

## The Origin of the "A In a Circle" As A Symbol of Anarchism: A Symbolic Review of its Development

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore from a historical perspective the origin and evolution of the "A in a circle" symbol, widely associated with anarchism since its creation in Paris in 1964. Documentary and semiotic analysis, which examines how this emblem has become a universal symbol of anarchism, adopted by different movements around the world. In addition, an interview is conducted with the main creator of the symbol. The study, in addition to showing the origin of the symbol, contributes to demystifying certain erroneous beliefs about its origin, and delves into its political and cultural significance in the context of the anarchist struggles of the sixties, seventies and eighties. The conclusions of the article bring us closer to what role the "A in a circle" symbol has acquired in the process of building a globally recognised visual identity for the libertarian movement.

**Keywords:** anarchism, symbol, "A in a circle", political iconography, visual identity.

### INTRODUCTION

Symbols have played a crucial role in political movements throughout history, offering a visual representation that can be easily recognised, uniting their followers and spreading their ideals (Halas, 2002; Svilicic and Maldini, 2013). In this sense, the "A in a circle" symbol has become a universal emblem of anarchism, used in graffiti as well as on banners, stickers, publications, flags and other media. However, its origin is surrounded by confusion, mythification and erroneous speculation, as pointed out in one of the few publications on the subject by Gli Iconoclasti (2008).

Over the past six decades, "A in a circle" has been interpreted as the visual representation of anarchism, but, as this article demonstrates, the symbol was not conceived until April 1964 in Paris, at a time of political and cultural effervescence that sought new forms of visibility and representation for libertarian ideas. Far from having an uncertain origin (Baillargeon, 2008, p. 26), the symbol was born in a specific context: the need for a graphic that could be adopted by the Paris groups of the 1960s.

Anarchism, from its beginnings in the second half of the 19th century, was a political current characterised by its diversity and its rejection of power and inequality (Álvarez, 1976; Termes, 1977; Piqué, 1989). This made it difficult on many occasions to create a symbol that represented the whole movement. For this reason, the efforts of people like Tomás Ibáñez, René Darras and several young anarchists in Paris in the 1960s marked a turning point in the history of the symbolism of the anarchist movement. Thus, the "A in a circle" met the requirements of being easily reproducible, linguistically adaptable and visually striking (Gli Iconoclasti, 2008; Baillargeon. 2008,

pp. 28-29; Gómez, 2022). Similarly, the "A in a circle" achieved what seemed impossible: to offer a common visual reference that could be used by all currents, without compromising ideological plurality. In this sense, the symbol not only ended up representing the absence of authority and the rejection of the state, but also the coexistence of multiple forms of resistance and coexistence (Milstein, 2012; Hammond, 2015).

This article aims, in the absence of scientific articles on the subject, to rigorously explore its history, demystify false attributions and analyse the political and social context that enabled its creation, expansion and consolidation. From its initial use in Paris in 1964 to its international expansion and resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s, the "A in a circle" has proved to be a flexible and enduring emblem.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study of political symbolism and its impact on social movements has been a fundamental field of research to understand how certain ideas are transmitted visually and manage to consolidate themselves in popular and political culture (Halas, 2002; Svilicic and Maldini, 2013). Within the anarchist movement, the symbol of the "A in a circle" has played a preponderant role, becoming an immediate visual reference for anarchism and even for the libertarian movement. To understand the relevance of this symbol, it is necessary to situate it within the theoretical framework of the analysis of political iconography and studies on the semiotics of social movements.

The use of symbols in political movements has been extensively analysed from a semiotic perspective, highlighting how certain emblems acquire universal meaning and are able to synthesise an entire ideology in one image (Spiering, 2021). Roland Barthes (1964) points out that graphic symbols, especially in protest movements, are fundamental to establishing a visual identity that can be quickly recognised and reproduced. This idea is key to understanding how the symbol "A in a circle" became such a powerful element for anarchism, since, as the aforementioned author argues, visual simplicity and the capacity for immediate evocation are essential for the effectiveness of symbols in contexts of political mobilisation.

