1970
POSTERS: ADVERTISEMENT, ART, POLITICAL ARTIFACT, COMMODITY

Susan Sontag

IT HAS BECOME ROUTINE *for observers of graphic design to call for criticism able to situate graphic production in the wider matrix of culture, but this has rarely been achieved as convincingly as in Susan Sontag's essay on Cuban revolutionary posters. Sontag (b. 1933), one of the United States' best-known cultural critics, visited Cuba and, in 1969, wrote about the country—controversially—in the left journal* Ramparts. *Asked by* Ramparts*'s art director Dugald Stermer to contribute an introduction to his large-format collection of Cuban posters, Sontag delivered a forensic, partly historical analysis of the medium, showing how a capitalist invention, which began as means of encouraging "a social climate in which it is normative to buy," ended up becoming a commodity itself. She relates this popular new Cuban art form designed to raise and complicate consciousness to developments in film, literature, and fine art, before turning to the problematic position of the non-Cuban viewer. Posters, Sontag concludes, are substitutes for experience; collecting them is a form of emotional and moral tourism, and Stermer's book is implicated in a tacit betrayal of the revolutionary use and meaning of images now consumed as just another dish on the left-liberal bourgeois menu.—RP*

Posters are not simply public notices. A public notice, however widely circulated, may be a means of signaling only one person, someone whose identity is unknown to the author of the notice. (One of the earliest known public notices, found in the ruins of ancient Thebes, is a papyrus advertising a reward for the return of an escaped slave.) More typically, most pre-modern societies mounted public notices to circulate news about topics of general interest, such as spectacles, taxation, and the death and accession of rulers. Still, even when the information it carries concerns many people, rather than a few or just one, a public notice is not the same as a poster. Both posters and public notices address the person not as an individual, but as an unidentified member of the body politic. But the poster, as distinct from the public notice, presupposes the modern concept of the public—in which the members of a society are defined primarily as spectators and consumers. A public notices aims to inform or command. A poster aims to seduce, to exhort, to sell, to educate, to convince, to appeal. Whereas a public notice distributes information to interested or alert citizens, a poster reaches out to grab those who might otherwise pass it by. A public notice posted on a wall is passive, requiring that the spectator present himself before it to read what is written. A poster claims attention—at a distance. It is visually aggressive.

Posters are aggressive because they appear in the context of *other* posters. The public notice is a freestanding statement, but the form of the poster depends on the fact that many posters exist—competing with (and sometimes reinforcing) each other. Thus posters also presuppose the modern concept of public space—as a theater of

persuasion. Throughout the Rome of Julius Caesar, there were signboards reserved for posting announcements of general importance; but these were inserted into a space that was otherwise relatively clean verbally. The poster, however, is an integral element of modern public space. The poster, as distinct from the public notice, implies the creation of urban, public space as an arena of signs: the image- and word-choked façades and surfaces of the great modern cities.

The main technical and aesthetic qualities of the poster all follow from these modern redefinitions of the citizen and of public space. Thus posters, unlike public notices, are inconceivable before the invention of the printing press. The advent of printing quickly brought about the duplication of public notices as well as books; William Caxton made the earliest known *printed* public notice in 1480. But printing alone did not give rise to posters, which had to await the invention of a far cheaper and more sophisticated color printing process—lithography—by Senefelder in the early nineteenth century; and the development of the high-speed presses which, by 1848, could print ten thousand sheets an hour. Unlike the public notice, the poster depends essentially on efficient, inexpensive reproducibility for the purpose of mass distribution. The other obvious traits of a poster, apart from its being intended for reproduction in large quantities—its scale, its decorativeness, and its mixture of linguistic and pictorial means—also follow from the role posters play in modern public space. Here is Harold F. Hutchinson's definition, at the beginning of his book *The Poster, An Illustrated History from 1860* (London, 1968):

> A poster is essentially a large announcement, usually with a pictorial element, usually printed on paper and usually displayed on a wall or billboard to the general public. Its purpose is to draw attention to whatever an advertiser is trying to promote and to impress some message on the passer-by. The visual or pictorial element provides the initial attraction—and it must be striking enough to catch the eye of the passer-by and to overcome the counter-attractions of the other posters, and it usually needs a supplementary verbal message which follows up and amplifies the pictorial theme. The large size of most posters enables this verbal message to be read clearly at a distance.

