

Anarchist Antiauthoritarian and Antifascist Cultural Politics in Europe and the United States, 1890s–2020s

Kirwin R. Shaffer

As 2024 entered late fall in the northern hemisphere and elections in the United States sucked our attention to the reality of a second Donald Trump administration, no shortage of commentators warned of the threat of fascism ascending into power in Washington and thus joining recent hard-right electoral victories across the globe. Former officials in Trump's first administration called him a fascist—a description echoed by Trump's opponent in the election. But exit interviews of US voters revealed that Trump gained measurable support from groups that historically have been victimized by far-right and fascist militants. Men and women of African and Latino descent increased their support of Trump and his far-right agenda. Arabs and Muslims did too, despite Trump's "Muslim ban" during his first term in office. How to explain these shifts within the parameters of everything we know about classic fascism: ultranationalism, nativism, opposition to immigration, ethnic purity, authoritarianism, opposition to liberal democracy and socialism?

* Kirwin Shaffer is Professor of Latin American Studies at The Pennsylvania State University – Berks College. He has published four books on anarchist politics and culture in Latin America: *Anarchism and Countercultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba* (University Press of Florida, 2005) and re-issued as *Anarchist Cuba: Countercultural Politics in the Early Twentieth Century* (PM Press, 2019), *Black Flag Boricuas: Anarchism, Antiauthoritarianism, and the Left in Puerto Rico, 1897-1921* (University of Illinois Press, 2013/2020), *In Defiance of Boundaries: Anarchism in Latin American History* (University Press of Florida 2015/2017) co-edited with Geoffroy de Laforcade, *Anarchists of the Caribbean: Countercultural Politics and Transnational Networks in the Age of U.S. Expansion* (Cambridge University Press, 2020/2022), and *A Transnational History of the Modern Caribbean: Popular Resistance across Borders* (Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2022). He is currently working on a book project on a Latin American anarchist approach to global history (tentatively titled *The World through Anarchist Eyes: Latin American Anarchism and Global History*).

Whether or not Trump is a fascist or just a narcissistic frontman for darker neofascist agenda makers, the menace of what such a fate portends has led leftist and liberal antifascists to prepare for massive changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Of course, the perceived threats and dangers are not new. For the past decade, the far right has amassed political support that has propelled them into decision-making positions within legislatures and parliaments of both the Global North and the Global South. Yet, during this same decade, antifascist forces have arisen to counter these populist nationalists, Christian Identitarians, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, antisemites, Islamophobes, and more. When we turn our attention even further back in time, antifascists took to the streets, published magazines and newspapers, wrote fiction and poems, and sang songs as specific forms of cultural opposition against fascism.

This issue of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* emerges at a fraught time for anarchists specifically and antifascists generally. Its content reminds readers of some of the anti-fascist, antiauthoritarian cultural wars waged against those dark forces that have sought to further segregate people by imposing new authoritarian hierarchies of power both historically and today. I'm pleased to introduce four articles on anarchist cultural politics in Europe and the United States spanning the early 1900s into the 2010s: Constance Bantman and Michael Jones' literary biography of Wales-born anarchist Mabel Holland Thomas Grave (whom many might know as the partner of anarchist Jean Grave), Andrew Lee's exploration of anarchist anticlericalism in the fiction of Spain-based anarchist Federica Montseny, Montse Feu's analysis of United States-based Spanish anarchist exiles who created a large portfolio of illustrations for US-based Hispanic antifascist periodicals, and Spencer Beswick's history of mostly white US anarchists struggling in the 1980s and 1990s to make the late-twentieth century antifascist movement more racially sensitive and inclusive. In addition, I note the inclusion here of Mark Antliff's review of M. Testa's *Militant Antifascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance*. Several themes and topics link these articles that stretch across the Atlantic and the century, including gender, antiauthoritarianism, nationalism, and racism. Finally, as should be clear from the note above, one will also find an antifascism thread that runs throughout

these essays. The illustration from the Spain-based magazine *Estudios* (1928-1937) that serves as the cover art for this volume brings it all home.

