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Anarchists in the Trump Era: Scorecard, Year One

Achievements, Failures, and the Struggles Ahead

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countability, decision-making formats like consensus, and social centers like those established by the global squatting movement have all been essential to producing the current generation of anarchists. We have to renew and reinvent all of these for the next generation.

While top-down organization may appear to give authoritarian institutions and organizations an advantage in the streets, in the long run this only renders them vulnerable to inertia. As long as we retain our faith in ourselves and our sense of wonder, we will always have an advantage when it comes to acting creatively and working in the medium of desire. No one can present a more beautiful proposal for human relations than anarchists. Even Marx had to embellish his prescriptions by promising that under his model, the state would eventually “wither away.” In expressing our values in the ways we live our daily lives, we can experience freedom right now.

To this end, this coming year, we aim to expand the range of creative material we publish here on crimethinc.com. If you risked your freedom in 2017 to fight against the forms of tyranny that are currently ascendant in the world, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Let’s stay in touch with that which is most beautiful in ourselves and continue the fight.

Both sides benefit from the false dichotomy presented by the choice of Hitler or Stalin.

It's up to us to present a different path. To counter the prevalent desire to identify with some strongman or party, we have to foster other desires, other ways of relating. The dignity of resistance that cannot be coopted, the joy of genuinely egalitarian and empowering relationships, the exhilaration of untrammelled freedom—if we open space for these, they should be so seductive that no one would ever give them up in order to cower under the wing of a party.

In Conclusion: Expanding the Anarchist Palette

Anarchists spent 2017 responding to one crisis after another. In the course of all these mobilizations, we've almost lost track of the other things we are good at. In 2018, whenever we are afforded respites from the emergencies precipitated by Trump and everyone else who seeks state power, we should prioritize exploring and developing these.

We need to expand the palette we paint from as well as the range of tactics we employ. We need arts movements to evoke our visions of another way of living. We need new formats for romance, sex, and togetherness so as to encounter each other outside the cages of patriarchy and propriety. We need new models for conflict resolution to demonstrate our alternative to prisons and police. We need new models for organization and coordination so no one has to pay membership dues in order to be part of movements for change. We need new ways to conceive of selfhood so no one can reduce identity to a question of distinct categories with irreconcilable interests. We need spaces in which people can experience firsthand the world we are fighting for. Arts movements like punk, relationship models like polyamory, transformative justice frameworks like ac-

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strategy employed in microcosm by older formations like the the Revolutionary Communist Party and newer ones like *Jacobin*, a magazine named after a political position that was already reactionary by 1793, which purports to represent the opposition to capitalism while legitimizing institutions like the prison industrial complex in the name of reform. In affirming the importance of the state, such groups can limit the scope of movements for social change without ever gaining a place in the government.

Reminding “tankies” of the atrocities and betrayals state socialists perpetrated from 1917 on is like calling Trump racist and sexist. Publicizing the fact that Trump is a serial sexual assaulter only made him more popular with his misogynistic base; likewise, the blood-drenched history of authoritarian party socialism can only make it more appealing to those who are chiefly motivated by the desire to identify with something *powerful*.

This is not to deny the good intentions of those pouring into groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, which currently occupies the same position that the Socialist-Revolutionaries did in Russia at the opening of the 20th century. Like the SRs, who were considerably more popular than the Bolsheviks at the time of the October Revolution yet naïvely permitted the latter to outflank and destroy them, the danger is not that the DSA itself will take power, but that it will legitimize authoritarian frameworks and antiquated cosmologies that others can use to gain control of social movements. Anarchists should maintain dialogue with the rank and file of left organizations to keep open the possibility that we can all eventually find common cause outside of any authoritarian program.

To the extent to which authoritarians on the left are able to define the horizon of social change, authoritarians on the right will be able to point to this to legitimize their own projects.

uary 20, 2018, while anarchists around the country were focusing on supporting the J20 defendants, we saw the Women’s March model repeated as an advertisement for Democrats running for office: “power to the polls.” This underscores the desperate need for a well-articulated 21st-century anarchist feminism.