A public notice usually consists entirely of words. Its values are those of "information:" intelligibility, explicitness, completeness. In a poster the visual or plastic elements dominate, not the text. The words (whether few or many) form part of the overall visual composition. The values of a poster are first those of "appeal," and only second of information. The rules for giving information are subordinated to the rules which endow a message, any message, with impact: brevity, asymmetrical emphasis, condensation.

Unlike the public notice, which can exist in any society possessing a written language, the poster could not exist before the specific historic conditions of modern capitalism. Sociologically, the advent of the poster reflects the development of an industrialized economy whose goal is ever-increasing mass consumption, and (somewhat later, when posters turned political) of the modern secular centralized nation-state, with its peculiarly diffuse conception of ideological consensus and its rhetoric of mass political participation. It is capitalism that has brought about that peculiarly modern redefinition of the public in terms of the activities of consumption and spectatorship. The earliest famous posters all had a specific function: to encourage a

Chéret, the first of the great poster makers, which range from cabarets, music halls, dance halls, and operas to oil lamps, apéritifs, and cigarette papers. Chéret, who was born in 1836, designed more than a thousand posters. The first important English poster makers, the Beggarstaffs—who began in the early 1890s, and were boldly derivative of the French poster makers—also mostly advertised soft goods and the theater. In America, the first distinguished poster work was done for magazines. Will Bradley, Louis Rhead, Edward Penfield, and Maxfield Parrish were employed by such magazines as *Harper's, Century, Lippincott's,* and *Scribner's* to design a different cover for each issue; these cover designs were then reproduced as posters to sell the magazines to the expanding middle-class reading public.

Most books on the subject flatly assume the mercantile context as essential to the poster. (Hutchinson, for instance, is typical in the way he defines the poster by its selling function.) But even though commercial advertising provided the ostensible content of all the early posters, Chéret, followed by Eugene Grasset, were quickly recognized as "artists." Already in 1880, an influential French art critic declared that he found a thousand times more talent in a poster by Chéret than in most paintings on the walls of the Paris Salon. Still, it took a second generation of poster makers—some of whom had already established reputations in the serious, "free" art of painting—to establish for a wide public that the poster was an art form, not simply an offshoot of commerce. This happened between 1890, when Toulouse-Lautrec was commissioned to produce a series of posters advertising the Moulin Rouge, and 1894, when Alphonse Mucha designed the poster for *Gismonda,* the first of his dazzling series of posters of Sarah Bernhardt in her productions at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. During this period the streets of Paris and London became an outdoor gallery, with new posters appearing almost every day. But posters did not have to advertise culture, or present glamorous or exotic imagery, to be recognized as works of art themselves. Their subjects could be quite "common." In 1894, work with such lowly commercial subjects as Steinlen's poster advertising sterilized milk and the Beggarstaffs' poster for Rowntree's Cocoa were being hailed for their qualities as graphic art. Thus, only two decades after they began appearing, posters were widely acknowledged as an art form. During the mid-1890s there were two public art exhibits in London entirely devoted to posters. In 1895 an *Illustrated History of the Placard* came out in London; between 1896 and 1900 a publisher in Paris issued a five-volume *Les Maîtres de l'Affiche.* An English journal called the *Poster* appeared between 1898 and 1900. Amassing private collections of posters became fashionable in the early 1890s, and W. S. Roger's *A Book of the Poster* (1901) was specifically addressed to this already sizeable audience of enthusiastic poster collectors.

