

### **FAREWELL TO FABULATIONS!**

A brief dossier to clarify its origin and its sense

April 2024

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### Origin of the circled A: the birth of a symbol.

We can thoroughly search all archives, going back in time as far as possible and across all continents; however, reality is stubborn, and one fact remains unyielding: prior to April 1964, an A in a circle had never symbolised anarchy or anarchism.

No poster, no graffiti, nor any trace whatsoever. This absence of evidence, however, does not conceal any mystery; rather, it simply reflects the straightforward fact that the circled A couldn't exist before being conceived, which happened precisely in April 1964.

Despite well-documented evidence of its origin, numerous fanciful speculations persist, including within anarchist circles and many libertarian historiographies that explore the symbol's origin. It's essential to clarify that we are concerned with the history of an anarchist symbol, rather than a specific design. While representations of the letter A enclosed within a circle have certainly existed for centuries, they held no connection to anarchism.

At the time of the publication of this dossier, April 2024, sixty years have passed since the circled A was publicly presented as a proposed symbol of anarchism. While documents attesting to its origin will endure for a long time, the opportunity to provide first-hand testimony is rapidly diminishing. Therefore, I see no reason to delay any longer the compilation and dissemination of this dossier, although Marianne Enckell and Amedeo Bertolo covered the essential aspects in an article from 2002, which is included in this dossier.

The importance of specifying the origin of the A in a circle lies not so much in clarifying exactly where and by whom it was conceived, but rather in delimiting its meaning, as this explains its extraordinary dissemination. Nor is it about claiming for a clearly unwarranted paternity, because although the circled A was indeed introduced and proposed in April 1964, it only gained significance as a symbol through the collective efforts of thousands of anarchists worldwide, who adopted and incorporated it into various media, including walls, flags, banners, publications, and even tattoos. Consequently, the circled A has arguably become the most widespread political symbol in the world, epitomizing anarchism with unparalleled clarity.

The symbol is undeniably the result of extensive collective work, but before becoming a symbol, the process of its creation was also collective. Although a specific person initiated the proposal, that is, the idea of creating a simple and easy-to-draw symbol that, devoid of ties to any specific anarchist group or organization, could increase the

visibility of anarchism through its presence in all graphic expressions of the anarchist movement, the acceptance of this proposal within the group of young libertarians in Paris was the outcome of extensive discussions and, thus, collective endeavour. The pursuit of the most suitable design and the final selection were likewise communal activities. And although one single person was responsible for drawing it on a stencil, both the production of the carefully mimeographed bulletin in a companion's flat and its distribution continued to be collective activities.

Furthermore, the intent behind recounting the circumstances which surround its genesis is twofold: to debunk fanciful tales circulating about its origins and to reaffirm the concept of anarchism embodied by the circled A. From its inception, the aim was for the symbol to be owned by no one so it could belong to all. And indeed, the will to design a symbol that did not refer to any existing anarchist organisation, acronym, or collective was decisive in ensuring its place within the broader anarchist sphere. Its independence from any ownership meant it could be claimed by anyone who resonated with its ethos.

Moreover, the circled A's proposal aimed not to homogenize the diverse spectrum of anarchism but to celebrate its plurality while providing a shared reference point. It was necessary to ensure that what was common to all anarchist sensibilities could manifest itself without invocation of any centralising principle. We had to accept the dispersal of anarchist forms of organisation, but at the same time introduce a principle of confluence that would bring all these forms together. The circled A avoids any temptation to integrate anarchism under a single formula, ensuring that its diversity is reflected in the undifferentiated use of an icon that belongs equally to each of its streams and modalities.

Like the definition of archipelagos, which are described as a collection of islands united by what separates them, the circled A aimed to transform what separates the different streams of anarchism into a link between them, without erasing their specificity. The idea was to encourage a confederation of singularities united by a family resemblance and a common ground beneath the multiplicity of sensibilities and struggles. This recalls Gilles Deleuze's beautiful phrase defining anarchy as "that strange singularity which can only be said of the multiple".