In this sense, Baudrillard (1972) also explored the idea that symbols not only communicate a direct message but become part of the "political economy of the sign", where their value lies both in their ability to be reproduced and in the meaning given to them by their users. The "A in a circle" exemplifies this political economy of the sign, as, since its conception in 1964, it has been used in a variety of contexts and by various currents within the anarchist movement. Its ability to be appropriated by different groups, without losing its connection to anarchist ideals, makes it a flexible emblem that remains relevant today.

On the other hand, authors such as Umberto Eco (1997) have highlighted the importance of the "absent structure" in symbols, where a simple design can carry multiple meanings and be interpreted in different ways depending on the context in which it is used. The "A in a circle" is a clear example of this "absent structure", since, although it was conceived as a symbol that did not belong to any specific organisation, it has been adopted by different movements, from anarchists to punks (Burolo, 2022), who have given it new meanings, partly altering its original essence.

As has been pointed out, from a historical perspective, anarchism has been a movement characterised by its rejection of power and its ideological plurality. This has made it difficult, in many cases, to create a symbol that could represent all its currents. According to George Woodcock (1962) anarchists had historically reluctant to use elements that could be interpreted as representations of authority. The "A in a circle" managed to circumvent this barrier by offering an emblem that, by not being linked to any particular organisation, was able to represent the diversity of the movement without imposing a single identity. This feature was key to its success, as Tomás Ibáñez or Amedeo Bertolo point out, the initial intention being precisely to avoid any kind of centralisation or monopolisation of the symbol by a single faction of anarchism. As Ibáñez also says in an interview: "That's how the idea came about, to create a simple, quick, clear symbol that belonged to no one" (see also: AADD, 2024 and Gli Iconoclasti, 2008-2010).

It is also necessary to address the role of symbols in the consolidation of the visual identity of political movements. According to Manuel Castells (2011), in an era marked by globalisation and mass communication, symbols are a fundamental tool for the mobilisation of collective identities. Thus, the anarchist symbol, which emerged in a context of intense youth and political mobilisation in the 1960s in Paris, was subsequently adopted by anarchist movements around the world, precisely because of its ability to unify militants through a graphic symbol that reflected their values. As Ibáñez says: "There are many unmistakable symbols and this is one of them".

Finally, it is relevant to note that the "A in a circle" has not only functioned as an element of internal cohesion within anarchism, but also as an outward communication tool. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), political symbols have this double function: to consolidate internal identities and to project a message towards society at large.

## METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative methodology, based mainly on documentary analysis and a semiotic approach applied to the study of political symbols, in particular that of the "A in a circle". The research is organised in several phases that make it possible to trace the origin, evolution and appropriation of the symbol by various anarchist currents and movements, as well as to demystify some of the legends surrounding its creation. The methods and sources used for this analysis are detailed below.

The first phase of the research consisted of an exhaustive review of historical documents and archives related to the origin of this symbol. Specifically, the documentation located at the Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme (CIRA) in Lausanne (Switzerland) and the Biblioteca de Comunicació i Hemeroteca General de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. This review included both primary and secondary sources. In this regard, it should be noted that there is a significant lack of visual documentation on the early use of the symbol. Although some graphic supports have been preserved, most of the early representations were made in ephemeral public spaces, such as graffiti or banners, which limits access to visual records.

In addition to documentary analysis, this research also incorporates interviews and testimonies from key figures within the anarchist and cultural movement. In this respect, an open interview was conducted with Tomás Ibáñez on 8 November 2024 in Barcelona. He was one of the most influential people in the creation of the symbol. For the section on results linked to the creation of the symbol, both this interview and the interview conducted by Freddy Gómez in 2011 and published in 2022 were used (Gómez, 2022).