Compared with the other new art forms that arose toward the end of the last century, posters achieved the status of "art" rather more rapidly than most. The reason, perhaps, is the number of distinguished artists—such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha, and Beardsley—who quickly turned to the poster form. Without the infusion of their talents and prestige, posters might have had to wait as long as movies did to be recognized as works of art in their own right. A longer resistance to the poster as art would probably have been inspired less by its "impure" origin in commerce than by its essential dependence on the process of technological duplication. Yet it is precisely this dependence which makes the poster a distinctively *modern* art form. Painting and

growing proportion of the population to spend money on soft consumer goods, entertainments, and the arts. Posters advertising the great industrial firms, banks, and hard commodities came later. Typical of the original function are the subjects of Jules Chéret, the first of the great poster makers, which range from cabarets, music halls, dance halls, and operas to oil lamps, apéritifs, and cigarette papers. Chéret, who was born in 1836, designed more than a thousand posters. The first important English poster makers, the Beggarstaffs—who began in the early 1890s, and were boldly derivative of the French poster makers—also mostly advertised soft goods and the theater. In America, the first distinguished poster work was done for magazines. Will Bradley, Louis Rhead, Edward Penfield, and Maxfield Parrish were employed by such magazines as *Harper's, Century, Lippincott's,* and *Scribner's* to design a different cover for each issue; these cover designs were then reproduced as posters to sell the magazine to the expanding middle-class reading public.

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sculpture, the traditional shapes of visual art, inevitably had their meaning and aura profoundly altered when they entered, in Walter Benjamin's classic phrase, "the age of mechanical reproduction." But the poster (like still photography and the cinema) carries no history from the pre-modern world; it could exist only in the era of mechanical duplication. Unlike a painting, a poster was never meant to exist as a unique object. Therefore, reproducing a poster does not make a second-generation object, one aesthetically inferior to the original or diminished in its social, monetary, or symbolic value. From its conception, the poster is destined to be reproduced, to exist in multiples.

Of course, posters have never won the status of a major art form. Poster-making is usually labeled an "applied" art, because, it is assumed, the poster aims to put across the value of a product or an idea—in contrast to, say, a painting or sculpture, whose aim is the free expression of the artist's individuality. In this view, the poster maker, someone with artistic skills which he lends, for a fee, to a seller, belongs to a different breed from the real artist, who makes things which are intrinsically valuable and self-justifying. Thus, Hutchinson writes:

> A poster artist (who is not merely an artist whose work happens to be used on a poster) is not drawing and painting solely for self-expression, to release his own emotions, or to salve his own esthetic conscience. His art is an applied art, and it is art applied to the cause of communication, which may be dictated by the demands of a service, message, or product with which he may be out of sympathy but whose advocate he has temporarily consented to be, usually in return for suitable financial remuneration.

But to define the poster as being, unlike "fine" art forms, primarily concerned with advocacy—and the poster artist as someone who, like a whore, works for money and tries to please a client—is dubious, simplistic. (It is also unhistorical. Only since the early nineteenth century has the artist been generally understood as working to express himself, or for the sake of "art.") What makes posters, like book jackets and magazine covers, an applied art is *not* that they are single-mindedly devoted to "communication," or that the people who do them are more regularly or better paid than most painters and sculptors. Posters are an applied art because, typically, they apply what has already been done in the other arts. Aesthetically, the poster has always been parasitic on the respectable arts of painting, sculpture, even architecture. In the numerous posters they did, Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha, and Beardsley only transposed a style already articulated in their paintings and drawings. The work of those painters—from Puvis de Chavannes to Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner to Picasso to Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Roy Lichtenstein—who have occasionally tried their hand at posters is not only not innovative but mainly casts into a more accessible form their most distinctive and familiar stylistic mannerisms. As an art form, posters are rarely in the lead. Rather, they serve to disseminate already mature elitist art conventions. Indeed, posters have been one of the main instruments during the last century for popularizing what is agreed on, by the arbiters of the worlds of painting and sculpture, as visual good taste. A representative sample of posters done in any given period would consist mostly of work that is banal and visually reactionary. But most of what are considered *good* posters bear some clear relation to what is fashionable visually, not merely popular—fashionable, though, only up to a point. The poster never embodies a really new style—high fashion is, by definition, "ugly" and off-putting

at first view—but fashion at a slightly later stage of assimilation or acceptability. For example, Cassandre's famous posters for Dubonnet (1924) and the transatlantic liner *Normandie* (1932), clearly influenced by Cubism and the Bauhaus movement, employed these styles after they were commonplaces in the fine art scene, already digested.