Remember, it was relying on the polls that brought Trump to power in the first place. If we had built movements capable of stopping Trump from implementing his agenda, we wouldn’t be reduced to depending on the ballot box. Direct action is the only sure solution to the problems introduced by government.

The Authoritarian Left

Anarchists are not the only ones who understand the value of direct action. Following Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign and the erosion of faith in both the Democratic and Republican parties, the conditions are perfect for authoritarian leftists to continue to gain adherents and momentum.

We can chalk some of this up to anarchists’ failure to share a vision of change that is accessible to those outside our networks. In a globalized neoliberal economy, state socialism is collapsing even in gated communities like the Scandinavian countries; yet at the same time, it is gaining traction in the popular imagination because it deals in familiar terms, playing on 20th-century ideas that the state should be able to mitigate the effects of capitalism. If only all the institutions that are currently imposing misery and oppression could magically become the solutions to those problems! In the era of memes, proponents of socialism don’t have to resolve this contradiction; they simply have to produce images pandering to the desire that our interests be represented by something other than ourselves.

The strategy of using populism to centralize power in the hands of an elite is not limited to the right. We see this same

January 20, 2018 marked the conclusion of the first year of the Trump era—a string of back-to-back crises that made unprecedented demands on US anarchists. Despite limited numbers and resources, we rose admirably to those challenges. Congratulations on a roller coaster of a year! Now it’s time to analyze how we succeeded, identify the opportunities we missed, and—above all—prepare for what comes next.

Over the past year, we’ve disrupted the far-right attempt to legitimize a more totalitarian strategy of governance and pushed back the threat of a street-level fascist movement. Neither of these victories are complete, but we achieved them against incredible odds. In 2018, we’ll have to continue fighting those battles, but we’ll also contend with “centrists” bent on re-legitimizing the political system, a resurgent authoritarian Left, and the next wave of ecological and geopolitical catastrophes. In order to succeed, we’ll have to broaden our focus and expand our range of tactics.

The following analysis is hardly comprehensive; for example, it passes over anarchist participation in disaster relief, which played an important role in demonstrating our ethos of mutual aid this past year.

Dawn of a New Apocalypse

The election of Donald Trump marked the ascendancy of a new nationalist strategy for managing the state. Trump’s nationalism is not centered in old-fashioned economic protectionism, but a neo-fascist model in which the violence necessary to sustain neoliberal capitalism is directed disproportionately at those outside the gated communities of citizenship, whiteness, and patriarchy. From the opening of his campaign, it was clear that he had no real plan to reverse the course of global development and bring factory jobs back to the US. Rather, he was

promising voters the wages of whiteness, and they bought it hook, line, and sinker.

Anarchists in the US have fought neoliberal capitalism for decades, along with its foundations in patriarchy and white supremacy; Trump gained ascendancy in part as a reaction to the movements we participate in. Following his victory, the most pressing question was how to thwart this escalation of state repression and racist violence. We knew we couldn't do it by ourselves.

Tyranny alone does not motivate people to resist. Once a tragedy has become too familiar, people become desensitized to it; they come to see it as inevitable. Rather, people are motivated to act when they experience a tension between what they can imagine and what they see around them.

Many things can create this tension. A sudden change for the worse can provoke people into action as long as they remember how things were before. A sudden change for the better can inspire people to demand more. When people see others acting courageously, as in Seattle in 1999 or in Ferguson in 2014, this reminds them that everything could be otherwise. Sometimes all it takes to make people hunger for a better world is to tell a really good story describing one.

But if things take a turn for the worse and no one reacts, the new situation becomes normalized. This is why we had to act immediately when Trump was elected. Following nights of rioting in response to the election results, anarchists were the first to call for the disruption of Trump's inauguration. With the entire executive branch united behind law enforcement agencies that were eager for revenge, this was dangerous, to say the least—yet with the stakes so high, it was even more dangerous not to act.