Additionally, the symbol's resonance with local grassroots initiatives and spontaneity eschews the principle of representation since a circled A does not represent anarchism and cannot claim to do so. Unlike an official stamp, it does not authenticate anything because no one has the legitimacy to authorise its use. The fact that anyone can use this icon freely means that it escapes any principle of representation and refers only to the responsibility of the user. This perhaps explains why the form of this symbol has

diversified considerably, especially thanks to the punk movement, expressing individual creativity without ever losing its powerful association with anarchism.

One last consideration to place the origin of the circled A. Its creation happened in the context of intense militant activity in the 1960s to encourage the convergence of different sectors of anarchism. Thus, at the end of 1963, the *Comité de Liaison des Jeunes Anarchistes* (CLJA) and the *Liaison des Étudiants Anarchistes* (LEA) were created simultaneously in Paris. The CLJA did not claim to be a new anarchist organisation but simply a meeting point between members of different organisations, while the LEA brought together anarchist students belonging to various collectives. Transcending borders, this effort to bring together different fragments of anarchism culminated in a major European Meeting of Young Anarchists held in Paris in April 1966, with a very active presence of young libertarians from Milan, who adopted the circled A and widely spread it in Italy, bringing it out of the shadows where it had been kept by the lack of enthusiasm it had aroused, and thus projecting it onto the international scene.



Tomás Ibáñez. Barcelona, April 2024.

#### True and false statements about the circled A.

#### $\rightarrow$ The circled A has always part of anarchism: False

The connection between the circled A symbol and anarchism is so deeply ingrained that for a significant period, it was believed they were inherently linked and had ancient origins. The lack of information surrounding its inception fostered a sense of mystery, perpetuating this misconception.

#### $\rightarrow$ The circled A did not appear until April 1964: True

It developed gradually as a Symbol of anarchism, becoming widespread only from the 1970s onwards, starting in Italy.



# $\rightarrow$ The circled A was intended to evoke "order without power", following Proudhon's well know sentence: False

This assertion suggests that the "A" of anarchy, symbolizing the absence of power, is enclosed within the "O" of order. However, this interpretation was never conceived by the young libertarians who sought to establish a symbol for anarchy. There is no connection between the circled A and Proudhon's concept, nor with the notion of order, as evidenced by the diverse evolution of the circled A, particularly when it was revitalized by the punk movement, transcending the confines of a closed circle.

## $\rightarrow$ The seal of the Federal Council of the International Workers Association of Spain depicted a circle A from 1870 onwards: False

This seal, featuring a combination of a square and a plumb line, bears a closer resemblance to freemasonry than anarchism. At the time, the Spanish section of the IWA, despite being heavily influenced by Bakunin, did not explicitly identify as anarchist. Therefore, the seal did not intend to symbolize anarchism.



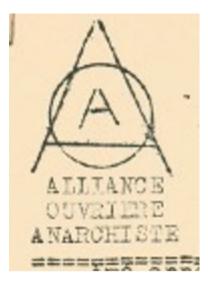
# → The circled A already appeard on the helmet of a militiaman during the Spanish Revolution: False

Despite efforts to discern a circled A on the helmet, it's challenging to interpret the depicted lines as forming the symbol. Even if a militiaman had indeed drawn a circled A on his helmet, it wouldn't represent a symbol of anarchism, as the circled A was entirely absent from the Spanish revolution.



# → The circled A appeared in the Bulletin of the Alliance Ouvrière Anarchiste (Anarchist Workers Alliance) as early as 1957: False