The relation posters have to visual fashion is that of "quotation." Thus, the poster artist is usually a plagiarist (whether of himself or others), and plagiarism is one main feature of the history of poster aesthetics. The earliest good poster makers outside Paris, who were English, freely adapted the look of the first wave of French posters. The Beggarstaffs (a pseudonym for two Englishmen who had studied art in Paris) were heavily influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec; Dudley Hardy, best remembered for his posters for the Gilbert and Sullivan productions at the Savoy Theater, owed to both Chéret and Lautrec. This built-in "decadence" continues unabated to the present, as each important poster artist partly feeds on earlier schools of poster art. One of the most remarkable recent examples of this functional parasitism on earlier poster work is the brilliant series of posters done in San Francisco in the mid-1960s for the great rock ballrooms, the Fillmore and the Avalon, which freely plagiarized Mucha and the other Art Nouveau masters.

The stylistically parasitic trend in the history of the poster is additional confirmation of the poster as an art form. Posters, good posters at any rate, cannot be considered mainly as instruments for communicating something whose normative form is "information." Indeed, it is precisely on this point that a poster differs generically from a public notice—and enters the territory of art. Unlike the public notice, whose function is unambiguously to say something, the poster is not concerned ultimately with anything so clear or unequivocal. The point of the poster may be its "message:" the advertisement, the announcement, the slogan. But what is recognized as an effective poster is one that transcends its utility in delivering that message. Unlike the public notice, the poster (despite its frankly commercial origins) is not just utilitarian. The effective poster—even one selling the lowliest household product—always exhibits that duality which is the very mark of art: the tension between the wish to say (explicitness, literalness) and the wish to be silent (truncation, economy, condensation, evocativeness, mystery, exaggeration). The very fact that posters were designed to have instant impact, to be "read" in a flash, because they had to compete with other posters, strengthened the aesthetic thrust of the poster form.

It is hardly accidental that the first generation of great posters was made in Paris, the art capital but hardly the economic capital of the nineteenth century. The poster was born out of the aestheticizing impulse. It aimed to make of selling something "beautiful." Beyond that aim lies a tendency which has continued throughout the hundred-year history of poster art. Whatever its origins in selling specific products and performances, the poster has tended to develop an independent existence as a major element in the public decor of modern cities (and of highways, as the nature-effacing links between cities). Even when a product, service, spectacle, or institution is named, the ultimate function of the poster may be purely decorative. Only a short step separates the posters done in the 1950s for London Transport, which were more ornaments than advertisements for their subject, from the Peter Max posters of the late 1960s mounted on the sides of buses in New York City, which advertised nothing at all. The possible subversion of the poster form by its drift toward aesthetic autonomy is confirmed by the fact that people began so early, already in the 1890s, to collect posters; thereby removing this object preeminently designed for public, out-

door space, and ostensibly for the cursory passing glance of crowds, to a private, interior space—the home of the collector—where it could become the subject of close (i.e., aesthetic) scrutiny.