Following this first phase, semiotic analysis has been another key element of the study. Through this approach, we sought to break down and understand the visual elements that make up the "A in a circle" and how they convey a clear and direct message linked to anarchism. Following the theories of Barthes (1964) and Eco (1997), it examines the ability of the symbol to evoke a complex idea, such as the struggle against authority and power, through a simple but effective design.

Before closing the article, and in order to ensure the veracity of the facts reported and the scientific accuracy of the article, the final version was sent to Tomás Ibáñez for prior review, from which we have incorporated his contributions.

## RESULTS

The analysis carried out on the creation, evolution and appropriation of the "A in a circle" symbol offers a detailed view of how such a simple graphic design managed to become a universal icon of anarchism. Through documentary research, a semiotic approach and an interview with Tomás Ibáñez, several relevant findings have been obtained. These allow us to understand not only the historical process behind the symbol, but also the factors that explain its mass adoption and its permanence in the global political imaginary.

The following are the main findings of the research.

### The Anarchist Youth Movement in Paris, 1963-1964

The origin of the "A in a circle" symbol is linked and intimately related to Tomás Ibáñez and René Darras, together with the *Jeunes Libertaires* group located in Paris in 1964.

In September 1963, Ibáñez had travelled from Marseilles to Paris to enrol in psychology at the Sorbonne University. As in Marseilles, where he had arrived at the age of ten from Toulouse (where he was three years old), he quickly joined the *Jeunes Libertaires* group in the French capital along with Helyette Bess, René Darras, Progrés Rosell, José Montaner, Nicole Moine, Buc, Gardenia and, among others, Nestor Romero. Practically at the same time, Ibáñez also joined other groups such as the *Federacion Anarchiste* (FA), the *Groupe de Liaisons Internationales* (GLI) and the *Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth* (FIJL), which was outlawed in France in 1963. It was then that Ibáñez, who was nineteen years old at the time, observed the fragmentation of the anarchist movement in Paris, as he recounts in the interview: "When I arrive in Paris, I see many anarchist groups at odds with each other". In this context, and with the aim of bringing these movements together, he decided to create the *Liaison des Estudiants Anarchistes* (LEA) in October 1963, together with Richard Admiral. This grouping of young anarchist collectives, which had no more than five or six members in its early days, remained with few members until it developed in Nanterre in 1966 (Gómez, 2022).

Thus, little by little, a gregarious feeling among the different groups began to develop, also at the international level (Gurrucharri and Ibáñez, 2010). In turn, on 13 October 1963, the *Comité de Liaison des Jeunes Anarchistes* (CLJA) was formed, also by people from different groups. This, in addition to being very well received and multiplying its membership rapidly, had the objective of pooling and organising the premises of the CNT in exile, which was located in rue Ste. Marthe, no. 24 The success of Paris, and with the aim of propagating

the ideas taken up internationally, the CLJA together with the FIJJ and some young anarchists from Milan took on the organisation of the First European Meeting of Young Anarchists which took place in Paris between 16 and 17 April 1966 (Gómez, 2022).

All these dynamics, as well as the connections between the young French anarchists, allowed the dynamics of the anarchist movement in the capital to change and, on the initiative of Tomás Ibáñez, it was decided to find a distinctive and unifying logo.

### Creation of the Symbol

The proposal arose within this small collective of *Jeunes Libertaires* as a response to the need to create an emblem that could represent the different anarchist youth movements as a whole, without being linked to any specific organisation. Thus, meeting in a flat in the Clignancourt neighbourhood, the proposal was born: Tomás Ibáñez proposed the need to create a unifying symbol, the collective came up with the new logo, and René Darras, a fellow anarchist who had experience in graphic design, drew it (Ibáñez, 2006).

