

Rupturism and Popular Internationalism

An Open Letter of Political Divorce and Disassociation

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To Whom It May Concern

There comes a point where disagreement and infighting cease to describe what is happening within the left.

For more than a century, libertarian and authoritarian socialists have continued to speak as though we belonged to a single political family. We've inherited the language of a common Left, shared demonstrations, shared enemies, shared histories of labor struggle and antifascism, and, when circumstances demanded it, shared barricades. The depth of our problems have thus far been treated as a problem internal to that family: libertarian socialists distrust the state, authoritarian socialists insist upon transition; libertarian socialists demand autonomy, authoritarian socialists demand discipline; libertarian socialists warn against concentrated power, authoritarian socialists ask us to tolerate it until some later stage of history.

This arrangement is impossible to maintain.

What separates us isn't principally a disagreement over which revolutionary strategy is more effective. Increasingly, we're supporting different people, defending different institutions, recognizing different political subjects, and arriving at opposite sides of actual struggles with material, visceral consequences on the lives of others.

Demanding freedom for prisoners of the Iranian state while simultaneously condemning American and Israeli imperialism should have been among the least controversial propositions imaginable for an internationalist Left. Nothing about opposition to prisons, executions, torture, foreign intervention, sanctions, or imperial war requires choosing one of those systems against another.

Yet even this proved intolerable to a substantial campist tendency.

People who insisted that Iranians could simultaneously oppose foreign imperialism and their own state were accused of assisting imperialism. Black radicals and abolitionists expressing solidarity with Iranian prisoners were subjected to demands that they withdraw their solidarity. Iranian voices describing their own repression were treated as politically inconvenient because acknowledging them disturbed a geopolitical narrative in which states, rather than the people governed by them, had become the principal actors of liberation.

This occurred while anarchists across and connected to Southwest Asia and North Africa were already grieving another enormous loss. The autonomous project in Rojava. Imperfect, contradictory, never simply anarchist, yet among the closest contemporary revolutionary experiments to libertarian socialism. Rojava had been crushed beneath the new Syrian regime, US betrayal, and Turkish ethnic cleansing. For libertarian socialists who've spent years watching Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and other communities experiment with forms of communal autonomy, women's liberation and confederal political organization under nearly impossible conditions, it was the destruction of a living revolutionary possibility.

And almost immediately, we were again confronted by people calling themselves “anti-imperialists” who seemed unable to perceive liberation except through states.

This is the rupture.

The problem isn’t that anarchists and campists disagree over Iran, Syria, Palestine, Ukraine, China, Russia, or any other particular conflict. The problem is that we’re increasingly disagreeing over what anti-imperialism itself is, or who it’s for.

For us, liberation belongs to the people. A government doesn’t become the embodiment of its population because it conflicts with Washington. A revolutionary party doesn’t become synonymous with the working class because it claims to represent it. A state does not acquire the right to imprison dissidents because another state wishes to overthrow it. A people do not cease to possess autonomy because their resistance complicates somebody else’s geopolitical strategy.

No struggle against an empire can require us to abandon those living beneath another empire, state, party, military, prison system, or ruling class.

Yet campism increasingly demands exactly this hierarchy of solidarity. It asks us to distinguish oppression not according to what it does to people but according to who commits it. It asks us to regard certain prisons as strategically embarrassing, certain imperial ambitions as defensive, certain ruling classes as temporarily progressive, and certain populations as politically subordinate to the international position of the states governing them.

We reject this completely, and we no longer believe that this rejection can be contained indefinitely inside the language of ordinary leftist infighting. If one currently believes Iranian prisoners deserve international solidarity and another believes such solidarity must be suppressed when Iran confronts the United States, we’re not debating tactics anymore. If one current sees autonomous Kurdish institutions as revolutionary possibilities and another sees them as inconvenient pieces in the geopolitical struggle between hegemons, we’re not just debating tactics anymore. If one current believes liberation must be organized from below while another repeatedly asks oppressed people to subordinate themselves to states, parties, and geopolitical camps supposedly acting on their behalf, we’re not merely debating tactics.

We are describing entirely different political projects.

The continued insistence that anarchists, libertarian socialists and campists must nevertheless constitute a single revolutionary left has obscured this reality for far too long. Historical proximity has been mistaken for political compatibility. Shared enemies have been mistaken for shared objectives. The word “socialism” has been allowed to conceal fundamentally incompatible relationships to authority.