So, let's start with the cover. Spanish anarchism is one of the largest and best documented movements of its kind. In July 1936, Nationalist forces under the fascist Francisco Franco revolted against Spain's Republican government and its liberalizing agendas. Within days, leftists in Catalonia organized across the country to halt the militarist advance. They then pursued a three-year effort to repel Franco's fascists—who eventually garnered the assistance of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. The early antifascist forces emerged particularly from the anarcho-syndicalist CNT labor union, the socialist UGT labor union, and the anarchist FAI. The Civil War gave rise to the Spanish Revolution which saw emergence of largely anarchist and libertarian socialist control of large swaths of Spain. One area of radical organizing was the Mediterranean region of Valencia. From Valencia, large numbers of volunteers filled the antifascist ranks. Meanwhile, around Valencia itself, anarchists created over 350 rural communes operating along anarcho-communist lines.

Valencia had been a site of significant anarchist organizing and publishing years before the Revolution and Civil War erupted in 1936. Of importance in this struggle was the monthly culture magazine *Estudios: Revista Ecléctica*, published in Valencia from 1928-1937 with print runs ranging from 25,000 to perhaps as high as 70,000 copies. The magazine was important not just for leftists in Spain but increasingly for Spanish-speaking leftists (especially anarchists) in exile across Europe, the United States, and Latin America.¹ Politically, the magazine promoted anarchism, antifascism, and naturism. This latter also shaped many articles, artwork, and photography that addressed sexual behavior, eugenics, birth control, homeopathy, and an empowerment of the individual to escape the hazards of modern industrial capitalism while living more simply and harmoniously with nature.²

One of the magazine's most striking features was its artwork, especially the cover designs. By the Civil War, magazine covers generally focused on one of two themes: female nudity or antifascism—or

sometimes both. As Javier Navarro Navarro writes, the nudes “without doubt, constituted a good allegory of the magazine’s naturist and regenerative ideals, but also helped to attract readers and flirted—despite angry denials by those responsible for publishing *Estudios*—with the erotic and pornographic publishing that was common in many of the books printed by this publisher at the time.”³ Graphic design has a long importance in the history of global anarchism from revolutionary propaganda posters and newspaper headers to book and magazine covers. Alexander Vergara estimates that Spanish Republican graphic artists produced between 1500 and 2000 such posters during the Civil War. Though paper for posters grew scarce as the war continued, magazine cover art remained strong. In September 1936, Republicans reopened the Ministry of Public Instruction and named photomontage artist Josep Renau (1907-1982) as head of the ministry’s Fine Arts Section. The ministry relocated from Madrid to Valencia in November 1936.⁴

Renau had been producing cover art for *Estudios* even before the ministry relocated. For several years, he and graphic artist Manuel Monleón Burgos (1904-1976) produced cover designs, often alternating month to month. The cover art for our current volume of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* comes from the April 1937 edition of *Estudios* and was created by Monleón. Monleón was born into an agricultural family. As a youth, the family moved to Valencia. Beginning at age 12, he was apprenticed as a painter of miniatures and hand fans. In his twenties, he encountered fellow artists from the Association of Artists of the Soviet Union which led him to paint portraits of numerous Soviet luminaries. In the early 1930s, he began experimenting with new techniques, including photomontage (which Renau was using too) and airbrushing.⁵

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Monleón produced anti-Franco, antifascist posters at the Intellectuals’ Alliance of the Visual Arts and illustrated the newspaper, *Verdad*. In cover art and posters, Monleón frequently employed a “bestiario” perspective that portrayed fascism and Nazism in monstrous forms such as snakes or skeletons.⁶ From the early 1930s and thus long before Franco’s mutiny, Monleón created posters and artwork condemning fascists and Nazis. For instance,



Figure 1.

in February 1933, the cover of *Estudios* depicts an armed skeleton with a swastika emblazoned on a blue uniform in front of an array of cannons (Fig. 1).

The May 1933 cover of *Estudios* shows a man and woman helping fists break apart a swastika (Fig. 2).



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

The September 1936 cover focuses on a male militiaman with banners and smoking cannons in the background, raising his fist while standing atop a broken object that could easily be a swastika (Fig. 3).