The first proposal for the "A in a circle" consisted of a simple but highly symbolic design: a capital letter "A", whose triangular structure intersected with a circle surrounding it. In this first proposal, the three vertices of the "A" touched the perimeter of the circle, giving the logo a compact and harmonious appearance. Thus, the "A" represented the word *anarchism* or *anarchy*, while the circle was interpreted as a symbol of unity and solidarity. The circle was inspired by the logo of the English anti-nuclear movement, in which Tomás Ibáñez himself had participated. In the first design, the "A" remained inside the circle without touching the vertices. This was confronted by breaking that initial harmony with later proposals (Gli Iconoclasti, 2008). Thus, from the 1970s onwards, the same "A" went beyond the circle (Ibáñez, 2006).

For his part, Ibáñez wrote most of the text entitled "Pourquoi A?" which was to accompany the proposal that was to appear on the front page of issue 48 (April 1964) of the *Bulletin des Jeunes Libertaires*:

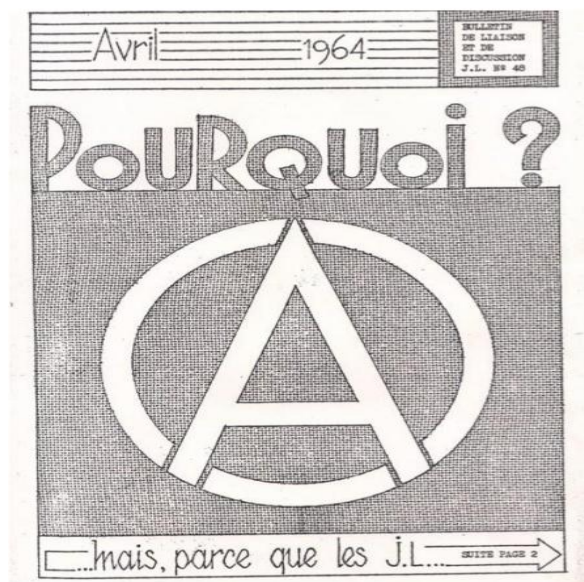
*...Two main motivations have guided us: firstly, to facilitate and make more effective the practical activities of inscriptions and posters, and secondly, to ensure a greater presence of the anarchist movement in the eyes of the people through a common character to all expressions of anarchism in its public manifestations.*

*More precisely, it was a question for us, on the one hand, of finding a practical way of reducing the registration time to a minimum by avoiding the use of a too long signature under our slogans, and, on the other hand, of choosing a sufficiently general sign that could be adopted and used by all anarchists.*

*The acronym adopted seemed to respond best to these criteria. By associating it constantly with the word anarchist it will end, by a well-known mental automatism, to evoke only the idea of Anarchism in the minds of the people (see the phenomenon of the young nation's Celtic creux: celtique).*

*The presence of the anarchist idea will be all the more marked by the fact that the acronym allows for an extension following two dimensions:*

- *Increase in the number of anarchist calls for applications due to faster and easier registration.*
- *Accroissement de ces évocations par la présence du sigle dans les manifestations graphiques des divers groupements, tendances ou organisations anarchistes.*



*Bulletin des Jeunes Libertaires*, no. 48 (April 1964). "Pourquoi A?" Text without signature.

This publication was produced in a practically handmade way, one by one, with a multi-copyist, so its dissemination could not, nor was it intended to, be far-reaching. The arduous task of its creation was recounted by Ibáñez during the interview: "After deciding on the idea, it appeared for the first time in the bulletin of our small collective. We did it with a multicopyist. We had to draw and write page by page".

The above proposal was brought for discussion to the CLJA, which, although not reluctant, did not show any sympathy either. Thus, for the first few weeks, only the *Jeunes Libertaires* group used the symbol and gave it visibility. It was not until December 1964 that it was seen for the second time. Then, although it was not accompanied by a defining text, the libertarian militant Salvador Gurrucharri thought it appropriate to head the article "Perspectives Anarchistes" by Tomás Ibáñez published in *Action Libertaire* (issue 4). On this, Ibáñez notes: "The printers had great difficulty in getting it stamped and printed because there was no such graphic design".



