

The School and the Barricade

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“The majority of the public comes to the depositories of archives for only two reasons: to verify family relations at the National Registry, and to verify property at the Cadastral Registry. Only these archives seem to have considerable importance in the life of most people. The proof of this lies in the fact that during riots or revolutions, one of the most urgent actions of the revolutionaries is to go to the archives and burn the title deeds. One might almost believe that the majority of the people never go to archives except during revolutions.” (Melot 1986)

“In Argentina, the tradition of People’s Libraries has been sustained since the beginning of the twentieth century by anarchists. There is one in every town, in every labor force. Sometimes they carry the names of great ancestors; sometimes simply the name of a street or local personality.

“In Buenos Aires, for example, the Biblioteca Popular José Ingenieros has for sixty years offered to students as well as laborers scholarly books, novels, encyclopedias, and general works, in addition to its two archive rooms devoted to anarchist documents. It becomes a movie club on Sunday afternoons, gatherings are held in the evenings; and one can even have a barbecue in the courtyard. It has often been forced to close, to hide itself behind a neutral facade, to relocate suddenly, and to withstand floods. If today some laborers tell its story, it is because it has nonetheless endured.” (Francomano 1995)

All these libraries are the collective property of the Movement, run by volunteers, open to the town, to the neighborhood people; they are by no means ghettos. Some of them are supported by organizations like La Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (the Argentine Regional Labor Federation) or La Federación Libertaria Argentina (the Argentine Libertarian Federation); others are supported by an informal group. Many have survived in spite of the weakness of the movement, even when dictators forced laborers to work clandestinely. And when it was necessary to relocate in haste all the unions lent a hand or threw money in the pot.

La Biblioteca Juventud Moderna (Modern Youth Library) in Mar del Plata was founded in November of 1911. Veteran activist Hector Woollands recalls that it filled “a double function: that of a school, which offered a high level of information, and that of a barricade, the place where labor unions could elaborate their direct action plans.” (La Razón 1996)¹

Schools and barricades: what better way to describe the work which Anarchist libraries and documentation centers around the world wish to do? It isn’t a matter of us archiving the memory of the movement in order to fix it in place; it is a matter of keeping our history alive and subversive, of affirming the existence of Anarchists (“There are not even a hundred of them..”)² and their diversity against the suffocation by those in power. History with a capital “H” gleefully reduces life, ideas and disturbing experiences to anecdotes and tales. (Escudero 1996)

“Through the reactivation of its past, Anarchism can reappropriate its culture. The activity this renaissance implies, will in itself constitute an invigorating agent of cultural life. The purpose of the operation, obviously, is not for us to be able to marshal a bookish knowledge of our

¹ The “barricade” as used in the title and body of this article refers to the library’s functioning to protect its holdings, and therefore the memory of the movement and its strategies (M.E. note of clarification to R.B., October 2009).

² “Y en a pas un sur cent...” An allusion to the poem “Les Anarchistes” by Leo Ferre. The poem can be accessed at www.math.umn.edu/chansons/ferre/anarchistes.html (translator’s note)

antecedents. It is more a matter of knowing ourselves, of restoring to our field of knowledge the courage, the dreams and ideas which have made Anarchism a historical reality. An active past is a past mobilized by and for a present activity. It is not just doing genealogy for the fun of it. The interest lies in rediscovering what is implicit in our position, and in what unites us. The search for unity goes beyond the search for our background. This is but one aspect of the work of foundation, which for us takes place in the present. Our reading of the past, therefore, will also depend on the coherence which we will have brought to our current ideas; each of these two efforts of structuring will continually refer us back to the other.” (Furth 1973)

Anarchists have always been readers; every group publishes a paper, brochures, establishes a library. Reading forms one’s judgment, fosters one’s autonomy, serves as a basis for discussion. (Our friend André Bösiger, who quit school at the age of 13 and served a long prison sentence for refusing to serve in the Swiss Army, said: “Is two years of prison a long time? Well, I would have needed two more years to finish everything I had to read!”)

For these groups and their activists, the circulation of pamphlets is infinitely more important than their preservation — hence the difficulty of the task of archiving and cataloging. During periods of intense militant activity, one is willfully unaware of copyright or returning books to the Group’s library; one scoffs at the calendar and ordinal numbers, one distributes leaflets and newspapers down to the last copy, if one can. When activity dies down, unsold stock may remain, but to restore the complete run of an important periodical is the work of busy bees.

It has been a century since Elisée Reclus, in the preface to the *Bibliography of Anarchy* edited by Max Nettlau, said:

“I swear that I have never known such riches: the importance this still-incomplete collection has taken on surprises me greatly. The Anarchist ideas, consciously developed in their current form, are of such recent origin that one could easily imagine them existing still in a rudimentary period of propaganda. No doubt the vast majority of documents cited in this collection are destined to disappear, and barely even merit being preserved, but some of these works will certainly mark an epoch in the history of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it has sometimes been difficult for Anarchists to tell what they believe to be the truth, but one would not accuse them of having hidden the truth. We have raised it as high as our hands can reach, and no one in the world, whether he loves or hates us, can pretend to ignore us.” (Reclus, 1997)

Not everything deserves to be preserved? One risks much in screening what is or is not worth saving. Let us in any case avoid the collection of waste paper and the ways of antiquarian booksellers; let us prefer swapping and donations. It is necessary that libraries and archives clearly define their principles and their limits, but it is not for us, librarians and archivists trained on the job or in school, to decide what has value or not. Typically, one local group’s library will not necessarily collect all the editions of Kropotkin’s pamphlet *An Appeal to the Young* or Malatesta’s *Fra Contadini* (A Talk Between Two Workers), of which dozens of versions exist in dozens of languages. But in the archives of the Anarchist movement, it will be exciting to find signs of circulation, dedications, or stamps of libraries or organizations on the flyleaf. The history of a printed work is part of the history of the movement.