For the time being, the various forces competing for control of the state have reached an impasse in which none of them can prevail: far-right nationalists, traditional neoconservatives, centrist democrats, and left-wing reformists all find themselves stymied and jockeying for position. This may explain why we have not seen the authorities carry out a new wave of attacks on popular movements since the initial assaults of January 2017. Each of the factions that comprise the state might well prefer to do so—nationalists and neoconservatives in order to suppress resistance once and for all, centrists and reformists to demonstrate that they too can establish order. Yet none of them are certain enough of their footing to risk initiating a new crackdown... yet.

When these internal conflicts within the state are resolved, the next step will almost certainly be to suppress popular unrest by coopting it through reformist movements and brutally repressing it through the security apparatus. This explains the aggressive denunciations of anti-fascist organizing that we have heard from Trump's political rivals. In this regard, we should not look forward to Democratic electoral victories. They will not make our position any easier. On the contrary, they will just bring new challenges to everyone who seeks systemic change.

In the long run, our chief problems are still capitalism and the state, not the particular management style of a single despot. Despite Trump's disingenuous promises to stand up for workers, neoliberal capitalism remains the order of the day. As long as it continues, the next wave of nationalist backlash will be worse—and it will be worse still if anti-racism becomes inextricably associated with neoliberal politics. It is paramount that we spend 2018 differentiating ourselves from supposed centrists and delegitimizing the institutions through which they hope to rule.

This will be especially challenging as centrists attempt to funnel all opposition to Trump into the next election. On Jan-

In order to accomplish this, they have to sideline participatory social movements, asserting themselves as the proper protagonists of social change through the existing institutions. The FBI investigation into Trump's dealings with Russia is a classic example of the sort of surrogate that they hope to substitute for grassroots organizing. Regardless of whether or not it is grounded in fact, the Russia investigation plays the same role as conspiracy theories in that it casts Trump's opponents as spectators in a hunt for *more information*. As we wrote in 2014 in reference to Edward Snowden's whistleblowing,

“The idea that the mere revelation of some hidden truth could somehow awaken people into revolt is most evident in the 9/11 Truth movement and similar purveyors of conspiracy theory. But those are simply extreme manifestations of a narrative that is pervasive in our society, in which millenarian powers are ascribed to information itself.”

The quest for *more information* is not intended to catalyze people into action, but to defer it: receiving information without corresponding opportunities to act, people slowly lose the habit of responding.

There's no need for new revelations about Trump's overt racism, perpetration of sexual assault, or illicit dealings with other authoritarians. All of these are already flagrantly obvious. The focus on *investigating* him serves above all to re-legitimize the same FBI and justice system that are already being used against anyone who honestly sets out to interrupt the harm that both Trump and his centrist rivals are perpetuating through the institutions of the state.

State repression has not gone nearly as far yet under the Trump era as Trump promised that it would. But it may not be Trump who presides over the next wave of crackdowns: it may well be the centrists.

Inflection Points

At a few critical points in 2017, a relatively small number of anarchists helped to shift the course of history. These can serve us as case studies to explore larger questions about visibility, legitimacy, and strategy.

J20: A Call to Revolt

The first critical point was the inauguration itself on January 20, 2017. Imagine, as we cautioned a week ahead of time, what would have happened if Trump had come to power in front of millions of cheering fans while fascist gangs beat up protesters around Washington, DC. That would have emboldened right-wing thugs all over the country, intensifying the new wave of racist recruiting and violence already in progress. Worse, it would have sent the message to the political establishment that Trump really had a popular mandate, giving them cause to collude with him.

Going into the inauguration, there was considerable anxiety about how powerful the far-right street presence would be. “Bikers for Trump” vowed to build a “wall of meat” to defend Trump's parade; online trolls were promising to gun down protesters in cold blood. Richard Spencer and other fascists had organized a high-profile “Deploraball” downtown on the night before the inauguration, with hardly any opposition from the political establishment in DC.

As it turned out, Trump's supporters didn't present a powerful force in the streets. Behind the scenes, fascist organizers were trying to figure out how to do so, but most Trump supporters attended the inauguration as isolated spectators, counting on the 28,000 security personnel mobilized by the state to carry out the work of repression on their behalf.