Even the specific commercial function of posters, in their early history, strengthens the aesthetic basis of the poster form. Alongside the fact that posters, at their origin a device of commercial advertising, reflect the intensity of a single-minded didactic aim (to sell something) is the fact that the first task of posters was the promoting of goods and services that were economically *marginal*. The poster originates in the effort of expanding capitalist productivity to sell surplus or luxury goods, household articles, nonstaple foods, liqueurs and soft drinks, public entertainments (cabaret, music hall, bullfights), "culture" (magazines, plays, operas), and traveling for pleasure. Hence, the poster frequently had, from the beginning, a light or witty tone; one main tradition in poster aesthetics favors the cool, the amusing. Evident in many of the early posters is an element of exaggeration, of irony, of doing "too much" for their subject. Specialized as it may seem, the theatrical poster is perhaps the archetypal poster genre of the nineteenth century, beginning with Toulouse-Lautrec's harsh Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert, Chéret's suave Loïe Fuller, and Mucha's hieratic Sarah Bernhardt. Throughout the history of the poster, theatricality has been one of its recurrent values—as the poster-object itself may be viewed as a kind of instant visual theater in the street.

Exaggeration is one of the charms of poster art, when its tasks are commercial. But the theatricality of poster aesthetics found its heavy as well as playful expression, when posters became political. It seems surprising how late the political role of the poster followed the advertising role it fulfilled from its origins around 1870. Public notices continued to serve political functions, like calls to arms, throughout this period. An even closer precedent for the political poster had been flourishing since the early nineteenth century; the political cartoon, which, in the burgeoning weekly and monthly magazines, had reached a masterly form in the hands of Cruikshank and Gillray, and later Nast. But despite these precedents, the poster remained largely innocent of any political function until 1914. Then, almost overnight, the newly belligerent governments of Europe recognized the efficacy of the medium of commercial advertising for political purposes. The leading theme of the first political posters was patriotism. In France, posters appealed to citizens to subscribe to the various war loans; in England, posters exhorted men to join the army (from 1914 until 1916, when conscription was introduced); in Germany, posters were more broadly ideological, arousing love of country by demonizing the enemy. Most posters done during World War I were crude graphically. Their emotional range moved between the pompous, like Leete's poster of Lord Kitchener and his accusatory finger with the quotation "Your country needs YOU" (1914), and the hysterical, like Bernhard's nightmare anti-Bolshevik poster (same year). With rare exceptions, such as the poster by Faivre (1916) urging contributions to the French war loan of that year under the slogan "*On les aura*," the World War I posters have little interest now other than historical.

The birth of serious political graphics came right after 1918, when the new revolutionary movements convulsing Europe at the close of the war stimulated a vast outpouring of radical poster exhortation, particularly in Germany, Russia, and Hungary. It was in the aftermath of World War I that the political poster began to constitute a valuable branch of poster art. Not surprisingly, much of the best work in the revolutionary poster was done by collectives of poster makers. Two of the earliest were the "November group," formed in Berlin in 1918, among whose members were Max

Pechstein and Hans Richter, and ROSTA, formed in Moscow in 1919, which included as active artists the poet Mayakovsky, the Constructivist artist El Lissitzky, and Alexander Rodchenko. More recent examples of revolutionary poster work produced by collectives are the Republic and Communist posters made in Madrid and Barcelona in 1936–37 and the posters turned out by revolutionary students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris during the revolution of May 1968. (Chinese "wall posters" fall into the category of public notices rather than posters, as the terms are used here.) Of course, many individual artists have made radical poster art outside the discipline of a collective. Recently, in 1968, the revolutionary poster was the subject of a large and impressive retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm.

