

Islands of Anarchy

Simian, Cienfuegos, Refract and their support network

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Discussion

Simian, Cienfuegos and Refract were three interconnected anarchist publishing projects active between 1969 and 1986. They produced a significant number of works reflecting the international history and scope of the movement and promoting the contemporary use of the anarchist critique. They also demonstrated the potential—and pitfalls—of moving beyond print-it-yourself pamphlet publishing and operating a professional publishing house devoted to advancing the libertarian idea.

These groups had their roots in the anarchist resurgence of the nineteen sixties. Young militants finding their way to anarchism, often from the anti-bomb and anti-Vietnam war movements, linked up with an earlier generation of activists, largely outside the ossified structures of 'official' anarchism. Anarchist tactics embraced demonstrations, direct action such as industrial militancy and squatting, protest bombings like those of the First of May Group and Angry Brigade—and a spree of publishing activity.

From the sixties on duplicators (and later the new offset litho presses) were used to encourage and analyse the political ferment of the times. Like photocopiers later they offered cheap and relatively fast and easy reproduction of texts. Only a typewriter was needed to produce duplicator stencils. Litho offered a more legible result and any text already printed could be used directly to make new plates. Images, too, were easier to produce. One of the groups taking advantage of these machines was Coptic Press (1964-1968) run by Albert Meltzer and Ted Kavanagh. 11, Phil Ruff, *The Albert Memorial, the Anarchist Life and Times of Albert Meltzer*, p7. They produced a range of pamphlets both political (*Aims and Principles of Anarchism*, *Bakunin's Criticism of state socialism* and a spoof on the hype surrounding the Grosvenor Square demo *The October revolution—27th & 28th October 1968 positions to seize and strategic tactics to deploy*²², 'One leaflet I issued, meant as a sarcastic comment... finished in the Sunday Times in full as an example of what was intended on the dreaded day. It included digging up Kew Gardens, playing American football on Lord's cricket pitch... and blowing up Peter Pan's statue replacing it with an inscription "fairies are a bourgeois illusion", all as part of a plot to destroy the English way of life.' Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, p187.) and more general (*Hawks and hawking*, *Coffee houses of old London* etc, generally out of copyright items to be sold as limited editions at their Coptic Street bookshop). Meltzer and Kavanagh were also part of the group publishing the satirical libertarian magazine *Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review* (1965-67).

Albert Meltzer and other activists from this group joined Stuart Christie on his return from imprisonment in Francoist Spain (1967) in launching the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC). Christie had been involved in an abortive assassination attempt

on the Spanish dictator, Franco. The three years he served gave him an intimate knowledge of the Spanish penal system and the anarchist movement. The ABC has been described as a prisoners aid organisation though it was more of an affinity group promoting solidarity with the Spanish anarchist movement

‘We had in fact in mind to call it ”Solidarity” but it transpired that this title was used by another grouping—hence the decision to use the old name The Anarchist Black Cross which had the merit of immediately suggesting support, of a permitted nature, for victims of the State...

‘What is solidarity It does not imply charity... It is a recognition of common struggle... The intention of this solidarity is to build an international, not upon ”paper” nor on paper conferences but on active reality.’³

One of the first prisoners the group assisted was Miguel Garcia who on his release moved to London and became the ABC’s international secretary. Garcia, who had met Christie inside, was a veteran of the second wave of anarchist resistance in Spain (1945-60). He was also an important figure linking that generation with the new militants of the sixties and seventies—as well as maintaining an impressive level of activity himself after his release.

The Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross (which changed its title to Black Flag in 1970) emphasised activism, solidarity and the revolutionary goals of anarchism. It also promoted class struggle, in opposition to the non-revolutionary tendency of ‘perpetual protest’, criticizing society but not expecting to totally change it, represented (until recently) by Freedom and Freedom Press. This reflected a political division which went back to the 1940s.

Simian, originally describing itself as ‘Son of Coptic’ was the pamphlet imprint for Black Flag. Some of its titles were Coptic Press reprints (duplicated material tended to be produced in short runs) as well as material generated but not used by Black Flag. The first original Simian title was an interview with Miguel Garcia on the Spanish resistance. Simian produced a mixture of historical studies (The Anarchist Movement in China, The Truth about the Bonnot Gang etc.) and more contemporary texts like On How the Student Rising is Re-absorbed.