Despite all these threats, thousands mobilized against Trump, blockading checkpoints around the parade route

early in the morning. Several blocks north, at 10 am, 500 people gathered for the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March. The march stormed across the city, creating an electrifying atmosphere, until scrambling police units finally managed to trap it, resulting in the now widely-known J20 arrests. Had it not been for a heroic umbrella charge against the encircling line of police, dozens or even hundreds more demonstrators might have been trapped in the J20 kettle.

By late morning, crowds of demonstrators filtered north as the blockades and the march dispersed. The intersections were occupied by detachments of the National Guard; riot police established a line to the east, firing chemical weapons and projectiles at the crowd throughout the afternoon. Yet despite their efforts, the authorities never regained control over the area of downtown north of the parade route, as evidenced by the fire that burned from early afternoon until well past nightfall at the intersection where the smashed limousine was eventually set alight as well.

Masked anarchists were able to move freely throughout this area. This is how it came to pass that Richard Spencer, who had come to proclaim the renewed ascendancy of white supremacy in the United States, was instead reduced to a meme symbolizing resistance to Trump and fascism.

In the context of the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March, the burning limousine, and other acts of resistance in DC that day, the wildly popular punching of Richard Spencer signified widespread rebellion against everything Trump represented. Together, the events of J20 were a signal flare to everyone around the world who opposed the coming of the Trump era, demonstrating what resistance might look like. Without the iconic image of the burning limousine as a backdrop, the record-setting Women's March of the following day might simply have functioned as a premature voting rally for 2018 and 2020. Instead, the courage of anarchists and other rebels

carries out raids around the US. The anarchist approach would be to attack and delegitimize these institutions to such an extent that they were not able to continue performing these functions effectively.

On every front where we fail to demonstrate the effectiveness of anarchist organizing, we will see reformists assert their hegemony. This makes it more difficult to assert an anarchist vision of a world without hierarchy and oppression, but it also functions to neutralize those struggles, ensuring that their chief effect is to legitimize state actors like the Democratic Party rather than to undermine the institutions that perpetrate violence and oppression.

The Challenges Ahead

Going into 2018, grassroots fascists are in disarray and Trump is the least popular president on record. But this does not mean our work is done. Rather, we must shift our attention to other groups that hope to take advantage of the failures of the far right to assert their own brands of authoritarian power. We can divide these groups, roughly, into the political center and the authoritarian left.

The Centrists

As Trump's star wanes, Democrats, media outlets, and other representatives of the political establishment are looking to reestablish their dominance by presenting themselves as the political center—the *legitimate* face of US democracy. Just as they did under Obama, they intend to continue carrying out the activities that characterize Trump's agenda—the deportations, the police murders, the evictions, the prison-industrial complex and ecological destruction—but under the banner of normalcy and adherence to protocol.

to drop charges against 129 of them showed that anarchists can fight effectively in a variety of different contexts.

As of this writing, 59 defendants still face charges. What transpires in their cases will do a lot to determine what the long-term legacy of the struggles of 2017 turns out to be. Support the J20 defendants.

What We Lost along the Way

In reflecting on such a frenetic year, it's easy to lose track of all the things that *didn't* happen, all the missed opportunities.

For example, the uprisings against police violence that gained national attention during the uprising of 2014 in Ferguson and continued in cities from Baltimore to Charlotte virtually ceased. The only city to see a major movement against racist policing in 2017 was St. Louis, where the social movements and tensions that gave rise to the uprising of 2014 had continued unabated. This points to some of the ways that the reaction represented by the Trump administration succeeded in setting back social movements and taking possibilities off the table. Have we missed opportunities to let the communities that are most directly targeted by police know that we are still ready to stand with them when they stand up for themselves outside the useless channels of reformist organizing?

Likewise, although anarchists participated in solidarity organizing with Muslims and immigrants targeted by fascists and the Trump administration, we could have done more to push back against the repression directed at these groups. Instead, Democrats and other reformists have gained the initiative, centering attention around the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and other questions of state policy while US Border Patrol ensures that hundreds die in the desert and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

in DC underscored the urgency of the situation and infected tens of thousands with the desire to act accordingly.

