

An Open Entrance to the Shut Palace of Anarcho-Surrealism

Exploring the crossroads of two radical pathways

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a review of

Surrealism and Anarchism by Pietro Ferrua, edited by Ron Sakolsky. Eberhardt Press, 2022.

Ron Sakolsky has uncovered a previously lost piece of anarchist history, one that explores the fertile crossroads of surrealism and anarchy.

This text originated as a 1982 lecture given by Pietro Ferrua (1930–2021), inaugurating the Anarchos Institute at the University of Montreal. The pamphlet provides a useful biographical sketch of Ferrua that helps situate his scholarship within a lifelong commitment to anarchism.

In his youth, Ferrua was a runner for the Italian resistance during World War II, and after the war co-founded the Alba dei Liberi anarchist group in San Remo, his birthplace in northwestern Italy. Anarchist agitation and refusal of military conscription led to his imprisonment from 1950–52.

He edited an anarchist paper in Italy and then several publications in Switzerland. There, he founded the International Centre for Research on Anarchism (CIRA) in 1957, an international archive of anarchist material which continues to this day.

In 1963, Ferrua was chased out of Switzerland for anarchist activities and moved to Brazil where he was active in anarchist agitation in opposition to the dictatorship. He was expelled in 1969 and relocated to Portland, Ore. He taught at Lewis and Clark University from 1970 to 1987 in the foreign languages, comparative literature, and film history department. He studied Lettrism and Surrealism, anarchism and cinema, anarchist painters, and anarchists in the Mexican revolution.

In 1992, he coedited a still untranslated French-language anthology, *Surrealism and Anarchism: I'm Still Left Wondering*. Sakolsky came across Ferrua's work while doing research for his recent book, *Dreams of Anarchy and the Anarchy of Dreams: Adventures at the Crossroads of Anarchy and Surrealism* published by Autonomedia in 2021. The discovery that Ferrua was still living in Portland led first to correspondence, and then to a meeting along with Eberhardt Press's Charles Oberbeck, and Canadian Surrealist Sheila Nopper.

Ferrua died in 2021 at the age of 91, just before *Dreams of Anarchy* was completed. The publication of Sakolsky's pioneering work on Anarcho-Surrealist history stands as a tribute to Ferrua—scholar and anarchist militant.

Ferrua's *Surrealism and Anarchism* examines the 15-month long collaboration between the Paris Surrealist Group and *La Libertaire*, the weekly paper of the French Anarchist Federation. This alliance was announced with a manifesto published on October 12, 1951, entitled "Surrealism and Anarchism: Opening Statement" which is included in the pamphlet.

The statement begins, "Surrealists have never ceased to assert that the execrable trinity of state-work-religion has often led us to encounter the comrades of the Anarchist Federation. Today we express this unity in *La Libertaire*. We are pleased that this collaboration will release a common force with a revolutionary spirit."

While some of the less imaginative or more doctrinaire members of the Anarchist Federation may have seen this involvement of the Surrealists as strange, Ferrua argues that it represented a fundamental affinity between the two movements. He bemoans the silence of historians of Surrealism regarding this specific collaboration, and the Surrealist affinity for anarchism in general—a silence that continued for the most part until recently.

Despite a relatively short time frame, nearly all the Surrealists in France appeared in the pages of *La Libertaire*. Ferrua lists 54 by name. Alongside many shorter pieces, there were several very significant essays that appeared during that period.

One example is Jean Schuster's "Dreams and Revolution," which Ferrua sees as a precursor in many ways to the anarcho-surrealist influence during May 1968 revolt in Paris. Another essay singled out is Benjamin Péret's "Imperialism and Nationalism."

Perhaps the most important was André Breton's "The Lighthouse," which Ferrua characterizes as Breton's "declaration of love to the anarchists." In it, Breton explores his own lifelong affinities for anarchism, but also the anarchist roots of surrealism.

He writes: "Surrealism, long before it was called surrealism, when it was still only a free association of individuals who spontaneously rejected the totality of the social and moral constraints of their time, was first a reflection in the black mirror of anarchism."

Breton has often been criticized for his onetime alliance with the French Communist Party and later friendship with Leon Trotsky. Historians have used these associations as an excuse to minimize or omit Breton's solidarity with anarchists. Fundamentally, for Breton, a surrealist world and an anarchist world are identical. Ferrua quotes Breton to drive that point home: "the surrealists were convinced that a social revolution which would spread to every country could not fail to promote a libertarian world (some say a surrealist world, but it is the same thing)."

Ferrua ends his discussion by briefly touching on "later anarcho-surrealist relations" of which there are many. Happily, several people have followed up on Ferrua's work and greatly expanded on it. Ron Sakolsky's *Dreams of Anarchy* explores these later relations in great detail. Recent work by Abigail Susik is exemplary as well, among many others.

Sakolsky characterizes Surrealism as seeking "a rupture with the impoverished vision of what passes for reality by actively questioning, critiquing, and joyously upsetting the notion of what is deemed 'realistically' possible."

Many anarchists are seeking this rupture as well, and they would do well to investigate these same crossroads that Ferrua was exploring four decades ago. This brief 50-page pamphlet is a great place to start looking.

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