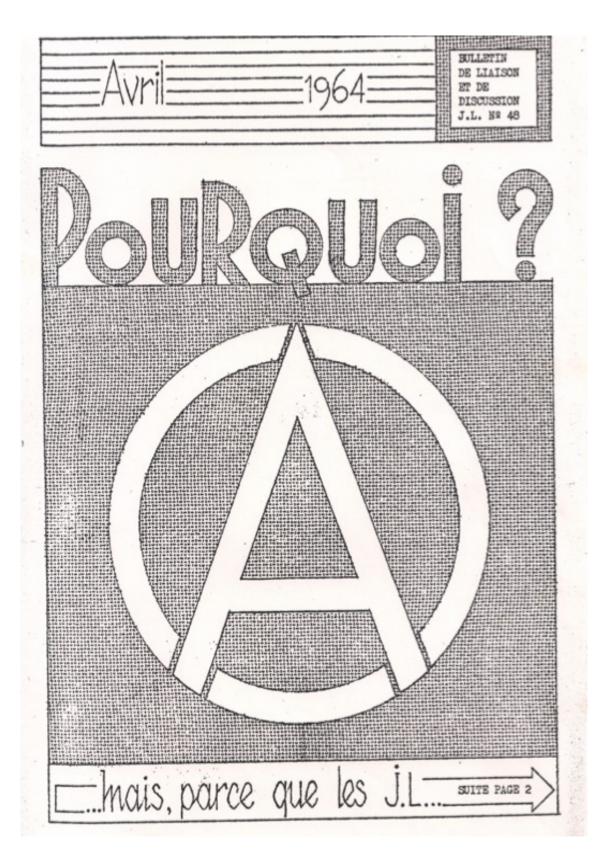
What was featured in the bulletin of this small French-speaking anarchist organization was the acronym of AOA, with the letter "O" (for Ouvrière) enclosed within the letter "A" (for Alliance), and a second letter "A" (for Anarchist) inserted within the letter "O." This contrasts sharply with the circled A which could only symbolize anarchy when detached from any specific organization. It wasn't until June 1968, four years after its inception, that the circled A was utilized in the AOA bulletin.



# DOCUMENTS

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### Document 1a: Original circled A.



...but because the J.L...

#### Document 1b: Original argument, and its translation.

... parallèlement à leur travail d'autoéducation non formaliste, entendent divulguer au maximum les idées fondamentales de l'Anarchisme.

La propagation des thèmes d'émancipation à caractère libertaire requiert la présence de tous ceux - sans exclusive - pour qui une société anarchiste représente la seule possibilité de réalisation intégrale de l'homme.

Et par delà des différents courants (nuances philosophiques...) et les divers groupes ou organisations (nuances pratiques...), il n'est aucun militant qui puisse s'offusquer de participer à l'accroissement quantitatif d'une propagande tendant à la fois à augnenter ses propres forces et à montrer l'Anarchisme Unique à travers la pluralité de ses conceptions et expressions.

Pourquoi ce sigle, que NOUS PROPOSONS A L'ENSEMBLE DU MOUVEMENT ANARCHISTE et pourquoi celui-ci plus particulièrement ?

Deux motivations principales nous ont guidé : d'abord faciliter et rendre plus efficaces les activités prafiques d'inscriptions et affichages, ensuite assurer une présence plus large du mouvement anarchiste aux yeux des gens par un caractère commun à toutes les expressions de l'anarchisme dans ses manifestations publiques.

Plus précisément, il s'agissait pour nous d'une part de trouver un moyen pratique permettant de réduire au minimum le temps d'inscription en nous évitant d'apposer une signature trop longue sous nos slogans, d'autre part de choisir un signe suffisamment général pour pouvoir être adopté, utilisé par tous les anarchistes.

Le sigle adopté nous a paru répondre le mieux à ces critères. En l'associant constamment au mot enerchiste il finira, par un automatisme mental bien connu, par évoquer tout seul l'idée de l'Anarchisme dans l'esprit des gens (voir le phénomène: );jeune nation).

La présence de l'idée anarchiste sera d'autant plus marquée du fait que le sigle permet une extension suivant deux dimensions :

- Accroissement du nombre d'évocations de l'anarchisme due à la plus grande rapidité et facilité des inscriptions.

- Accroissement de ces évocations par la présence du sigle dans les manifestations graphiques des divers groupements, tendances ou organisations anarchistes.

En adoptant un A (qui n'a rien de commun avec J.L....!) nous pensons avoir fait montre de notre volonté d'oeuvrer dans la solidarité réciproque et ouvert la voie à une adoption généralisée de ce système efficace et pratique.

Groupe J.L. de PARIS.



