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Aaron Bushnell

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*“Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death.”*

– Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*

*“It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.”*

– James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Aaron Bushnell, before self-immolating in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C., sent notice to a few radical platforms including CrimethInc. (henceforth: the Outlet) informing them of his decision to commit “an extreme act of protest” against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. He asked simply that they preserve the footage of his action and report on it. Most complied, but in the face of such a humble request, the Outlet was confused: “All afternoon, while other journalists were breaking the news, we discussed how we should speak about this. Some subjects are too complex to address in a hasty social media post.” It’s telling that they self-identify as journalists.

Still, the white man’s burden of “anarchist” journalism demanded that they not ponder too long before releasing a statement, even if half-formed. Within hours, they hastily published their garbage take. Putting Aaron’s actions in the context of another self-immolation that occurred on December 1st by a woman in Atlanta, (who, despite the Outlet’s misinformation, is still alive) they said: “It is not easy for us to know how to speak about their deaths.” Such dis-ease surely disquieted the spin-doctors and self-appointed spokespeople of revolution. For a project which only contributes to struggle by *knowing what to say*, the imperative to speak is paramount. In light of what they wrote, it would have been better for them to contemplate a little longer, or just say nothing at all.

After grossly overestimating their importance as journalists “speaking to people of action,” they ultimately write:

*“Just as we have a responsibility not to show cowardice, we also have a responsibility not to promote sacrifice casually. We must not speak carelessly about taking risks, even risks that we have taken ourselves. It is one thing to expose oneself to risk; it is another thing to invite others to run risks, not knowing what the consequences might be for them. And here, we are not speaking about a risk, but about the worst of all certainties. Let’s not glamorize the decision to end one’s life, nor celebrate anything with such permanent repercussions.*

reening. The rest of us must act within the unsayable. Deeds must speak where words fail.

Those golden letters of history will not record the name Crime-thInc., whose version of anarchism cannot hold, comprehend, or move with the young militants taking increasingly bold and dire action. While the pro-Ukraine anarchists continue to stumble again and again over the question of militarism, Aaron's act of self-negation resolved the contradiction. This is not to say his was the only way to resolve the contradiction, but it was a powerful way that threatens the worldview the Outlet desperately clings to: a view inextricably affixed to Western epistemological hegemony. The decline of the neoliberal consensus indicates the inevitable illegibility of their explanation of the world. The coming days and years will surely see a proliferation of increasingly drastic actions, marked by an intensity which surpasses what the Outlet can accept or condone, positioned as it is. For the Outlet, the death of this world conjures the existential anxiety of dissociation. For others, ourselves included, the end of this world is essential for the legibility of our perspective.

Aaron left us a will. That will, in the many senses of that term, is our inheritance. It reads: "I wish for my remains to be cremated. I do not wish for my ashes to be scattered or my remains to be buried as my body does not belong anywhere in this world. If a time comes when Palestinians regain control of their land, and if the people native to the land would be open to the possibility, I would love for my ashes to be scattered in a free Palestine."

Whatever Aaron was in the preceding years of his life, he died as an anarchist, and will be remembered as one. His action points to a new organic anarchism emerging out of the present moment, one disconnected from the scenes, subcultures, and cults-of-personality that constitute the anarcho-mainstream. This development threatens the hegemony of the anarchist talking heads as much as the rest. His death is already drawing unprecedented attention, at new levels, to the cause of Palestinian liberation, and likely to anarchism as well. Those who cannot adapt to the changing tides will be washed into historic oblivion, toward which they're already ca-

*Rather than exalting Aaron as a martyr and encouraging others to emulate him, we honor his memory, but we exhort you to take a different path."*

While it would be easy to dismiss this as the Outlet cautiously mitigating any potential liability if self-immolation generalizes, the rejection of the framework of martyrdom demands attention. The question is not whether Aaron qualifies as a *shahid* within the Palestinian context, although demonstrators in Yemen have proclaimed Aaron a "martyr of humanity" and an argument can be made for him having become an anarchist martyr in the lineage of Louis Lingg, Avalon, and Mikhail Vasilievich Zhlobitsky. The bigger issue: the Outlet's assertion that an individual's death, particularly in the context of the US, is the "worst of all possible certainties" reveals a deep disconnect with the context of this entire decolonial struggle. In the days following October 7th, anti-colonial anarchist thinkers such as Zoé Samudzi argued that the figure of the martyr marked a fundamental contradiction for the secular left's ability to fully comprehend and act in solidarity with the Palestinian resistance. The martyrs constitute a force in the present for all who live and continue to struggle. Aaron framed his self-immolation as "not that extreme" compared to the ascension to martyrdom of tens of thousands in Gaza. By implying that Aaron's choice was too extreme, the Outlet dishonors the reality of the struggle within Palestine and undercuts the potential of Aaron's sacrifice.