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

In March 1937, Monleón skewered the transnational fascist support for Franco that was killing people of all ages. The cover illustrates Italian and German fascist flags attached to a rifle that has bayoneted a young girl to death (Fig. 4).

At the same time, Monleón often switched back and forth between warnings of fascism's threat and the promise of living a healthy, free naturist life in harmony with nature—in essence, fascism was the opposite of nature. Women—especially nude or topless women—long had been hallmarks of anarchist graphic design in Europe and the Americas. They symbolized liberation, equality, and a harmonious nature.⁷ The *Estudios* magazine covers generally featured images of nude women in nature such as the young, naked girl frolicking on a rock next to the water in June 1936 and with the tag line on the cover: “CUERPO SANO = MENTE SANA” (healthy body = healthy mind) (Fig. 5).

Nudity and antifascism could be wed as part of a strategy to fight the current fascist threat and imagine a healthy, harmonious future. For instance, Monleón merged the two in *Estudios*'s May 1937 cover with a topless woman reaching into the sky, grabbing a flying swastika, and ripping it apart (Fig. 6).

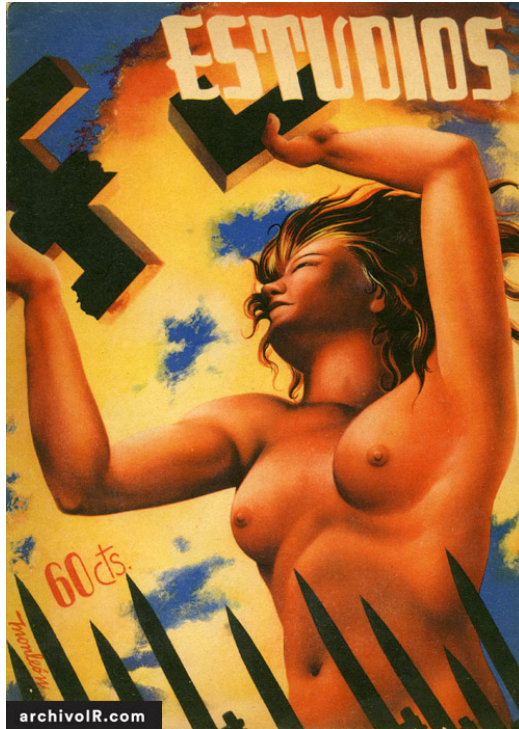


Figure 6.

By spring 1937, the Civil War was approaching the end of its first year and the anarchist-dominated Revolution surged across Spain. But fascism, too, was on the march not just in Spain but across Europe—and even the globe. In April, with war raging, *Estudios* continued its regular publishing of naturist and culture articles on sex, diet, and theater. In addition, other articles warned of the growing fascist threat. One article by Dr. J.M. Martínez analyzed fascist impacts on culture and education—a clear warning of what would happen in Spain if Franco succeeded. The lead article analyzed the war and provided an overview of current events across Spain. This was the publication context for Monleón's cover that graces our volume. A strong arm reaches

down to grab the yellow, jaundiced wrist connected to a swastika-tattooed hand dripping in blood. The savior arm keeps the Nazi hand from spilling any further blood on the already red-blood saturated country of Spain highlighted on the otherwise blue globe. Though his previous use of bestiary portrayals of fascism is less obvious here, one can at a quick glance see the bloodied fingers of the jaundiced hand as vampirish. When linked to the articles in this edition of *Estudios*, it is a stark warning that fascism had already wrought so much misery and death. Only the work of antifascist resistance (the gripping hand) will save the country and the world to allow leftist ideas about sexuality, diet, theater, and more to flourish (Fig. 7).