Afterwards, some anarchists expressed concern that the model for the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March isolated the participants from other demonstrators, presenting too obvious a target for the authorities. This objection may be valid on a logistical level, in that the march began by passing through largely empty streets. The reasons for this are unclear: it may have resulted from an honorable intention to draw police away from the checkpoint blockades, a wrongheaded misunderstanding of the march simply as an opportunity to employ certain tactics, or an erroneous prediction of where and when crowds would be gathering. The important target of the day was not any particular storefront or highway, but the atmosphere of order surrounding the inauguration itself. Against incredible odds, the march managed to disrupt this.

It is unlikely that this would have been possible if anarchists had not openly called for a confrontational march. Downtown DC only became ungovernable after the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March had occurred. Throughout the remainder of the day, although thousands of rebellious people circulated throughout downtown, they never again managed to initiate coordinated action. Had anarchists remained dispersed throughout the crowd at the checkpoint blockades, as they were all morning before the march, downtown DC might not have become an environment in which fires could break out and Richard Spencer get what was coming to him. The fact that these things were possible attests to the success of the march.

The price of success was heavy. In an unprecedented example of judicial persecution, over 200 arrestees captured in the kettle were charged with the same felony—and three months later, seven or more additional felonies, two of which did not even exist. The impetus for this may well have come from the very apex of Trump's government.

When the stakes are high enough, it is worth taking action even when the consequences are severe. Had Trump's inauguration passed without serious opposition, it would have been more difficult to mobilize people to respond to everything that came afterwards, which would have ultimately led to much more dangerous situations. We needn't count the actions of J20 as a failure just because they were costly. We were taking on the most powerful empire in the history of the solar system at its strongest and most reactionary.

Likewise, it is important that people acted openly as anarchists, rather than imagining that tactics alone could convey their values and visions. As the prevailing order loses legitimacy, a widening range of groups are employing confrontational tactics in the service of many different objectives—including reformism and authoritarianism. When we understand days like J20 not only as clashes with the authorities, but also as opportunities to express what we are fighting *for*, we can see the advantage of identifying ourselves as anarchists, lest others hijack our efforts to promote their own agendas.

One more point bears making. The majority of the day's arrestees were captured in the kettle targeting the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March. Had there been no march, the 28,000 security personnel would have been free to focus on targeting the people who were blockading the checkpoints. In this regard, those who participated in the blockades owe thanks to the participants in the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March for forcing the police to concentrate the force of their repression elsewhere. When anarchists push the envelope, it opens up space for everyone else.

The Airport Blockades: A Message to the Center

The clashes of J20 conveyed the urgency of the situation; the numbers in the Women's March conveyed how many people

against the infighting and pettiness of the far-right, it offers a sterling model for solidarity.

Anarchist legal supporters and media projects struggled to make people aware of the J20 case throughout the spring and summer, organizing around the site defendj20resistance.org and calling for weeks of solidarity actions in April and July. In August, the story got a boost when the news spread that the Justice Department was demanding that a web hosting provider turn over 1.3 million IP addresses of people who visited the website DisruptJ20.org on the premise that *every one of them* did so in order to plan a crime. By mid-fall, sympathetic coverage was finally beginning to appear in some corporate media outlets.

Six courageous defendants demanded to go to trial as early as possible, in hopes of setting a precedent that would put the other defendants in a stronger position. Their trial began in November; only then did the J20 case obtain traction on the attention of the general public. On December 21, the jury returned an innocent verdict for all six defendants, with one juror reporting that there had never been any doubt in his mind that the defendants were completely innocent.

Although the prosecution immediately announced that they intended to try every one of the remaining 188 defendants, on January 18, they dropped the charges against 129 of the J20 defendants. This was a major defeat for them; along with Trump's Muslim Ban, the J20 case has been a bellwether indicating that the Trump administration has not yet managed to subordinate the US justice system to its agenda.

That will likely change as Trump and his cronies have more time to appoint judges and establish new laws and legal precedents; it is a grievous mistake to legitimize the legal system as an institutional counterweight to the Trump administration. It was already a victory for Kerkhoff and her fellow goons to spend a year terrorizing the defendants with the threat of decades in prison. Yet the fact that she was forced

tactics as more or less “militant” as if militancy were a goal in and of itself.