In denouncing any action taken with "such permanent repercussions," the Outlet reproduces the anti-death paradigm of capitalism itself. The philosopher Byung Chul-Han, commenting on an exchange between the filmmaker Werner Schroeter and Michel Foucault, says:

*"Schroeter describes the freedom unto death as an anarchist feeling: 'I have no fear of death. It's perhaps arrogant to say but it's the truth... To look death in the face is an anarchist feeling dangerous to established society.' Sovereignty, the freedom unto death, is threaten-*

*ing to a society that is organized around work and production, that tries to increase human capital by biopolitical means. That utopia is anarchist insofar as it represents a radical break with a form of life that declares pure life, continued existence, sacred. Suicide is the most radical rejection imaginable of the society of production. It challenges the system of production. It represents the symbolic exchange with death which undoes the separation of death from life brought about by capitalist production.”*

The fact that an anarchist media syndicate cannot recognize the anarchic nature of a sovereign death, or the *symbolic exchange* of a uniformed US airman’s self-immolation (which cannot be simply reduced to suicide) is in and of itself a disgrace. Even worse, this conforms to a long established pattern where every time a comrade’s actions pass a certain threshold of intensity, the Outlet is first in line to call for restraint. While Michael Reinoehl was still on the run after shooting a fascist, they wasted no time issuing a hasty social media post denouncing his action and urging their followers to “reject the logic of the guillotine.” The Outlet preferred to remain palatable for liberal eyes, ears, and politicians, rather than express solidarity with a comrade on the run for his life.

In his “Letter to Michael Reinoehl,” Idris Robinson exposes the logic at the heart of the contradiction of those who chose to parse Reinoehl’s actions as nonstrategic:

*“What the double-standard with regards to your situation reveals is how violence in America will always necessarily have a profoundly racial dimension. And it is precisely this—the terrifying core of racialized violence—that they are trying to repress when they lie to both themselves and others that their issue with what you did is a question of strategy or tactics. I mean, give me a break: in a country that is literally saturated in violence, from blind mass shooters to murderous police, no one can honestly claim that the few shots that you let off could in some way be construed as an escalation. There is simply no way to avoid the spiral of violence that began at the very moment when the first wooden ships reached the shores of the Atlantic.”*

*eration of Palestine,” confirms the state of anger among the American people due to the official American involvement in the Zionist genocide war being waged on the Gaza Strip. It also indicates that the status of the Palestinian cause, especially in American circles, is becoming more deeply entrenched in the global conscience, and reveals the truth of the Zionist entity as a cheap colonial tool in the hands of savage imperialism.*

*The Front expresses its full solidarity with the soldier’s family and all the American sympathizers who took a honorable stance and whose struggle and pressure to stop the genocide on the Strip have not ceased, confirming that the act of an American soldier sacrificing his life to draw the attention of the American people and the world to the plight of the Palestinian people, despite its tragic nature and the great pain it involves, is considered the highest sacrifice and medal, and the most important poignant message directed to the American administration, that it is involved in the war crime in Gaza and that the American people have awakened and are rejecting this American involvement, calling on the American administration to stop this support and bias for the Zionist entity.*

*The Front sends a message to the Arab soldier to take this American soldier who sacrificed his life for a noble cause like the Palestinian cause as an example and role model, and to leave the trenches of waiting, incapacity, and move to the trench of confrontation in support of Palestine and its people who are being slaughtered, besieged, and starved in full view and hearing of the world and just a few kilometers from Arab lands and meters from the borders.*

*Palestine will be victorious as long as it has deeply engraved itself in the conscience and consciences of the world, and history will record in golden letters the names of all the sympathizers and free people of the world who stood with it and sacrificed their lives for its sake.*

*The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine  
Central Media Department  
26-2-2024”*

membrance, and solidarity. Instead, the Outlet doesn't fail to make the selfless about themselves: "Choosing to intentionally end your life means foreclosing years or decades of possibility, denying the rest of us a future with you." Lacking any real other direction, this future seems to amount to years of patient readership and faithfully following the lead of well-platformed self-declared strategists. Their obnoxious tendency to quote their own past texts illustrates their narcissism and self-importance. This self-reference demonstrates a deepening dogmatism on their part, a commitment to stay the course on a sinking ideological ship.

The ill-timed call for recruitment is made explicit in the closing paragraphs: "Prepare to take risks as your conscience demands, but don't hurry towards self-destruction. We desperately need you alive, at our side, for all that is to come." Just as in recent weeks they celebrated those who fight side-by-side with the Azov Battalion in the Ukraine, they would prefer active US military personnel alive and well, ready to fight for Western interests at home and abroad.