*Action libertaire* : organe de la Section Française de la Fédération Internationale des Jeunes Libertaires. Section Française, no. 4 (October 1964). Collection: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Biblioteca de Comunicació i Hemeroteca General. CEDOC

### International Dissemination and Consolidation as an Anarchist Symbol

"Suddenly thousands of hands were drawing it on walls all over the world". (Interview with Ibáñez in Chic, 2018).

The "A in a circle" symbol was not an immediate success after its creation in 1964. According to the documents reviewed (AADD, 2024), the initial diffusion of the emblem was limited, being used in few places outside Paris during the first years. However, from April 1966 onwards, it began to gain popularity, especially after the European Meeting of Young Anarchists in Paris, where there was a large participation of young libertarians from Milan. It was precisely the Milanese group *Gioventù Libertaria*, and among others Amedeo Bertolo, who adopted the symbol and made it popular in Italy. This was a crucial moment for the expansion of the symbol internationally. Bertolo recalled in an interview in 2008:

None of us at *Gioventù Libertaria* expected much. Or maybe they did: the only one who objected to the adoption of the symbol did so on the grounds that it was too simple and therefore falsifiable. Anyone could have signed anything like that. He feared, therefore, an excessive success (its general identification as an anarchist signature) for potential distorted or in any way unwanted uses (Quoted in Gli Iconoclasti, 2008, 9).

Thus, young Italian anarchists were instrumental in spreading the symbol outside France, taking it to other European countries. This expansion coincided with a period of intense political and social mobilisation in Europe, where anarchism gained new strength, especially after the May '68 revolts in Paris (Galcerán, 2008). According to Ibáñez: "With May '68 everything was transformed, diversified; everything changed and many anarchist groups were diluted in new spaces".

By the 1970s, the symbol had already established itself as an emblem of anarchism, being used by anarchists of different currents, from individualists to anarcho-syndicalists. In the case of Spain, it was not until the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in November 1975 that the symbol became widespread. Tomás Ibáñez himself acknowledged that he was moved at the 1977 Montjuïc congress when he saw the symbol waving in the crowd: "I must admit that the strong emotion I felt on 2 July 1977 in Barcelona during the impressive CNT rally at Montjuïc was heightened even more when I saw some black flags with the A... waving in the crowd..." (Gli Iconoclasti, 2008-2010).

### **Appropriations and False Attributions Regarding The Symbol**

One of the most significant appropriations by countercultural movements was the identification of the "A" symbol in the punk movement during the 1970s. Through the analysis of graphic materials it has been corroborated that the adoption of the symbol by this subculture contributed significantly to its global popularisation.

The punk movement, for example, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, was identified with anarchism because of its anti-authoritarian attitude and its rejection of established norms (Burolo, 2022). The "A in a circle" was quickly incorporated into the iconography of this collective, appearing on records, T-shirts, graffiti and fanzines. Tomás Ibáñez recalled: "Punk has been fundamental in the beginnings of the symbol's diffusion". This appropriation, while maintaining its link with anarchism, gave the symbol a new layer of meaning related to youth resistance and cultural rebellion. Punk, with its DIY (Do It Yourself) aesthetic and its rejection of commercialisation, found in this a visual symbol in keeping with its values and practices (Horton, 2024).

Even in the underground music scene following the 1979 revolution in Iran, young people developed a musical movement that followed anarchist and DIY sentiments (Niknafs, 2016).

From the 1980s onwards, it began to appear in a wide variety of contexts, from anti-globalisation protests to cultural demonstrations (Arias, 2008; Taibo, 2007). This re-signification allowed the symbol to become a reference not only for anarchism, but also for a broader resistance against any form of authority.

Also, throughout the research, several erroneous beliefs and mythologies about the origin of the "A in a circle" have been identified (AADD, 2023).