The First J20 Trial: Pushing Back the Reaction

By the end of 2017, both the Trump administration and its rank-and-file proponents had run up against the limits of their strategies. Fascist organizers and former allies like Trump and Bannon were at each other’s throats, illustrating the perils of a hierarchical framework in which everyone competes to be the “alpha.” At the same time, expressions of popular resistance had also plateaued.

Yet not all victories are won in the street. Often, the impact and significance of a day of struggle are determined long afterwards.

The context had changed considerably since Trump’s inauguration, but Assistant US Attorney Jennifer Kerkhoff was still intent on prosecuting those arrested in the kettle on J20. In charging hundreds of people with the same crimes simply for being in the vicinity of a confrontational protest, she and her fellow reactionaries hoped to establish a precedent that could be used to brutally suppress protest movements of all stripes.

Despite its historic importance, the J20 case initially received very little publicity. Leftist media like Democracy Now! covered the inauguration protests in detail without so much as *mentioning* the arrests. In April, when the defendants were saddled with seven or more additional felony charges apiece, very few outlets besides this one reported it.

In this stressful situation, two hundred defendants located all around the country, most of whom did not know each other, had to coordinate and agree on strategies for solidarity, media outreach, and legal defense. Bearing this in mind, the fact that 194 defendants refused to collaborate with the state or even to take plea bargains is incredibly inspiring. When we set this

were concerned. This is the classic division between quality and quantity that haunts most movements: those who utilize effective tactics are targeted and isolated, while those who seek mass for its own sake end up organizing ineffectual rituals that cater to the lowest common denominator. If this division had remained in place, opposition to Trump would have been neutralized by J20-style felony charges on one side and meaningless mass marches on the other.

However, only a week later, when Trump attempted to sign his Muslim Ban into law, massive numbers of people responded immediately, shutting down airports around the country.

In doing so, demonstrators sent a message to those in positions of political power that business as usual would be impossible under Trump. Had this not taken place, holdovers from the political establishment would have had no reason not to accommodate themselves to the new political landscape, making only a perfunctory show of “#resistance.” Instead, judges recognized that they would reap political rewards if they blocked Trump’s executive orders; government employees deduced that they would be heroes if they leaked classified information; apparatchiks of the deep state set about undermining Trump before opposition to his administration undermined public order and taught the general public the effectiveness of confrontational direct action. All of these developments interfered with Trump’s efforts to implement his agenda, but they would never have occurred without popular pressure.

In retrospect, the airport blockades marked the high point of resistance to Trump. Movements usually peak early before anyone knows what is going on. Much of the discourse utilized by centrist politicians and media since February 2017 has been aimed at driving a wedge between those who are prepared to use effective tactics and the great numbers of people who oppose Trump. Media outlets like the *Washington Post* that portray Trump as a grave threat to democracy also go out of their

way to portray his opponents in the street as alien and violent. We will return below to the agenda of supposed centrists.

The airport blockades took everyone by surprise. Anarchists participated all around the country, sometimes playing a critical role in escalating from symbolic protest to confrontational civil disobedience. But there was hardly any *organized* or visible anarchist presence in most of the blockades.

Was this a missed opportunity? That depends on whether we consider it more important to prioritize the effectiveness of the blockades, which succeeded in part precisely because police could not figure out how to distinguish between radicals and “ordinary” protesters, or to prioritize taking advantage of the opportunity to proselytize. In such situations, anarchists almost always prioritize taking action over promoting ideas. When people’s lives hang in the balance, this is the only honorable approach, though it can give a recruiting advantage to less honorable groups that view such moments chiefly as opportunities to promote their organizations. If we are correct that efforts to combat oppression are doomed to fail unless they incorporate an anarchist analysis of power itself, we ultimately have to figure out how to act effectively, expand our networks, and promote our ideas all at the same time.

