialist-anarchist principles, such as the IWW’s commitment to “class-struggle, federalism, direct economic action, local autonomy and mutual aid.”⁸

The raised fist is another non-explicit anarchist symbol, insofar that it has seen mass use across political ideology, but largely finds itself in the realm of “solidarity politics,” for the lack of a better term. It has been used in graffiti and graphic designs in more recent years and is generally such a variable symbol, there is no large opposition, in my view.

So, no, there is no place for Anarchists to reclaim the Bolshevik symbols, as we have plenty of unique symbols of our own, as well as generally socialist or revolutionary icons that have a close relationship to Anarchism. Symbols or other representations of our ideology are important to helping others understand our message. To use the symbols of genocidal, authoritarian, anti-worker regimes is to show a sort of apologia. It isn’t a surprise then that I personally find Anarchists who use these symbols are the same who are pro-Left Unity (whatever the fuck that means)!

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Non-Compete. “An Anarchist Defense of the Sickle and Hammer.” Non-Compete, 9 May 2018, <https://www.non-compete.com/an-anarchist-defense-of-the-sickle-and-hammer/>.

⁷ Makhno, Nestor. “The ABC of the Revolutionary Anarchist.” The Anarchist Library, 7 Apr. 2021, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nestor-makhno-the-abc-of-the-revolutionary-anarchist>.

⁸ Dolgoff, Sam. “Revolutionary Tendencies in American Labor — Part 1.” Revolutionary Tendencies in American Labor — Part 1: Industrial Workers of the World, Industrial Workers of the World, <https://archive.iww.org/history/library/Dolgoff/newbeginning/4/>.

As the notorious Bolshevik Joseph Stalin said, “We believe that the Anarchists are real enemies of Marxism. Accordingly, we also hold that a real struggle must be waged against real enemies.”⁹ Likewise, we consider Marxists to be the real enemies of Anarchism and understand a struggle against them is a part of Anarchy, which includes struggling against their Holy Icons.

⁹ Stalin, “Anarchism or Socialism?”

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