There are perhaps more archivists at heart among the Anarchists than in the great institutions. The New York Public Library, having put on microfilm the collection of posters from the Spanish

Revolution, which it received, threw away the originals. At the Royal Library of Belgium, these same posters coming from the collections of Hem Day were rolled up and stored in a corridor, and ended up as waste paper. Of the dozens of posters that Hem Day brought from Spain, only six remain in small format at the Mundaneum in Mons. At CIRA (International Center for Research on Anarchism) we have about fifty of them, brought by the union leader Lucien Tronchet, carefully mounted onto sturdy cardboard to circulate and to serve at Spanish solidarity events around 1936 or 1937. They are in impeccable condition; the colors are as vibrant as they were on the walls of Barcelona or Valencia. In Spain itself, the collection and cataloging of Republican posters continues to this day.

As difficult as it is to complete these collections, one nevertheless finds treasures of fidelity to the cause. While renovating a house for a client, Lucien Grelaud found beneath a plank a collection of the newspapers of Proudhon (from around 1850), which he deposited at CIRA. In Brazil, the archives of Edgar Leuenroth survived dictatorship intact by being cemented inside a wall. Today one can identify a hundred newspapers and bulletins which appeared in Spain during the two years following Franco's death, thanks to Solon Amoros, who dated and sourced them. Without him, they would remain without the dates and places of their publication and therefore essentially unreadable.

For forty years, since its foundation, the ambitions of CIRA have been global:

“to collect the collective memory of anarchy, in all languages, from the beginnings to the dreams of the future...” (from CIRA statement)

Young readers should be aware that this was not an auspicious time. After a brief period of strength immediately following World War II, at the height of the cold war Anarchists hardly ever appeared in public. International alliances on the run had trouble maintaining themselves, and places closed. Quantities of collections disappeared during the black years in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Portugal, despite the reserves of ingenuity some people exercised in disguising and preserving them.

During the 1950s, when CIRA was created, the only anarchist or libertarian publications were produced by libertarian publishers. They were valiant, to be sure, but this was no longer the age when Jean Grave's *Temps Nouveaux* (New Times) was publishing more than 100,000 copies of Kropotkin in just a few years! The first paperbacks appeared in the beginning of the sixties, including the works of George Woodcock and James Joll in England, and Daniel Guérin in France, though obviously nothing in Spain or Portugal, and almost nothing in Germany, where only a few mimeographed pages appeared. A few quality papers appeared in Italy, such as *Volonta*, and a few periodicals courageously survived, notably among the Italian, Spanish or yiddish-speaking exiles.³

Ten years later, carried on the wave of May 1968,⁴ Anarchy burst into the libraries and universities; new works and scores of new editions vied for attention. Photocopy and small offset editions at reasonable prices allowed publications to proliferate in every genre. Increasingly frequent travel and increasingly accessible studies shaped the youth of the movement and their

³ For example, in the United States, *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* in Italian; *Fraye Arbeiter Shtime* in Yiddish; and all the periodicals of the Spanish libertarian movement in exile.

⁴ A reference to the student riots in Paris (translator's note)

readings. Business also entered the scene: the popular low-cost novels and works by leading anarchists.

The meaning and the boundaries of the library were beginning to expand.

It was then that we began to work within a network. There existed other, older libraries, which had begun to catalog their old stock, and to publish; new libraries and archives were opened everywhere, specializing in chronicling the events in a particular language, group, country, or period. Even the major archives of the labor movement took our existence seriously. And at CIRA, we recognized our limits: it wasn't just our shelves that could no longer contain the onslaught, it was also our limited connections, our difficulties in managing shipments, indexing works, and responding judiciously to reference questions.

Through the years priceless tools of the trade have appeared. Let us note the indexing of the first volumes of the *History of Anarchism* by Max Nettlau, edited by Maria Hunink; the pioneering index of the Italian anarchist press by Leonardo Bettini, followed by still more inclusive indexes by René Bianco in France, Paco Madrid in Spain, and Jocken Schmück, Günter Hoerig and others in Germany;⁵ the collection of all the articles by Kropotkin in all the languages possible as a complement to the bibliography begun by Heinz Hug; the pamphlet published by CIRA, *Anarchists on Screen*, following works by Pietro Ferrua and supplemented by Stuart Christie. And there are more — catalogs of photos, posters, and songs will soon appear.

CIRA, perhaps one of the most important centers at the international level — not counting the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam — remains generalist; but we are able, should the need arise, to refer our users to other centers or other more specialized researchers, or give the address of the nearest info-kiosk where pamphlets and 'zines are easily accessible.

In 1975 we created the Fédération internationale des centres d'étude et de documentation libertaire (International Federation for Libertarian Study and Documentation), or FICEDL (ficedl.info). To enrich the culture of the movement, our culture, we hope to establish the most comprehensive inventory possible of all the notable locations, and tools of propaganda, of schools and of barricades, and to render it all accessible to researchers, to militants, or to the curious, to make of them a network of exchanges, a support for groups which are forming in Eastern Europe and other countries, and to deepen their knowledge — all under the clever name of Anar-chives.

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The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



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