

Ravachol Costantini - Artist of Anarchy

By Bill Nowlin

"It is hard to pass judgment on lives such as these. One stands bewildered, at aghast before men capable of such deeds; and, if they defy frivolous judgment, even to explain them seems beyond the power of man. So, in the presence of the same wrongs that so deeply moved them, can still remain inert."

—Robert Hunter
Violence in the Labor Movement, p.86

Peopled with so many daringly defiant, rebellious, and romantic individuals, the history of the anarchist movement holds a distinct fascination for many. With so many colorful and tragic incidents, attempts, and experiments in social revolution the movement has never been easy to deal with superficially, other than by those who would dismiss it out of hand.

Writers, both anarchist and non-anarchist, have found themselves challenged to deal with the depths of commitment, insistent purity of ideals and tragic martyrdom evident throughout the history of the anarchist movement. Now the movement has found its chronicler in art, Flavio Costantini.

Unlike some of the writers, Costantini does not deal with an incident or two in the history of anarchism and then move on to other subjects, but is instead intent on creating an extensive artistic documentation of the movement in his works. The first 43 paintings in the series are presented in *The Art of Anarchy*, released in September 1975 by Cienfuegos Press, London. Costantini has plans for many more.

Working from a studio in his apartment in Rapallo, Italy, he has already completed additional paintings on McKinley's assassination by Colozos and the martyrdom of Wobley Frank Little and has begun several more. The originals are painted by Costantini and from each original, 100 silkscreen prints are made by an associate in Zagreb, Yugoslavia.

One thing in Costantini's work becomes evident immediately. He is particularly drawn to the violent — the assassinations, bombings, arrests and executions. Ravachol is clearly the figure who intrigues him the most. Ravachol symbolizes to many the uncivilized element which frightens most people. This symbol of the violent anarchist, in the case of Ravachol a figure who bombs, murders and plunders graves, is effectively exploited by the enemies of a free and Stateless society to "prove" the dangers and chaos which would ensue upon us, were we to dispense with the restraining influences of Party or State.

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President McKinley. And yet, Ravachol does symbolize something for Costantini — the will to act.

Kafka was a very important and early influence on Costantini's work, predating his decision to draw and paint. Costantini, now 45, was the son of a professor in northern Italy, and began his professional career as a textile designer and commercial graphic artist. In a recent interview, he said, "I started to draw because I read the Kafka books. And I like them very, very much. But it was impossible to write like Kafka, so I began to draw."

The isolated, buffeted and bewildered subjects in Kafka's works, always near the edge of hysteria and collapse, captivated Costantini and he remained involved with them for many years. Always in mind, though, was an alternative — Communism. For Costantini, Communism was Communist in this period until a one month visit to Russia in 1962.

Russia Disappointing

Costantini was disappointed and disturbed by Russia. In Moscow he saw "an endless stream of tourist peasants who were strangely silent, neither sad nor happy, but, rather canalized in a disenchanted, unconscious pilgrimage. The soldiers did a lively goose step in the changing of the guard in front of Lenin's Mausoleum. Sleek black cars with drawn curtains filed through the walls of the Kremlin. The revolution had ended."

He reread a book which he had hated and forgotten: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* by Victor Serge. He felt that perhaps this was an alternative, an isolated but insistent voice. Serge's book, particularly the section on the French anarchists inspired him with new hope. Since that time, Costantini says, "I have tried, within the scope of my own possibilities, to publicize this compromising alternative."

Costantini agrees with Serge that the French anarchists, although "shot through with contradictions," were people who "demanded, before anything else, harmony between deeds and words." These were often very lonely and isolated individuals, sensitive in their own way, who chose to act, and not simply wander about confused and disoriented in a bewildering world. Indeed, their reaction to confusion and bewilderment was precisely to act, to refuse to submit.

Costantini's work has said that some of his prints show a love of the decorative but that this is betrayed by an underlying feeling of loneliness bordering on morbidity.

Costantini adds: "Before my trip to Russia I was inspired by Kafka. My drawings of the homeless border-trover: I don't mean to say that my work now is ex-troverted, but I think I've reached a greater objectivity. Kafka has grown into Ravachol. Ravachol places

his explosives outside the door of his persecutors. With Kafka one remains isolated and vulnerable; with Ravachol one feels comradeship. He acts to challenge the forces which threaten us all.

"Then I loved Kafka but I was a Communist — though a logical, rational choice, not a sentimental one. I was Communist because I thought Communism was the sole solution of logic and justice for humanity. Something that could replace the fraud that is Christianity. My Russian voyage made me understand the new deception of authoritarian socialism. Now

(Ravachol, Jacob, Bonnot) in spite of the bad consequences for the movement, have done something. They had no other choice but to fight, at that time. It was truly a class war: the workers were like slaves.

Individual Acts

In bourgeois ethics it is not a crime to wage war; on the contrary, it is honorable. The anarchist ethic sees war as a horrendous crime. The same goes for the accumulation of capital, etc. The same act can be considered criminal or not according to the norm by which it is judged. The bank robberies

pulled off by Durruti and by Costantini's focus on individual acts rather than collective manifestations reflects his concern for the subjective. Individual courage and will dominate all his works; only a few, like the 1879 McCormick Works massacre in Chicago, and the 1894 peasant revolt in Ghillella, deal with group struggles.

There is another element as well, Costantini says, "I feel the violence very deeply. I am very shocked by these people who give their lives for an idea. An idea. It's terrible for me to see such

wooden, with the posed photographic faces often staring in unnatural directions, appearing distant and eerily oblivious to all that goes on around them. What is portrayed is thus like a frozen frame of film of a particular incident. A moment preserved for the viewer is presented in a startling fashion, underscored the startling subject matter of the print itself.

Costantini's work is both documentary and artistically innovative. Increasing experimentation in technique and pattern is evident, and his exceptional talent has



Flavio Costantini and his depiction of French anarchist printer Claude-François Etlevant shooting policeman from his jail cell in 1898. Etlevant died in French Guiana penal colony.

logically I accept libertarian socialism but psychologically I am attracted by anarcho-individualism.

"My individualism precludes my anarchism — it is inherent in my nature. The one step forward that I've made is only one: now I am able to analyze my solitude. My choice today for libertarian socialism is fully conscious."

In reply to those critics of anarchism who lump anarchists with bandits, Costantini says: "These people

Sabate are not in my opinion criminal acts.

"La Bande a Bonnot — in my opinion — is symbolic in another sense: it concluded the epoch of frontal struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and initiated that of negotiations and conformism in the unions; the last surviving remnants of the irreducible ones who were isolated from the rest of the proletariat and had only the option to join the system or succumb."

people fighting in proportion to the power ranged against them."

In Costantini's work, we run up against a certain paradox of style. In almost all of his works, hardly anyone but the direct participants are portrayed and their faces are drawn directly from available photographs, often from police files. This touch of photographic realism is played off against the increasingly stark simplicity of the backdrop.

The characters are oddly

been widely recognized. As he scope of his work becomes more familiar to anarchists and art critics alike, we can anticipate a broad discussion of anarchism and a deeper appreciation of the spirit of rebellion.

(*The Art of Anarchy*, by Flavio Costantini, containing 43 full-page black-and-white reproductions, is available from Cienfuegos Press Ltd., Box A, Over the Water, Sandby, Orkney, Scotland KW17 2BL.)