The advent of political posters may seem like a sharp break with the original function of posters (promoting consumership). But the historical conditions which produced posters first as commercial advertising and later as political propaganda are intertwined. If the commercial poster is an outgrowth of the capitalist economy, with its need to attract people to spend more money on nonessential goods and on spectacles, the political poster reflects another specifically nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon, first articulated in the matrix of capitalism: the modern nation-state whose claim to ideological monopoly has as its *minimal*, unquestioned expression the goal of universal education and the power of mass mobilization for warfare. Despite this historical link, however, there is a major difference of context for commercial and political posters. While the presence of posters used as commercial advertising generally indicates the degree to which a society defines itself as stable, pursuing an economic and political status quo, the presence of political posters generally indicates that the society considers itself in a state of emergency. Posters are now a familiar instrument, during periods of crisis for the nation-state, for promulgating political attitudes in summary form. In the older capitalist countries, with bourgeois-democratic political institutions, their use is mainly confined to wartime. In the newer countries, most of which are experimenting (not too successfully) with a mixture of state capitalism and state socialism and are undergoing chronic economic and political crises, posters are a common tool of nation-building. Particularly striking is the extent to which posters have been used to "ideologize" relatively unideological societies in the Third World. Two examples from this political year are the posters being put up all over Egypt (most of them blown up newspaper cartoons), as air war in the Middle East escalates, identifying America as the enemy who stands behind Israel, and the posters that swiftly appeared throughout relatively poster-free Phnom Penh in April 1970, after the fall of Prince Sihanouk, inculcating hatred of the resident Vietnamese and rousing the Cambodians to war against the "Viet Cong."

Obviously, posters have a different destiny where they disseminate the official view in a country, as do the British recruiting posters of World War I or the Cuban posters for OSPAAAL and COR in this book, than they have where they speak for an adversary minority within the country. Posters expressing the majority view of a politicized society (or situation) are guaranteed mass distribution. Their presence is typically repetitive. Posters expressing insurgent, rather than establishment, values get less widely distributed. They usually end being defaced by irate members of the silent majority or ripped off by the police. The chances for the insurgent poster's longevity and its prospects of distribution are, of course, improved when it is sponsored by an organized political party. Renato Guttuso's anti-Vietnam War poster (1966), done for the Italian Communist Party, is a less fragile political instrument than the anti-Vietnam

posters of freelance dissenters, like Takashi Kono in Japan and Sigvaard Olsson in Sweden. But however dissimilar in context and destiny, all political posters share a common purpose; ideological mobilization. Only the scale of this purpose varies. Maxi-mobilization is a realistically feasible goal when posters are the vehicle of a ruling political doctrine. Insurgent or revolutionary posters aim, more modestly, at a mini-mobilization of opinion against the prevailing official line.

One might suppose that political posters produced by a dissenting minority would need to be, and often are, more appealing visually, less strident or simplistic ideologically, than those produced by governments in power. They have to compete for the attention of a distracted, hostile, or indifferent public. In fact, differences of aesthetic and intellectual quality do not run along these lines. State-sponsored work may be as lively and loose as the Cuban political posters or as banal and conformist as the posters in the Soviet Union and East Germany. A similar range of quality occurs among insurgent political posters. Very distinguished poster work was done for the German Communist Party in the 1920s, by John Heartfield and Georg Grosz among others. During the same period, only naïve agit-prop posters, like William Gropper's poster urging support for the striking textile workers in Passaic or Fred Ellis' poster demanding justice for Sacco and Vanzetti, both from 1927, were being made for the American Communist Party. The art of propaganda is not necessarily ennobled or refined by powerlessness, any more than it is inevitably coarsened when backed by power or when serving official goals. What determines whether good political posters are made in a country, more than the talent of the artists and the health of the other visual arts, is the cultural policy of the government or party or movement—whether it recognizes quality, whether it encourages, even demands it. Contrary to the invidious idea many people have about propaganda as such, there is no inherent limit to the aesthetic quality or moral integrity of political posters—no limit, that is, separate from the conventions that affect (and perhaps limit) all poster-making, that done for commercial advertising purposes as much as that done for the purposes of political indoctrination.