Shutting Down Milo in Berkeley: A Risky Escalation

On Wednesday, February 1, celebrity misogynist and Islamophobe Milo Yiannopoulos was scheduled to speak at the University of California at Berkeley. Massive crowds gathered in protest. Yet as on J20 in Washington, DC, it was only the arrival of an organized and confrontational black bloc that transformed the situation, forcing the police to cancel Milo’s event. Acting offensively and as a distinct social body, cheered on by the crowd, anarchists showed that a hundred determined people could outmatch the authorities even on the flagship cam-

Centrist politicians and media outlets were more frightened of a grassroots social movement capable of shutting down fascist organizing and police collusion than they were of fascism itself.

Putting the black bloc front and center in Berkeley arguably assisted the corporate media in portraying “antifa” as alien and dangerous. In Charlottesville, when anarchists were practically on their own against a powerful fascist movement, they forewent black bloc tactics, yet at the apex of anti-fascist momentum, in Berkeley, anarchists utilized them. Why?

For many years, anarchists have debated when and how to employ the black bloc model. For example, during the general strike at the height of Occupy Oakland in 2011, rather than simply shutting down the port along with everyone else, anarchists mobilized in a fierce black bloc that cut a swath of destruction through downtown Oakland. Afterwards, this was understood as a polarizing moment: anarchists had violated the taboos around anonymous action and property destruction, but in doing so they helped to introduce tactics into the popular imagination that became widespread in 2014 following the uprising in Ferguson.

In retrospect, the Berkeley demonstration occurred toward the end of the trajectory of anti-fascist street conflict. Perhaps at that moment, when anarchists had support from other activists, it was a propitious time to continue trying to normalize the tactics that had shut down Milo in hopes that next time anti-fascists find themselves in a situation like the one in Charlottesville, they will not have to endanger themselves by leaving their faces bare.

Yet every time we push the envelope, we also risk presenting our adversaries with a vulnerability they can exploit—not only fascists, but also corporate media pundits, police, liberal politicians, and authoritarian activists. We have to think carefully about which approach to use in each situation, weighing the risks against the advantages and resisting the tendency to rate

Though outnumbered and ill-equipped, anarchists and other courageous rebels confronted the fascists, precipitating street fighting that forced Charlottesville officials to rescind the permit for the rally. This goaded one fascist into driving his car into an anti-fascist victory march, killing Heather Heyer and severely injuring several more people. These two factors—the public defeat of fascists in the streets and the association of fascists with murder—destroyed fascist momentum and legitimacy at the very moment they were poised to succeed.

Let's reflect on the tactics that anarchists employed in Charlottesville and afterwards around the country. In Charlottesville, anti-fascists largely opted to forego masks and black clothing, despite the risks of participating in confrontations while permitting fascists and police to identify them. Due to far-right and corporate media efforts to stigmatize “antifa” as violent and alien, participants feared that concealing their identities would only help to legitimize the fascists. This concern underscores the extent to which anarchists were operating from a position of weakness in Charlottesville.

Flagrant violence and displays of Nazi iconography compelled the media to portray the “Unite the Right” rally as more “extremist” than anarchist counterdemonstrators even before Heather Heyer was killed. Had fascists been able to restrain themselves from waving swastika flags and murdering people, however, things might have turned out differently.

Over the following two weeks, massive anti-fascist demonstrations took place in Boston, Durham, and the Bay Area. Anti-fascism had arrived as a powerful social movement. Yet at this point, when tens of thousands were finally pouring into the streets, the corporate media turned on anti-fascists, describing them as violent extremists. This pivot occurred two weeks after the clashes in Charlottesville, on the occasion of a thousands-strong anti-fascist mobilization in Berkeley in which a black bloc of 100 forced the police out of the park they had hoped to reserve for fascist demonstrators.

pus of University of California. In DC, the Anti-Capitalist/Anti-Fascist March had ended in hundreds of costly arrests; in Berkeley, the police withdrew in disarray.

But the police were not the chief threat. The greatest danger was the trap that Milo himself had set in hopes of using anarchists to foster a reactionary grassroots movement.

Milo had hit upon an insidious strategy: appearing at universities around the US in the name of “free speech,” he created a double bind in which liberals either had to offer him a platform to promote his politics or else incur the stigma of opposing freedom of speech. Even anarchist direct action seemed to play right into his plan. Just as Trump had ridden to power on a right-wing backlash against movements opposing police and white supremacy, Milo and his cronies hoped to build a street-level fascist movement by mobilizing the far right in response to perceived far-left violence.