### Translation of document 1b.

...but because the J.L...

... parallel to their work of non-formalist self-education, they aim to spread as widely as possible the fundamental ideas of anarchism.

The dissemination of issues related to libertarian emancipation requires the involvement of all individuals who advocate for an anarchist society as the sole path toward the complete realization of humanity.

Regardless of the different currents (philosophical nuances) or the different groups and organizations (practical nuances), no activist should object to any effort that contributes to the wider dissemination of propaganda, thereby enhancing its effectiveness and demonstrating the unity of Anarchism amidst its diverse conceptions and expressions.

Why this symbol that we PROPOSE TO THE ENTIRE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT and why this one in particular?

It stems from two primary motivations. Firstly, it aims to streamline and expedite the creation of wall inscriptions and posters. Secondly, it aims to enhance the visibility of the anarchist movement within society by incorporating a common element shared across all anarchist expressions in the public sphere.

Specifically, our objective was to minimize the time required to create wall inscriptions by avoiding the need to write a lengthy signature beneath our slogans. Additionally, we want to choice a symbol broad enough to be embraced and used by all anarchists.

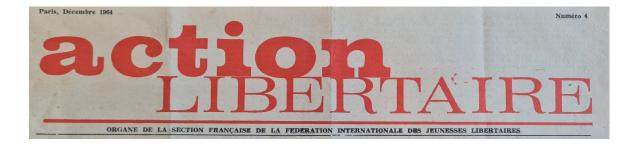
We believe the proposed symbol best fulfils these criteria. By consistently pairing it with the term "anarchist," it will trigger associations with anarchism in people's minds (akin to the phenomenon of the Celtic cross linked with the Jeune Nation organization).

Moreover, this symbol serves a dual purpose for anarchist enhancement: firstly, by accelerating and facilitating the creation of anarchist messaging, and secondly, by appearing in graphic representations of the various anarchist groups, tendencies, and organizations.

By adopting the letter "A" (which bears no resemblance to JJLL), we aim to demonstrate our commitment to reciprocal solidarity and to pave the way for the widespread adoption of this efficient and practical approach.

Young Libertarians Paris Group

#### Document 2: First circled A in block letters (1964).



### Anarquismo revolucion

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### Document 3: First reliable article about the origin of the circled A, and its translation.

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#### La véridique histoire du A cerclé

Le A dans un cercle est un sigle si répandu, si connu et reconnu qu'on a fini par le prendre pour un symbole traditionnel de l'anarchisme, comme s'il avait existé depuis toujours. La rumeur le fait parfois remonter à la révolution espagnole : l'œil des jeunes anarchistes est plus habitué à voir un A cerclé qu'une cible peinte sur le casque d'un milicien (fig. 1, p. 15). Certains croient qu'il ferait référence à Proudhon, résumant son idée de l'Anarchie dans l'Ordre. En réalité, il s'agit d'un phénomène récent dans l'iconographie libertaire le A cerclé a en effet été inventé à Paris en 1964 et réinventé à Milan en 1966. Deux dates, deux lieux de naissance ? Voyons-y de plus près.

C'est en avril 1964, sur la couverture du bulletin *Jeunes Libertaires* qu'apparaît le dessin d'un sigle que le Groupe J. L. de Paris propose «à l'ensemble du mouvement anarchiste» par delà les différents courants et les divers groupes ou organisations. «Deux motivations principales nous ont guidés d'abord faciliter et rendre plus efficace les activités pratiques d'inscriptions et affichages, ensuite assurer une présence plus large du mouvement anarchiste aux yeux des gens, par un caractère commun à toutes les expressions de l'anarchisme dans ses manifestations publiques. Plus précisément, il s'agissait pour nous d'une part de trouver un moyen pratique permettant de réduire au minimum le temps d'inscription en nous évitant d'apposer une signature trop longue sous nos slogans, d'autre part de choisir un sigle suffisamment général pour pouvoir être adopté, utilisé par tous les anarchistes. Le sigle adopté nous a paru répondre le mieux à ces critères. En l'associant constamment au mot anarchiste il finira, par un automatisme mental bien connu, par évoquer tout seul l'idée de l'anarchisme dans l'esprit des gens.»