Most political posters, like commercial posters, rely on the image rather than the word. As the aim of an effective advertising poster is the stimulation (and simplification) of tastes and appetites, the aim of an effective political poster is rarely more than the stimulation (and simplification) of moral sentiments. And the classic means of stimulating and simplifying is through a visual metaphor. Most commonly, a thing or an idea is attached to the emblematic image of a person. In commercial advertising, the paradigm occurs as early as Chéret. He designed most of his posters, no matter what they were selling, around the image of a pretty girl—the "mechanical bride," as Marshall McLuhan named her twenty years ago in his witty book about contemporary versions of that image. The equivalent in political advertising is the heroic figure. Such a figure may be a celebrated leader of the struggle, living or martyred, or an anonymous representative citizen, such as a soldier, a worker, a mother, a war victim. The point of the image in a commercial poster is to be attractive, often sexually attractive, thereby covertly identifying material acquisitiveness with sexual appetite and subliminally reinforcing the first by appealing to the second. A political poster proceeds more directly and appeals to emotions with more ethical prestige. It is not enough for the image to be attractive, even seductive, since what is being urged is always put forth as more than merely "desirable;" it is imperative. Commercial advertising imagery cultivates the capacity to be tempted, the willingness to indulge private desires and liberties. The imagery of political posters cultivates the sense of obligation, the willingness to renounce private desires and liberties.

To create a feeling of psychic or moral obligation, political posters use a variety of emotional appeals. In posters featuring a single model figure, the image can be heart-rending, like the napalmed child in posters protesting the Vietnam War; it can be admonitory, like Lord Kitchener in Leete's poster; it can be inspirational, like the face of Che in many posters made since his death. A variant of the poster focusing on one exemplary persona is the type that depicts the agon or struggle itself, juxtaposing the heroic figure with the figure of a dehumanized or caricatured enemy. The tableau usually shows the enemy—the Hun, the capitalist in frock coat, the Bolshevik, LBJ—either being pinned down or in flight. Compared with posters featuring only exemplary figures, posters with agon imagery usually appeal to cruder feelings, like vindictiveness and resentment and moral complacency. But depending on the actual odds of the struggle and the moral tone of the culture, such imagery can also bypass these emotions and simply make people feel braver.

As in commercial advertising, the image in political posters is usually backed up by some words, the fewer (it's thought) the better. The words second the image. One handsome exception to this rule is Sigvaard Olsson's black-and-white poster of Hugo Blanco (1968), which superimposes a lengthy quotation in heavy type over the face of the jailed Peruvian revolutionary. Another exception, even more striking, is the COR poster reproduced here on p. 18, which dispenses altogether with an image and makes a bluntly colorful, nearly abstract arrangement of the words of a sophisticated ideological slogan in maxim form: "*Comunimo no es crear conciencia con el dinero sino crear riqueza con la conciencia.*"

II.

In capitalist society, posters are a ubiquitous part of the decor of the urban landscape. Connoisseurs of new forms of beauty may find visual gratification in the unplanned collage of posters (and neon signs) that decorate the cities. It is an additive effect, of course, since few posters to be seen outdoors nowadays, regarded one by one, give any aesthetic pleasure. More specialized connoisseurs—of the aesthetics of infestation, of the libertine aura of litter, and of the libertarian implications of randomness—can find pleasure in this decor. But what keeps posters multiplying in the urban areas of the capitalist world is their commercial utility in selling particular products and, beyond that, in perpetuating a social climate in which it is normative to buy. Since the economy's health depends on steadily encroaching upon whatever limits people's habits of consumption, there can be no limit to the effort to saturate public space with advertising.

A revolutionary communist society, which rejects the consumer society, must inevitably redefine, and thereby limit, poster art. In this context, only a selective and controlled use of posters makes sense. Nowhere is this selective use of posters more authentic than in Cuba, which has, by revolutionary aspiration (abetted by, but not reducible to, the cruel economic scarcities imposed by the American blockade), repudiated mercantile values more radically than any communist country outside of Asia. Cuba obviously has no use for the poster to inspire its citizens to buy consumer goods. That still leaves a large place for the poster, though. Any modern society, communist no less than capitalist, is a network of signs. Under revolutionary communism, the poster remains one principal type of public sign: decorating shared ideas and firing moral sympathies, rather than promoting private appetites.

As one would expect a large proportion of the posters in Cuba have political subjects. But unlike most work in this genre, the purpose of the political poster in Cuba is not simply to build morale. It is to raise and complicate consciousness—the