We no longer intend to maintain this fiction. We therefore announce our separation in every possible manner from authoritarian socialists and geopolitical campists.

We’re not withdrawing from the international struggle, we’re not abandoning communists who reject authoritarian methodology, we’re not narrowing solidarity to those who call themselves anarchists, nor demanding that autonomous peoples translate their struggles into the vocabulary of nineteenth-century European radicalism before we recognize them.

We intend the polar opposite of that course. We seek to separate from hierarchical methodology in order to broaden the recognition of genuinely libertarian methodology wherever it develops. The old unity is breaking because it was organized around political labels and geopolitical camps represented by ideologies which no longer have command of those camps.

What must replace campism and state struggles is organization around liberation itself and not geopolitics. This letter is an attempt to name that separation, explain why it has become necessary, and propose what should come after it.

We would call this first principle Leftist Rupturism: we are separating ourselves from all authoritarian currents and we deny their legitimacy as revolutionary leftist currents.

We would call the second principle Popular Internationalism: we support oppressed peoples even against their own state without regard for national borders or geopolitics.

We therefore call for an end to material and political support for authoritarian projects which claim the language of liberation while imprisoning, repressing, exploiting, or subordinating the people they supposedly exist to free. No state earns our allegiance because it calls itself socialist, anti-imperialist, revolutionary, or a member of some preferred geopolitical camp. No party acquires our solidarity by declaring itself the historical representative of a people whose autonomy it denies.

Our obligation is not to governments or geopolitical chesspieces, it's to people.

We're under no obligation to defend a murderous state because another murderous state threatens it and someone else too. We are under no obligation to excuse prisons because their guards oppose Washington, to excuse imperial ambition because it "confronts NATO", or to excuse political repression because acknowledging it might complicate somebody else's theory of anti-imperialism. Opposition to foreign domination doesn't require subordination to domestic domination.

Nor is it our place, from thousands of miles away, to manufacture a revolutionary mandate for other people. We do not get to decide that Iranians must rise, that Palestinians must pursue one strategy rather than another, that Kurds must accept or reject negotiations, or that any population must sacrifice itself for the strategic needs of an international political bloc. Solidarity in no way confers command over the colonized and oppressed of the world.

If a people organize, resist, strike, revolt, defend their communities, or otherwise choose confrontation with the institutions dominating them, our task is to hear them as political actors in their own right. If they choose another course, that decision is theirs as well. The principle is autonomy, not spectators abroad appointing themselves commanders of struggles they don't have to live through.

You ask who should rule the people, we reply that the people should rule themselves. That is the beginning of Rupturism, and the foundation upon which Popular Internationalism must be rebuilt.

The post-McCarthy international order leaves us with a political responsibility that cannot be answered by nostalgia. Authoritarian communism has lost the confidence of enormous portions of the populations whose liberation it continues to claim, while campism repeatedly asks living movements to subordinate themselves to states and traditions they didn't choose. We will no longer attach the future of libertarian socialism to their rehabilitation.

This isn't an appeal to anticommunism. Communists who reject hierarchical methodology remain among those with whom cooperation is possible. Campism itself extends beyond communism into radical liberal, nationalist, theocratic, and geopolitical currents. Our separation is from the methodology and those who utilize it: party sovereignty, state worship, political substitutionism, hegemonic allegiance, and the demand that popular struggles sacrifice their autonomy to some supposedly greater historical camp.

If we intend to build a mass international movement for the liberation of all, we must meet the peoples of the world where their struggles actually exist rather than demanding that they inherit our old sectarian loyalties. We owe no loyalty to failed states, dead parties, ruling classes, or geopolitical blocs. Whatever obligations of unity might once have existed between the factions of the 19th century left have long since been repaid tenfold in the blood of our comrades and the oppressed peoples of the world.

Our obligations are to the people who are living and dead.

In good faith towards oppressed peoples everywhere, the libertarian socialist movement must finally distinguish itself from those authoritarian traditions which have repeatedly spoken in their name while denying them autonomy. We should not ask the world to trust them again as the price of trusting us.

We should separate and our separation must become material rather than rhetorical. Since we are such enemies of the campist tendency... wherever campism places itself against popular liberation, we should cease financing, legitimizing, propagandizing for, and politically laundering authoritarian "liberation" projects just because they oppose an enemy state. We should instead direct our solidarity toward workers, prisoners, autonomous communities, unions, women's movements, Indigenous peoples, libertarian organizations, dissidents, and other popular forces struggling to expand their own capacity to govern their lives.

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