Le sigle proposé est un A majuscule inscrit dans un cercle (fig. 2, p. 16) Tomás Ibañez en est l'initiateur, René Darras le réalisateur. D'où vient l'idée, de la simplicité de réalisation (en particulier avec la méthode d'impression par stencils de l'époque !), du sigle antimilitariste déjà répandu du CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, fig. 3, p. 15), d'autres inspirations ? L'Alliance ouvrière anarchiste affirme l'avoir utilisé dans sa correspondance dès la fin des années 1950 (fig. 4, p. 16), mais il ne figure dans son bulletin qu'à partir de juin 1968.

La proposition des J.L. de 1964 n'a eu aucun succès, hormis quelques graffitis dans les couloirs du métro parisien – n'oublions pas qu'alors on imprimait soit sur stencils, soit en typographie classique, et qu'il aurait donc dû fallu réaliser un cliché au plomb figurant un A inscrit dans un cercle. En décembre de la même année, le A cerclé apparaît en titre d'un article signé Tomás [Ibañez] dans le journal *Action libertaire* (fig. 5, p. 13). Le réseau des Jeunes Libertaires, qui comptait au début des années soixante plusieurs groupes dans toute la France, s'est affaibli les bulletins régionaux ne paraissent plus et le bulletin parisien sera en sommeil de 1965 à 1967, plusieurs «J.L.» seront par la suite aux premiers rangs du mouvement de Mai 68. Fin du premier chapitre.

Il faut attendre 1966 pour que le symbole du A cerclé soit repris et utilisé, d'abord à

titre expérimental puis régulièrement, par la Gioventù libertaria de Milan, qui avait des rapports fraternels avec les jeunes Parisiens. Ces deux groupes ont été à l'origine du Comité européen de liaison des jeunes anarchistes (CLJA). C'est alors que commence la vie publique du sigle.

Les premières fois qu'on le voit, c'est justement à Milan (fig. 6, p. 16), où il sert de signature habituelle aux tracts et aux affiches des jeunes anarchistes, parfois associé au signe antinucléaire et à la pomme des Provos hollandais. Puis il s'étend en Italie, puis dans le monde entier; mais on n'a presque point vu de A cerclés pendant le mai parisien en 1968, les premières traces n'apparaissent guère qu'en 1972-73. C'est en effet au début des années 1970 qu'explose la mode du A cerclé, que s'approprient et qu'imitent les jeunes anars dans le monde. Il connaît un tel succès que, selon un avis autorisé, si son inventeur l'avait breveté il serait milliardaire aujourd'hui (fig. 7, p. 28).

Pourquoi ce succès si rapide, si frappant ? Il est dû aux motifs mêmes qui avaient fait proposer le sigle par les J.L. d'une part il est extrêmement facile à dessiner, aussi simple que la croix, plus simple que la croix gammée ou la faucille et le marteau, d'autre part, un mouvement nouveau, jeune, en plein développement, avait appris à écrire sur les murs et se cherchait un signe de reconnaissance. C'est ainsi que le A cerclé s'est imposé de fait, sans qu'aucune organisation ni groupe n'ait jamais songé à en décréter l'utilisation, et en l'absence d'un autre symbole graphique international des anarchistes (qui utilisaient parfois une symbolique désuète, comme la torche en Italie).

Voilà donc la véridique histoire du A cerclé, faite de volonté consciente et de spontanéité: un cocktail typiquement libertaire. Toute autre histoire est légende.

Amedeo Bertolo, Marianne Enckell

La documentation utilisée et reproduite ici est déposée au CSL/Archivio Pinelli de Milan et au CIRA de Lausanne. Une première version de cet article est parue dans le Bollettino Archivio Pinelli (via Rovetta 27 IT-20170 Milano).