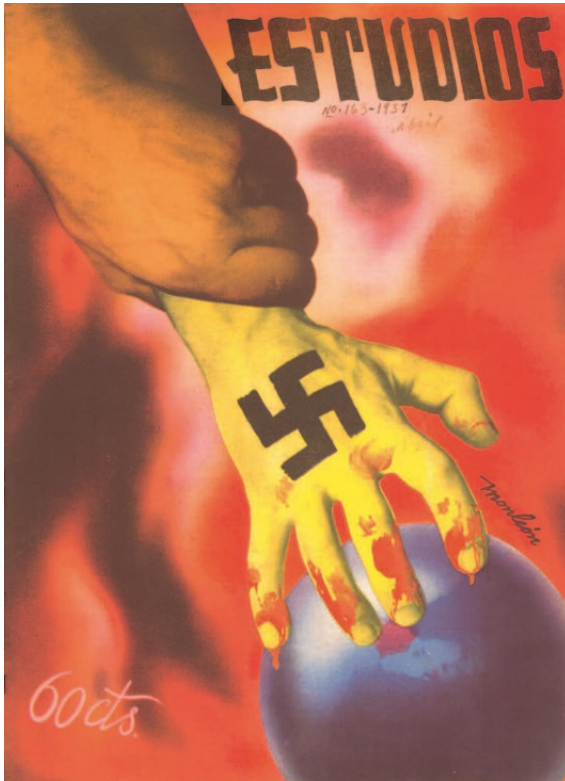


Figure 7.

Monleón's fate was linked to the fate of the Revolution. After the magazine ceased publication in mid-1937, Monleón continued producing propaganda posters and illustrations. However, Franco's victory in April 1939—two years after the *Estudios* cover was re-

leased—forced Republican forces to flee into exile or risk capture and imprisonment. Monleón traveled to Alicante in hopes of hopping a ship to flee, but no ship arrived. Instead, Italian troops arrested him. He then served time in two concentration camps and numerous prisons. Though condemned to death by Franco's fascist government, his death sentence was commuted in 1943. For years he found fleeting employment as a graphic artist but ultimately fled Spain for Latin America. From 1951 to 1962, he lived and worked in Bogotá, Colombia and Caracas, Venezuela, ultimately returning to Valencia where he worked with his son in an advertising firm. Cataracts diminished his ability to see and thus to paint, and he died in a small city outside of Valencia at age 72.⁸

The theme of antifascist resistance emerges throughout this issue of ADCS—at times explicitly, sometimes lying just below the surface of a broader focus on antiauthoritarianism. Two of the more prominent European women anarchists in the first half of the 1900s included Mabel Holland Thomas Grave and Federica Montseny—two people whose anarchism was directly linked to family connections: Mabel with her partner Jean and Federica whose parents were prominent Spanish anarchists Federico Urales and Soledad Gustavo. Both were important activists in their own rights. Grave wrote books of fiction and political analysis. She also illustrated and helped to edit key anarchist periodicals in France in the early 1900s. Montseny captured the spirit of anarchist literary production with her nearly fifty novels from 1920 to 1940, plus a plethora of other analyses on Spanish anarchism during the authoritarian years of the 1920s, the era of the Spanish Republic and Revolution, and the fight against Francisco Franco's fascists.

The always important anarchist theme of “antiauthoritarianism” additionally weaves its way through several articles in this volume. In our essays, we encounter US anarchists fighting right-wing neo-Nazi skinheads during the Reagan-Bush neoliberal 1980s. While many anarchists in the 1980s emerged from the punk music scene, they found rightists in their midst who too found affinity in punk. Out of this milieu, anarchists employed cultural politics to separate themselves from any linkages with neo-Nazis and to intensify their struggles

against authoritarian ideologies of fascism, racism, and neoliberalism. As early as the 1920s, Spanish exiles used their graphic illustrations to wage a visual war against Spanish fascism. Beginning in the 1930s, exile artists used images to celebrate strong leftists defending the people against fascists or condemning fascists as sickly and weak. Images were important propaganda weapons, often remaining in a newspaper reader's mind longer than an article associated with the image. Anarchists also deployed fiction to wage a battle for the hearts and minds of people against the authoritarianism of Spain's Catholic Church—an entity that would remain a bulwark of fascist support for Franco during the Civil War and decades beyond. As such, anarchist authors built off centuries of anticlerical peninsular writers who challenged the Church by making fun of it in caricature, highlighting the Church's hypocrisy and duplicity, and challenging the legitimacy of the Church, its actions, and its policies.