Black Flag covered anarchist activism both past and present and supported campaigns like those of the First of May Group against Spanish fascism and repression in general. It also explained the motivation behind homegrown protest bombings like those of the Angry Brigade (1968-72). This support for revolutionary action—as well as his previous involvement in the Spanish resistance—meant that Stuart Christie was the police candidate for ‘leader’ of the Angry Brigade. After 16 months on remand he was acquitted on all charges in the ‘Stoke Newington 8’ trial. By December 1972 he was a free man, but blacklisted and facing the threat of a more effective framing the next time. This is the background to the launch of Cienfuegos Press.

Anarchists have always been great publishers a Spanish saying goes that if you find two anarchists you'll also find three newspapers. This concentration on the printed word has been practical rather than profitable. Albert Meltzer commented 'As one could not fight a by-election for a mainstream party without incurring a loss, I do not see how a publishing venture against the political tide could conceivably be expected to pay its way'.¹ Often this has meant comrades printing in their spare time (and many anarchists have been employed in the printing trade) or commercial printing has been subsidised out of wages—or illegal activity like the bank robberies of Durruti or Sabate. Stuart Christie eulogised the anarchist propagandists in his introduction to *Man!*

'They are not as other men and women; they are not at all as other editors, publishers, speakers and writers; they are not even always like other anarchists. They share their passionate devotion to the cause of freedom with others, but theirs is a devouring, insatiable urge to communicate, to proselytise, to tell how it is... [They] sit in a little room—often their living room—surrounded by papers, books, all in the indescribable confusion—writing away, night after night, capable of producing whole newspapers on their own, not only preparing it for the printer but even if need be running it off as well. They spend their lives in poverty, though often skilled workers on good wages; for everything they have goes on 'literature'. When the situation becomes difficult they will go out to rob a bank to raise the money for a printing press, and from a small handpress in the cellar they will bring out leaflets, newspapers, books and pamphlets alongside forged passes, documents and all the other needs of the activist in a totalitarian regime.'²

As in the 1890s (or the media response to current anti-globalisation protests) the resurgence of anarchism in the sixties was accompanied by a rise in academic interest and the commissioning and reissue of both scholarly and general works. Similarly, the quality varied, ranging from hostile hack work to accounts from inside the movement like Christie and Meltzer's *Floodgates of Anarchy* and Miguel Garcia's resistance and prison memoirs *Franco's Prisoner*. These were successful ventures from their authors' point of view—they spread the word, were reviewed by the mainstream press and produced an income. *Floodgates of Anarchy* went into several editions. However, there were limits to the number and kind of revolutionary books that commercial publishers would handle. For example, Stuart Christie's autobiography *The Christie File* repeated his successful 'Stoke Newington 8' trial defence that detonators been planted on him by the police. This led to its planned production by the commercial publisher Michael Joseph being cancelled on legal advice.

¹ Albert Meltzer, *Op. Cit.*, p285.

² Stuart Christie, Introduction in Marcus Graham (ed.) *Man! an anthology of anarchist ideas*,

Black Flag had wide international contacts, ranging from the Spanish anarchist movement (in South America as well as Europe) to Italy and North America. These generated a large volume of material, historical and contemporary, most of which would not be published commercially. Christie was not in the position to take either the spare time or the subsidy approach to publishing, and needed a way to put bread on the table. He had the assets of notoriety and a flair for promotion. Thus Cienfuegos Press (named after a Cuban anarchist) was launched in 1974, aiming to expand the amount of useful—and especially current—anarchist material available. It consciously aimed to make material attractive. Economically unable and probably unwilling to take the ‘fine press’ route of high production costs, they concentrated on a functional internal layout complemented by colour covers produced by sympathetic artists such as Flavio Costantini. It was also planned to promote titles outside the confines of the anarchist movement.

The first two Cienfuegos publications illustrated the international links which they could call upon as well as the kinds of titles they saw as important. Sabate was Christie’s translation of one of the first books in Antonio Tellez’s comprehensive recounting of the story of the Spanish anarchist resistance. The Man! anthology was a reprint of selections from a North American anarchist paper of the 1930s (assisted by its former editor Marcus Graham). Man! had been a link between the Italian-American Galleanists and the broader anarchist movement³ but it also pre-figured some of the features of Black Flag and the Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review, especially their concern with examining and reclaiming anarchist history.

Stuart and Brenda Christie moved to Yorkshire in 1975 and then to Sanday (the Orkneys) in 1976 to escape police attention and thus avoided involvement in the 1978 ‘Persons Unknown’ case.⁴ As well as being out of harm’s way, Sanday also provided storage space for the mounting number of Cienfuegos titles.

Simian continued as the pamphlet publishing arm of Cienfuegos until 1976. After the move to Yorkshire its titles were printed, rather than duplicated, some of them professionally. Though overshadowed by Cienfuegos’ book publishing it produced some important texts like Marxism and a Free Society.

essays, poetry and commentaries, p I.