2002 Bulletin du CIRA, nº 58. Lausanne

### Translation of document 3: True story of the circled A.

The circled A is a symbol so widespread, so widely recognized and disseminated that it has come to be taken as a traditional symbol of anarchism, seeming to have existed forever Some rumours trace its origin back to the Spanish Revolution: young anarchists are more accustomed to seeing a circled A than the clearly discernible target painted on a militiaman's helmet as seen in a photo with Durruti. Some believe it refers to Proudhon, encapsulating his idea of Anarchy in Order. In fact, it is a recent phenomenon in libertarian iconography: the circled A was invented in Paris in 1964 and reinvented in Milan in 1966. Two dates, two birthplaces? Let's take a closer look.

It was in April 1964, on the cover of the Jeunes Libertaires bulletin, that the Groupe JL de Paris drew the symbol it was proposing "to the whole anarchist movement" across the different currents, groups, and organisations. *"It stems from two primary motivations. Firstly, it aims to streamline and expedite the creation of wall inscriptions and posters, and secondly, to enhance the visibility of the anarchist movement within society by incorporating a common element shared across all anarchist expressions in the public sphere. Specifically, our objective was to minimize the time required for creating wall inscriptions by avoiding the need for lengthy signatures beneath our slogans, while also selecting a symbol broad enough to be embraced and utilized by all anarchists. We believe the proposed symbol best fulfils these criteria. By consistently pairing it with the term "anarchist," it will trigger associations with anarchism in people's minds".* 

The proposed symbol is a capital A inscribed in a circle; Tomás Ibañez is the initiator, René Darras the designer. Where did the idea come from? From the simplicity of the design, from the already widespread anti-nuclear sign of the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), or from other inspirations?

The Alliance Ouvrière Anarchiste (Anarchists Workers Alliance) claims to have used it in its correspondence from the late 1950s, thus marking its initials AOA; but it did not appear in its bulletin *L'Anarchie* until June 1968.

The 1964 JL proposal had no success, except for some graffiti in the corridors of the Paris metro - let's not forget that at that time leaflets and newspapers were printed either on stencils (a fragile medium) or in conventional letterpress, so a lead plate showing an A in a circle would have been necessary. In December of the same year, the circled A appeared in the title of an article by Tomás [Ibañez] in the newspaper *Action Libertaire*. The Jeunes Libertaires network, which in the early sixties included several groups throughout France, had weakened: regional bulletins no longer appeared, and the Paris bulletin was inactive from 1965 to 1967. However, several "JL" would later be at the forefront of the May '68 movement. End of the first chapter.

It wasn't until 1966 that the circled A symbol was used experimentally, and then, in 1968, it was used regularly by the Gioventù libertaria of Milan, which maintained fraternal relations with the young Parisians. These two groups formed the European Liaison

Committee of Young Anarchists (CLJA). It was then when the public life of the symbol began.

The first time we saw it was in Milan, where it was used as the usual signature on leaflets and posters of young anarchists, sometimes in association with the anti-nuclear symbol and the apple of the Dutch Provos. It spread throughout Italy and then the worldwide, but hardly any circled A was seen during the Paris May of 1968, with the first traces appearing only in 1972-73. It was during those years that the popularity of the circled A exploded and was appropriated and imitated by young anarchists around the world. It was so successful that if its inventor had patented it, he'd be a billionaire today...

Why this rapid and striking success? Basically, it was due to the same reasons for which the JL proposed the symbol: firstly, it's extremely easy to draw, as simple as a cross or a star, simpler than the swastika or the sickle and hammer. Secondly, a new, young movement, in full development, had learned to write on walls and was seeking a recognizable symbol.

That is how the circled A came to be adopted, without any organisation or group ever thinking to decree its use, and in the absence of any other international graphic symbol for anarchists (who sometimes used outdated symbols, like the torch in Italy).

So that's the true story of the circled A, made of conscious will and spontaneity: a typically libertarian cocktail. Any other story is merely legend.

#### Amedeo Bertolo, Marianne Enckell

The documentation used in this text is deposited at Centro Studi Libertari (CSL)-Archivio Pinelli (Milan) and Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme (CIRA) Lausanne. A first version of this article was published in 2001 in Bollettino Archivio Pinelli N. 917, págs. 24-27.

