

Positively Quilca Street

Lima anarchist scene survives official clean up

Bill Weinberg

When Lutxo Rodríguez recalls the local punks and social outcasts of the downtown Lima, Peru district he habituates “dressing in black in the ‘80s,” I smile wryly, remembering the Lower East Side of my own youth. But the urban decay that allowed for the florescence of bohemia and an anarcho-punk scene in this small enclave of a South American capital came “in the context of political violence,” he says.

This is Jiron Quilca, a narrow street just off the city’s Plaza San Martín. Follow it west, and the stately old hotels and restaurants around the plaza quickly give way to dusty second-hand bookstores, where surviving murals on the exterior walls speak to a recent past of oppositional culture. Quilca, and the warren of small streets surrounding it, was long the haunt of Lima’s “poets, punks, writers, and marginalized people,” Rodríguez recalls.

A veteran figure in the scene, Rodríguez himself looks like he’s changed little. He is still dressed in a black-and-red color scheme, with long partly dyed hair, black beard and nose-ring. “But Quilca is not the same,” he says. “It is full of *lumpen* as well as bohemia. There are still lots of bookstores, people still gather there in the evenings to drink and talk. But it isn’t a focus of resistance the way it used to be.”

In the 1980s and on into the ‘90s, Peru was wracked by the Maoist Shining Path and other guerilla insurgencies. Lima suffered a lawless atmosphere, and much property was abandoned, especially in the downtown area. In outlying areas, there was massive colonization of vacant land, as peasants fleeing violence in the countryside established squatter communities and “informal” barrios, creeping up the rugged slopes that overlook the city. As in North American cities in the ‘70s and ‘80s, crime and insecurity were endemic.

Space has been closing more rapidly since Lima’s 2014 mayoral election of conservative Luis Castañeda who is aggressively touting a clean-up of the city—much in the style of New York City’s mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, a generation ago.

Still, Rodríguez is keeping alive a stubborn remnant of alternative Quilca’s heyday—El Eskupitajo (an alternate-spelling of the Spanish word for expectoration), a little stall in a pedestrian mall off Jiron Camana, one of Quilca’s feeder streets, selling punk records (yes, vinyl) and regalia, along with fanzines and some anarchist literature.

Much of this latter is published by Rodríguez’s own imprint, Editorial Anarcritica. Its most recent effort is a Spanish translation of Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*, with an introduction by Rodríguez. *Desobediencia* is also the name of the anarchist zine he has sporadically published since 2001.

He also peddles anarchist lit at Barricada Discos, the record stall he runs at Galerías Brasil, a mall in the nearby working-class district of Jesus María. Downstairs, traditional bookbinders work alongside internet connection points, while one flight up punk and metal blare from numerous stalls that now constitute the city’s principal magnet for *rockero* youth. Punks (especially the more political ones) are also called *subtes* in *limeño* argot—short for subterranean.

Rodríguez poses for my camera in Barricada Discos while holding aloft a slab of vinyl from Autonomía, the most iconic band of Lima’s subte scene. The sleeve sports a black cat and a black flag with the circle-A.

The changes to Quilca were clear to me when I passed through and met with Rodríguez in November. I had last been there four years earlier, in 2013. Then, a hub of the scene, El Haberno community center, had just recently been evicted. But the colorful and whimsical murals on its exterior walls were still intact. One read “14 years of counter-culture,” an obvious epitaph for the center, painted with eviction impending. Today they are all painted over.

The lifespan of El Haberno (The Devil’s Pit) is telling. When it opened in 1999, the property was disputed pursuant to its abandonment years earlier, allowing the activists and artists to move in, and pay little or nothing in rent. It was something of a hippie-punk hybrid entity, attracting subtle and DIY culture as well as followers of *musica folklorica*. One mural showed a portrait of El Jilguero del Huascarán (real name Ernesto Sanchez Fajardo), the folksinger from mountainous Ancash region who was an advocate for the peasants.

When dictatorship briefly returned in 1992—as President Alberto Fujimori declared his “self-coup,” suspending Congress and the constitution—Quilca had been a rare outpost of open defiance. After democracy was restored a second time and Fujimori was put on trial for corruption and ghastly human rights abuses, El Haberno pressed the question. Rodríguez recalls “murals and concerts openly opposed to Fujimori.”

The demise of El Haberno is the bitter fruit of Lima’s “recovery.” With stability restored, property values are rising, and disputed titles are being cleared up. Space for alternative culture is fast shrinking.

Another great loss was the closure of the Boulevard de Cultura Quilca, the enclave’s biggest pedestrian mall, filled with stalls selling books, zines, political or psychedelic t-shirts, and other such alternative accoutrements. Rodríguez tells me how it once hosted an annual “Anti-Patriotic Festival” every July, when Peru celebrates its Independence Day.

The site was owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Lima, which in 2016 finally evicted the peddlers. It is now a parking garage.

Yet another loss was the ironically named Salon Imperial squat and community center, just off Quilca on Jiron Colmena. This center dated back to the left-wing dictatorship of Gen. Juan Velasco in the late 1960s, when an old office building was turned over to the community. Through the subsequent conservative regimes, it had been held by various community groups on a more or less informal basis, tolerated if not officially permitted by the authorities.

The building operated a big communal kitchen that fed hundreds of local residents daily, and provided space for numerous activist groups, including the *Avancemos* anarchist collective, which published a newspaper of that name. It also hosted punk rock shows and other cultural happenings.

In February 2014, the Salon Imperial was gutted in a mysterious fire that left two dead. It remains vacant today.

Rodríguez runs down a brief overview of several alternative spaces that have come and gone over the years. The only significant entity that survives today is a vegan space dubbed La Maleza (The Undergrowth), in Callao, Lima’s port sibling city.

Before it was eclipsed by the Communist Party and a left-populist party in the 1920s, Peru had a significant anarcho-syndicalist movement. And, there are direct links to past participants in this movement to the current scene.

The great grand-daddy of Peruvian anarchism was the polemicist and poet, Manuel Gonzalez Prada.

His most important political work was his 1904 essay *Nuestros Indios* (Our Indians), an embarrassingly patronizing title by contemporary standards. But it was among the first to grapple with what would become a defining debate of the Peruvian left—whether the popular and especially rural masses are foremost economically oppressed as workers and peasants, or culturally oppressed as indigenous peoples.

Contemporaries of Gonzalez Prada were the father-and-son anarchist duo of Manuel Caracciolo Levan° and Delfin Amador Levan°.

Both were early labor organizers, back before the establishment of Peru’s major unions, and were especially critical in the struggle for the eight-hour day, won through national legislation in 1919. The younger, Delfin Levan°, a baker by trade, published the syndicalist newspapers *La Protesta* and *El Proletariado* through the early 1920s.

Delfin was the father of the journalist and historian César Lévano, who remains a significant figure on the Peruvian left today. He publishes the intransigent left-wing daily *Uno*, and intermittently teaches at Lima’s San Marcos National University. He’s the author with Luis Tejada of *La Utopia Libertaria en el Peru*, a history of the anarchist tradition in the country.

Lutxo Rodríguez has sat in on some of Cesar Levano's classes at San Marcos, representing a passing of the torch from the syndicalists to the subtes.

Even if it no longer has a central meeting space, Lima's anarchist scene survives.

Rodríguez tells me it is divided between a "more conventional" current and an "*anti-todo*" (anti-everything) tendency—meaning "anti-intellectual, anti-organization."

With Peru plunging into political crisis, Lima's anarchist survivors may be looking at an opportunity to test their mettle—eviction, property squeeze and "clean up" notwithstanding.

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