One of the most important myths to debunk is the idea that the symbol was used by the First International (International Workingmen's Association, IWA) or by groups affiliated to the International during the 19th century. This is one of the most persistent misconceptions, possibly due to the importance of the International in the articulation of the anarchist and working class movement in Europe in that period (Termes, 1977). Perhaps the myth arose from the need to give the symbol greater historical depth and legitimacy, connecting it to the origins of the movement. In any case, the IWA's label was not a properly anarchist organisation, but rather one that embraced the various socialist dimensions (Ramnath, 2011). Likewise, the logo had more to do with a dimension close to the mathematical arithmetic that had been assimilated and propagated from Freemasonry in this century.

Another incorrect belief, which has also been disproved by Ibáñez, is the supposed link of the symbol with the philosophy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and his concept of "order without power" (Hdez Velasco, 2017). Although Proudhon's anarchism is one of the philosophical roots of the movement, according to Ibáñez, there was no connection between his ideas and the design of the "A in a circle" symbol.

Similarly, the idea that the symbol was used during the Spanish Revolution (1936-1939) by anarchist militiamen has not been verified. Likewise, the idea that it was in use by Italian or French anarchists before 1964 must be disproved. This probably arose due to the strong influence of French and Italian anarchism and the rapid adoption of the symbol in that country after its creation. In fact, as Amedeo Bertolo and Marianne Enckell (2002) confirm, Italian anarchists did not start using the symbol until after the European Meeting of Young Anarchists in Milan cited above, when the symbol was introduced and widely adopted by Italian and European anarchist movements. Bertolo himself was one of its promoters (AADD, 2024 and Gli Iconoclasti, 2008-2010).

For its part, although a similar symbol appeared in the bulletin of the *Alliance Ouvrière Anarchiste* (AOA), founded in 1956 in Brussels, it referred to its acronym and not to the anarchist "A".

### **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the "A in a circle" symbol leads us to reflect not only on its history and evolution, but also on the deeper meaning that symbols can have within political and social movements, and how these emblems interact with dynamics of power, resistance and social change.

One of the points that emerges from the study of this symbol is its ability to represent, simultaneously, both cohesion and plurality. This is particularly important in the case of anarchism, a political movement that by its very nature rejects hierarchical structures and centralisation. The "A in a circle" or the "A" has managed to be the rare example of a symbol that unifies without imposing, that is adopted without coercion, and that resignifies without losing its essence. This process opens the door to a broader reflection on the role of symbols in movements that, like anarchism, attempt to subvert traditional logics of power.

Beyond its historical role, this symbol invites us to reconsider how we interpret the resignification of emblems in contemporary political struggles. Throughout its history, the symbol has been adopted by movements as diverse as punk or anti-capitalism, and yet it has maintained its link to anarchist ideals. This process of constant re-signification is a crucial characteristic of enduring symbols, but it also raises questions about the future of political symbols in general.

In an era marked by visual saturation and the fragmentation of social movements, how can symbols maintain their relevance and coherence amidst such diverse interpretations? The "A" suggests that symbols do not need to be anchored to a single meaning to be effective; indeed, it is their ability to be recontextualised that gives them coherence. This opens up a broader reflection on how today's political movements can design and use symbols that not only mobilise their constituencies, but also invite new interpretations and expansions, allowing them to evolve with social struggles.

The study has shown how the creation of myths around the origin of the symbol, although disproved in this work, has played a role in the consolidation of the "A in a circle" as a powerful emblem. This leads us to reflect on the role that myths and narratives play in the construction of the identity of social movements. Although historically incorrect, the myth that the symbol has roots in the work of Proudhon, the First International or the Spanish Revolution, has allowed it to be associated with a long tradition of struggle, legitimising its contemporary use.

Finally, one of the most powerful conclusions to emerge from this research is the continued relevance of the "A in a circle" symbol. In an increasingly interconnected and transnational world, anarchism has found new ways of expressing itself through social movements that, while not explicitly identifying themselves as anarchists, share many of its principles: horizontality, resistance to centralised power and the struggle for social justice.

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