³ ‘After The Road to Freedom ceased publication I was approached by the Italian-speaking comrades who were issuing a monthly newspaper Emancipazione (Emancipation), edited by Vincent Ferrero. They suggested I start a new anarchist monthly, and they would suspend their paper in its favour, and devote their energy to it. Ferrero proposed the name for the new paper MAN! as well as the sub-title “Man is the measurement of everything”. An international Group was formed to sponsor it, which included English, Chinese, Italian and Yiddish speaking comrades.’ Marcus Graham, Autobiographical notes in *Ibid.*, p xviii.

⁴ ‘The charges were so ludicrous there were fits of laughter from the well of the court, so that when it came to “conspiring with persons unknown”, though not unusual phraseology, it caused such merriment the magistrate had to threaten to clear the court. From then on it was known as

Cienfuegos published a number of important works of anarchist theory like *Towards a Fresh Revolution*, *Anarchism Arguments For and Against* and *The End of Anarchism*. There were also several historical studies, partly on familiar topics such as the Russian (*The Guillotine at Work*) and Spanish revolutions (*With the Peasants of Aragon*), but also of neglected subjects like the Spanish movement after the Civil War (*A New World In Our Hearts*), British (*The Christie File*, *The Anarchists In London*) and Mexican anarchism (*Land and Liberty*) and recent European events (*The International Revolutionary Solidarity Movement*). Finally, Cienfuegos (and after them *Refract*) produced a number of handbooks such as *Towards a Citizens' Militia* and *The Investigative Researcher's Handbook* and analytical works like *Stefano delle Chiaie* and *High Intensity Subversion* to underline their commitment to the practical application of anarchist theory, rather than the rumination of 'anarchaeologists'.

The greatest achievement of Cienfuegos Press was the weighty *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*. The Review shared the international reach of the Cienfuegos project, but also its breadth, bringing together academics and students of anarchism with its activists to discuss history, theory and tactics. The review reprinted whole pamphlets including classics like *Sabotage* (Walker C. Smith) and *Libertarian Communism* (Isaac Puente) and contemporary essays like Chomsky's 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship.' In its reviews, it gave an anarchist view on revolutionary theory and history, also covering a broad range of subjects including feminism, economics and literature, as well as promoting a revolutionary anarchism and countering misrepresentations. Though it came from a class-struggle anarchist perspective, the Review was intellectually omnivorous, reprinting relevant reviews from the mainstream press as well as taking them from titles like *Freedom* and the *Laissez Faire Review*. It also contained a healthy dose of humour, provided by Richard Warren's *Misadventures of Ann and Archie* comic strip and 'sarco-adverts' attacking everything from supermarkets, religion and employers to vanguard parties. Though it never approached anything like the quarterly publication that was planned, the six issues form an encyclopedia of Anarchist theory and history. Albert Meltzer bemoaned the fact that 'the amount of essays in one *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* would have made a couple of dozen pamphlets and a book or two'⁵ but perhaps it is this abundance that explains its appeal. So many topics covered by so many authors give it the status of the collective memory of the anarchist movement of the time.

As the Cienfuegos network developed more collaborators were brought in, more co-publications were arranged and more titles could be projected. Some of these

the "Persons Unknown" case.' Albert Meltzer, *Op. Cit.*, p280.

⁵ Albert Meltzer, *Ibid.*, p.285

titles were mentioned once as a kind of thinking aloud. This would encourage interested groups or individuals to offer assistance. Others were actively being prepared and indicate the ambitious nature of the Cienfuegos project and what might have been achieved with greater resources.

Economic problems were never far away, but the final straw was the arrest of Brenda Christie in Germany in 1981. Information accusing her of having been involved in a First of May Group attack ten years previously had come from the British political police (Special Branch). The charge was soon dismissed after an international protest campaign but large legal and communication costs gave Cienfuegos the final push to collapse in 1982. The Christies lost their house and had to leave Sanday, and people with outstanding loans and bills were left out of pocket.

Refract (harking back to the Italian-American Refrattari i.e. rebels), the successor to Cienfuegos, suffered the same financial problems and lasted a shorter while before it too collapsed. Its co-publications in 1985 and 1986 with Drowned Rat and Elephant Editions were, in effect, handing titles over to other anarchist publishers.

Assessment

Briefly examining the output of Simian, Cienfuegos and Refract (see statistics) shows that many of the items they published were original, and a large fraction were original translations. Of reprinted material, the bulk was recent, that is from the 1960s or '70s.