This was simply one scene in a conflict between fascists and anti-fascists that started before 2017 and extended throughout the rest of the year. The advantage swung back and forth between the adversaries like a pendulum: whenever one side achieved a victory, it catalyzed people who had been watching from the sidelines to join the other side. Many anarchists felt it was urgent to shut down Milo's talk in response to Trump's victory and an uptick of fascist activity in the Bay Area. Yet after anarchists shut down Milo, fascists were able to mobilize large numbers for increasingly violent “free speech” rallies that managed to dominate the streets of Berkeley on April 15 and April 27. This underscored the risks of grassroots resistance against Trump and his minions.

How can we strategize for conflicts in which our victories only make our enemies stronger? We can understand the dynamics of this *war of position* by thinking in terms of social taboos. At first, when people sought to delegitimize Milo and other fascists by accusing them of violating the taboos against racism, sexism, and religious bigotry, Milo outflanked this ma-

never by creating a situation in which he could accuse his adversaries of violating the taboos protecting free speech and prohibiting violence. It was only later, when the emerging fascist movement became associated with violating the greatest taboo of all—committing murder—that popular sympathy definitively shifted to anti-fascists.

For anarchists, this is a reminder that gratuitously flouting the norms of our society can cost us dearly. It never pays to present ourselves as pointlessly destructive or antisocial. At the same time, we cannot bring about a better world without challenging the existing social mores. Not shutting down Milo's talk in Berkeley would have enabled fascists to portray themselves as victorious in their struggle against liberalism and to position themselves as a legitimate pole in political discourse. It would have ceded Milo a platform via which to recruit followers who would turn immigrants over to ICE, terrorize Muslims and trans people, and stomp out anarchist organizing by any means necessary. Once again, as in DC on J20, it was necessary to take the hard road, escalating the conflict rather than accepting defeat in advance.

Charlottesville: Moment of Truth

After the airport blockades, street-level resistance to the Trump agenda slowly lost ground as “centrists” promoted Democratic politicians, corporate media, rogue government officials, and even the FBI as champions representing popular opposition. The effect was to reduce the urgency people felt, returning them to a spectator role.

Meanwhile, anarchists around the country were forced to focus on preventing the spread of grassroots fascism, a threat that few others took seriously. There was a significant risk that anarchists would end up locked in a private grudge match with gangs of white supremacists rather than finding common cause with others to take on capitalism and the state. This is one

of the fundamental functions of street-level fascism: it serves to reduce the horizon of political discourse from the possibilities of radical social change to the immediate imperatives of street violence. The consequence is a feedback loop in which, unable to present a revolutionary vision around which movements might cohere, anarchists become isolated, only able act in concert with others when they do so under banners that obscure their objectives. In the long run, this dynamic can create a situation in which fascists and other authoritarians can present themselves as the only ones with a proposal for how to transform society.

Corporate news outlets contributed to this, presenting anarchists as nothing more than the “extremist” wing of anti-racist protest. While the front page of the *New York Times* had identified “anarchists” as the foremost opposition to Trump and the far right immediately after Milo was shut down in Berkeley, over the following months media outlets shifted to utilizing the foreign-sounding term “antifa.” This was a way to conceal anarchists’ structural analysis at a time when it could have gained popular traction, instead portraying their politics simply as a violent reaction to Richard Spencer and the KKK.

By the time of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, many anarchists had shifted to focusing chiefly on anti-fascist organizing. In Charlottesville, they found themselves facing a fascist movement that had metastasized into a capable fighting force. On the night of August 11, following the torch-lit march that concluded with hundreds of fascists attacking a small number of counterdemonstrators at the foot of a statue of Thomas Jefferson, it appeared that fascists were going to come away from the weekend with a significant victory.

Like the Inauguration, the Muslim Ban, and Milo's event in Berkeley, this was a critical moment. The “Unite the Right” rally was poised to establish avowed white supremacists as a legitimate pole in US politics, around which millions of disappointed white workers might form a violent movement.