Nationalist politics and antiracism find illuminating expressions in these essays as well. While Grave is known for her anarchist activism, we are treated to an enticing hypothesis about her fondness for her Welsh roots and identity. Though she is linked most often to French anarchism due to her activism on the Continent, she had a deep attachment for Wales. This “nationality”—as Bakunin referred to it—was a love for that little piece of the world in which one was born and raised—an affection that does not equate with political or racial/ethnic nationalism as this latter is infused with hatred, separatism, and hierarchy—hallmarks of fascism. Grave's pro-Welsh sentiments seem to guide some of her anarchist activism. Was this itself a rejection of English imperialism and thus imbricated in the larger anarchist anti-colonial, anti-imperial discourse prominent in early twentieth-century anarchism? Decades later, US-based anarchists found themselves organizing largely in a “national” (i.e., US context), which meant dealing with the specific dimensions of US racial politics. This largely white movement emerging from the punk music scene of the 1970s spoke about antifascism and antiracism but with a near absence of non-white members. As a result, anarchists struggled both on the streets and in their cultural productions to adopt an antiracist agenda that incorporated the concept of being a “race traitor,” or rejecting one's white privilege, to forge a multicultural anarchist movement in

the early decades of neoliberal capitalism's descent over the United States.

This volume concludes with a timely review of historical and contemporary anarchist resistance to fascism in Europe but which has larger global implications. Mark Antliff assesses M. Testa's book *Militant Antifascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance* (Oakland: A.K. Press, 2015). A key part of Antliff's assessment is that Testa omits radical, anarchist antifascism that did not use violence or did not use violence alone as part of its strategy against the far right. This assessment coincides with examples from our volume of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* that showcase anarchist militant nonviolence in the form of cultural antifascist resistance.

The literature on anarchist cultural politics, especially linked to antiauthoritarianism broadly and antifascism specifically, remains a growing field within anarchist studies. Cultural politics persist as a continually profitable means by which to explore how anarchists employed "the cultural" and "the imaginary" to forge vibrant resistance cultures around the world. We hope that these essays serve as springboards for additional research—and as sources of inspiration.

Notes

- 1 Javier Navarro Navarro, “Transnational Anarchist Culture in the Interwar Period: The Magazine *Estudios* (1928-1937)” in *Writing Revolution: Hispanic Anarchism in the United States*, eds. Christopher J. Castañeda and Montse Feu (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019): 211-214.
- 2 Ibid., 210.
- 3 Javier Navarro Navarro. “Reforma sexual, control de natalidad, naturismo y pacifismo. La cultura libertaria trasatlántica en las décadas de 1920 y 1930: *Estudios: Revista Ecléctica* (1928-1937). *Historia y Política* 42 (2019), 154.
- 4 Alexander Vergara. “Images of Revolution and War.” <https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/intro.html>.
- 5 Manuel Monleón Burgos. <https://partidosindicalista.wordpress.com/2019/07/17/manuel-monleon-un-grito-pegado-en-la-pared-documental-2004/>; Francisco Agramunt Lacruz. “Manuel Monleón Burgos: Uñas y dientes contra los monstruos del fascismo.” <https://www.tebeosfera.com/1/Documento/Articulo/Recuperados/Manuel/Monleon.htm>; “Manuel Monleón Burgos.” <https://dbe.rah.es/biografias/67092/manuel-monleon-burgos>.
- 6 Francisco Agramunt Lacruz. “Manuel Monleón Burgos: Uñas y dientes contra los monstruos del fascismo.” <https://www.tebeosfera.com/1/Documento/Articulo/Recuperados/Manuel/Monleon.htm>.
- 7 See for instance Kirwin Shaffer, *Anarchist Cuba: Countercultural Politics in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 104.
- 8 Francisco Agramunt Lacruz. “Manuel Monleón Burgos: Uñas y dientes contra los monstruos del fascismo.” <https://www.tebeosfera.com/1/Documento/Articulo/Recuperados/Manuel/Monleon.htm>