Cienfuegos and Refract were always hand-to-mouth operations. There were comrades who made significant donations, but there was always a pressing need to increase turnover to pay for printing that had already been done. This of course meant producing more titles. Unlike pamphlets which could be reproduced fairly easily, books required long print runs to be affordable, leaving the publisher with just one shot at printing enough, but not too many books. Interestingly, only seven Cienfuegos books have been reprinted Sabate, *The Art of Anarchy* and *The Russian Tragedy* (all early productions with shorter print runs), *Land and Liberty* (pirated at the time by an academic publisher), *The Christie File* (effectively rewritten in a new edition), *With the Peasants of Aragon* and *People Without Government*. This suggests that most titles were produced in adequate (or too great) numbers—though of course, reprinting depends on money being available.

Cienfuegos and Refract were hopeful of reaching a far wider audience than the anarchist movement. While Christie's notoriety (and dramatic press coverage of titles like *Towards a Citizen's Militia*) did generate extra interest, and imaginative advertising spread the word wide, neither Cienfuegos or Refract titles really broke into the general booktrade, partly due to the specialised nature of most of their

titles and a limited response from reviewers. This increased their reliance on radical bookshops. These had a bad record—worsening as recessionary times advanced—of going bust and defaulting on large bills for stock.

Cienfuegos certainly hoped to make sales to libraries—in discussing *Man!* they made it clear that their plans were riding on this. They had some success, though probably not as much as they'd hoped. Financially, they couldn't afford large outlays for marketing. Also, it's possible for libraries (unless they know a field well) to fall into a reading-list driven reliance on reprinted classics (more Kropotkin, professor) precisely the titles Cienfuegos and *Refract* were avoiding.

Cienfuegos (and to a lesser extent *Refract*) developed a number of strategies to maximise their turnover, nationally and internationally. If a given book appealed only to anarchists, it didn't matter greatly where they were as long as they bought it. Co-publishing with groups overseas reduced the capital required (and the associated risk) as well as the distribution costs. This complemented the international network which had been developed. They developed a subscription service which offered cheap books to their readers—but also guaranteed money up front and increased sales. Operating a mail order bookshop alongside the publishing operation also increased turnover if someone had already bought everything published by Cienfuegos, perhaps there were other titles they'd like. Alongside the problem of rising postage costs this also increased the importance of the Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review. The Review itself exploded from 28 pages (number one) to 184 by number four, with associated rises in printing and distribution costs.

Cienfuegos also tried vanity publishing, for example in publishing *The struggle to be human*.⁶ This of course had financial benefits but it also tied up space and effort. In general, vanity publishing can compromise people's faith in your editorial judgement.

The great strength of Cienfuegos and *Refract* was in developing an international support network (the 'Islands' of the title). This comprised writers, translators, illustrators and reviewers; people with technical skills in editing, typesetting, layout and printing as well as readers and supporters. Paul Sharkey's translation skills made available a huge amount that had been published in Romance languages. Stuart Christie emphasised his importance 'Quite simply, without Paul's contribution it's unlikely we would have produced a quarter of what we did.'⁷ Artist-illustrators like Flavio Costantini, Cliff Harper, Phil Ruff and Richard Warren made a great contribution to the appearance of Cienfuegos and *Refract* titles. Collaborators with technical skills prevented titles being bottlenecked at any stage of production (as

⁶ Since much anarchist publishing is subsidised, 'vanity' only applies where economic inducements overrule or outweigh political ones.

⁷ Stuart Christie, email.

would have happened had they relied on their own typesetting equipment, for example). This network allowed the decentralisation of preparation work as well as juggling money and time to produce the maximum output. In the year of Cienfuegos' greatest output (1981) of thirteen titles, five (over a third) were co-published.

This network operated before email, without a fax machine and at a time when typesetting equipment was specialised, expensive and prone to breaking down. The production quality (and quantity) they produced were both impressive. Despite the attention paid to promotion, it was in distribution that their greatest weakness lay. Ultimately Cienfuegos and Refract, though they succeeded in producing a huge volume of anarchist literature, failed economically as professional publishers. This lesson has not been lost on some who have followed in their footsteps. Both Freedom Press and AK Press operate publishing programmes on the back of distribution and sales.

Given the propagandistic drive to distribute literature as cheaply and widely as possible the 'dismal science' of economics will always be the enemy of anarchist publishing (and vice versa). The example of Simian, Cienfuegos and Refract gives a few pointers on how imagination and drive can sidestep some of the problems inherent in shoestring publishing.

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