The time has long passed to dispense with these bloggers who, through their appeals for restraint and moderation, stand in the way of the resistance movements they imagine themselves to lead. The Outlet's inadequacy was already evident in the "both sides" narrative of their initial coverage of Al-Aqsa Flood. Instead, we choose to act out of affinity and solidarity with the resistance axis of the Palestinian struggle itself. Compare the milquetoast equivocations of the Outlet to the statement of unconditional solidarity with Aaron Bushnell and his loved ones issued immediately by the PFLP:

*"The act of an American soldier sacrificing himself for Palestine is the highest sacrifice and a medal, and a poignant message to the American administration to stop its involvement in the aggression.*

*The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine affirms that the act of the American soldier Aaron Bushnell from the U.S. Air Force by setting himself on fire in front of the Zionist embassy in Washington, D.C., in protest against the war on Gaza, which he called for the "lib-*

While the Outlet has no problem sanctioning enlistment in the fascist-dominated Armed Forces of Ukraine or calling for the US to keep troops in northern Syria, it seems even a single white death in the United States is a red-line they refuse to cross. For them, the self-sacrifice of a white person in the US military (a fact they fail to ever mention in their response but that was, without question, important to Aaron's action) in solidarity with colonized people might be even worse. Rather than a liberatory or truly life-affirming position, this timidity betrays a fundamental discomfort with anything that challenges the fragile unity of whiteness and the American racial order. Neoconarchists at it again!

The Outlet quotes Kropotkin (who broke with anarchist internationalism by supporting the Allied imperialists in World War I and is therefore a fitting predecessor to their brand of pro-NATO anarcho-liberalism) on the contagious nature of courage, yet their analysis downplays Aaron's courage again and again. They call death "the worst of all certainties," showing that they share Western civilization's pathological fear of death, yet feel confident in making pronouncements about the impact and efficacy of Aaron's offering mere hours after it happened. Those who are truly comfortable with uncertainty know that it remains to be seen what the full repercussions will be. The Outlet assumes the universality of a rationalist teleological perspective in the context of a gesture that is best understood deontologically: its essence, independent of outcome, is of distinct and ineffable value.

It's clear that the Outlet fears any form of struggle that challenges the sanctity of liberal democracy that they feel comfortable operating within. Echoing a line they have often used in the past, they frame themselves as protestors and militant lobbyists, not insurgents or practitioners of direct action (which is not about influencing government policy, but rather creating direct results of destruction and ungovernability.) They say: "The kind of protest activity that has taken place thus far in the United States has not served to compel the US government to halt the genocide in

Gaza.” While Aaron did call his self-immolation an “extreme act of protest [within U.S solidarity with Palestine],” the resulting question for anarchists should not be what more effective forms of protest might be, but rather how to honor Aaron’s act of personal refusal through our own deeds. His action was directed towards the rest of us. He looks us in the eye and asks: “What will you do?”

While the authors of the Outlet have called Aaron’s decision “self destruction” and “sacrifice,” we read little in their text of the long tradition of self-immolation as an ultimate form of self-expression against repression and war. They make only a diminishing reference to Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation to protest police bribery, which led to the Sidi Bouzid Revolt and impelled the Arab Spring. In 1965, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote to Rev. Martin Luther King:

*“The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is somehow difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination and sincerity..”*

*The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire non-existence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others..”*

The Outlet claims that Bushnell, in the rhetorical tradition of the notion of the selfishness of suicide, was “denying the rest of us a future with [him].” But the monks who self-immolated in the sixties teach us that perhaps that is the pain we must bear as witness, just

as those who chose fire bore the pain of their death or injury for the expression of their will.

*“But why does he have to burn himself to death? The difference between burning oneself and burning oneself to death is only a difference in degree, not in nature. A man who burns himself too much must die. The importance is not to take one’s life, but to burn. What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death.”*

Pain can be a motivating factor towards life, just as the witnessing of an autonomous death can inspire us to live deeper into our convictions now.

The question remains: what is the “different path” the Outlet urges readers to take? They admit that no act of solidarity in the US, however massive or targetedly destructive, has been able to slow the war machine. And yet they claim what the ruling class fears most is “collective action.” They give no examples of what said action might be. It doesn’t take too much creativity to imagine how disenchanted members of the US military could strike against the war machine, especially if they’ve overcome the fear of death. We could list those actions of desertion, sabotage, and fragging (and their long history in the anti-war movements of generations past) and theorize on their efficacy. However, we have no desire to reduce ourselves to the indignity of the anarcho-commentariat, issuing self-serving hot-takes about the grave actions of someone more courageous. We can only imagine what they will say when (not if) the war is brought home in even more escalated ways. What are they to do when a revolution based on summering in squats in European social democracies and engaging in ritualized playfights with police is no longer intelligible? Their greatest fear is not of state or economy but of an epochal shift that will render them incoherent.

The Outlet’s pontification on the inappropriateness of Aaron’s action is beyond disrespectful. Faced with such acts of self-sacrifice, the appropriate responses are pause, prayer, contemplation, re-