

Anarchy, War and Globalization

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Hello friends. As you probably know by now, I was refused entry into the belly of the beast last night. A friend and I had to turn back our car into the great white north, but not before we were held, questioned and searched for about ninety minutes at the Vermont border by your ever-vigilant United States Immigration and Customs officials. During those ninety minutes, as about twenty-five or so cars went by, it was only my friend and I, and two other African men after us, who were questioned and held. But far be it for me to suggest that Vermont border guards practice racial profiling.

Getting stopped at the border is not such a big deal, although staring at large, framed colour photos of George Bush Junior and Dick Cheney for over an hour has to qualify as some kind of psychological torture, especially for two anarchists.

After September 11, I've become especially aware that the profile of the archetypical modern terrorist/hijacker is a clean-shaven, brown-skinned male, between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-five, with some higher education and a good command of English.

That's why I grew a beard.

Still, I couldn't fool those border guys. I guess you should all feel collectively safer knowing that I'm stuck back in Montreal.

Whether in Montreal or Amherst, I want to thank the organizers of the Third New England Anarchist Book Fair — the third one I've now missed — for the invitation to speak, and for allowing me to present some thoughts in this imperfect way.

This panel is on the so-called current crisis, or crises, and takes as part of its title, "What the fuck do we do now?" I feel like responding, "How the fuck should I know!"

Still, I guess I'll offer up some food for thought. I usually talk from notes, but because it's about three in the morning as I write this, I'm basing this talk on a speech I gave at a teach-in in Montreal called "America's New War: Perspectives on Racism and Imperialism." The talk was given before October 7, when the bombing started in Afghanistan, and was presented to a general audience.

So, this speech might be somewhat basic for a lot of you anarchist radicals out there, for which I apologize. But I hope my remarks will complement Noel [Ignatiev], Cindy [Milstein] and Michael [Albert]'s interventions, or at least set up a framework from which we approach the question: "What do we do now?" I will also include some small parts of the presentation that I was to offer later in the day on "Anarchy, War and Globalization."

Now, whether we like it or not, those of us who identify as part of the radical social justice movement — especially us anarchists — all of us have to adjust. I use that word very deliberately, we have to adjust rather than retreat, as a result of the events of September 11 in the United States. It's the nature of living in an empire — and I use that word very deliberately too — it is in the nature of living in an empire that the emperor decides his priorities, and we have to reckon with those priorities.

Whatever the shallow and simplistic justifications presented in the recent days and weeks — “good versus evil,” “civilization versus terrorism,” “infinite justice,” “enduring freedom” — we are facing and confronting realities that have long existed, but are now more amplified than ever.

Those realities include the drumbeats of war, a war against enemies that are not yet too clear, but war all the same. The enemies are vaguely Arab, brown-skinned and Muslim, but beyond that we're not too sure. The war on drugs of yesterday is today's war on terrorism, both equally ill defined and self-serving.

Those realities include racism — not just racist backlash, but racism, — which is an integral part of our so-called Western civilization. This racism has come out to express itself in a more obvious and vulgar fashion in the last three weeks or so.

According to some commentators, we should somehow commend our nations' collective tolerance since there hasn't been a wholesale internment of Arabs like the internment of Japanese during the Second World War in the U.S.A. and Canada. We haven't opened up any concentration camps yet, but I think INS prisons qualify, not to mention the fact that, according to media reports, up to 1,000 people have been detained since September 11, and only eleven of them have any alleged link whatsoever to the terrorist attacks.

But there has been a clear expression of vulgar racism in the past six weeks. In just Canada and the United States, there have been:

- at least three confirmed backlash-related murders;
- numerous beatings and death threats;
- hundreds of reported verbal and physical assaults (thousands more are no doubt going unreported);
- countless mosques, Islamic centres and schools have been stoned, fire-bombed or defaced.

Even Christian Arab churches have been attacked. In Hamilton, Ontario, a Hindu temple was burned, and Sikh men, who wore turbans, have been specifically targeted for verbal and other abuse. I think it goes without saying that bigots and racists do not practice cultural sensitivity.

We're clearly in an environment of increased and amplified jingoism, chauvinism and nationalism, and this kind of climate lends itself to what I call “cheap shots” and “sloppy thinking.”

In a very basic sense, in answering the question “What do we do now?” we need to offer, as a counterweight, some clear thinking about our current situation. But let's consider some of the cheap shots and sloppy thinking ...

There's one kind of cheap shot that is very predictable, for example the comments of America's very own Taliban — rightwing preachers like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. They laid the ultimate blame for the September 11 attacks, and America's so-called weakness, on queers, feminists, atheists and other scapegoats.

Another predictable response is that of other rightwing commentators. We have the religious fundamentalists, but we also have the economic fundamentalists who are making links — perverse links really — between street protests against economic globalization — against the [International Monetary Fund] IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization — and terrorism. These commentators have been expressing the idea that there's some kind of slippery slope connection between anti-globalization protesters, anarchists and terrorists.

There's a new kind of McCarthyism that's being expressed in the last couple of weeks, whereby opposition to capitalism is not only seen as un-American, or un-Canadian — which most of us don't mind — but it's even pro-terrorist. That's the new kind of McCarthyism we're facing.

The current climate isn't just McCarthyite, it's positively Orwellian. When we talk about the "Office of Homeland Security," it sounds a lot like Orwell's Ministry of Truth. So does the "Patriot Act," which is being proposed to deal with national security issues in the U.S.A. The offensive attacks on Afghanistan, including Afghani villages and civilians, makes of mockery of the name of the Department of Defense, which is more properly a Department of War and Aggression.

There are other troubling responses that are perhaps just as predictable, but still disturbing; namely, the clear retreat by certain sections of more mainstream social justice movement. A retreat that has shamelessly been presented as some sort of "period of reflection."

The most obvious example of this retreat was the cancellation of anti-IMF and World Bank protests by Washington's Mobilization for Global Justice. The decision was not only wrong, it was inexcusable, especially given the clear links between war and globalization that could easily be made to the general public. No less a source than Thomas Friedman — the New York Times columnist and a prominent apologist for capitalist globalization — has written, "The invisible hand of the market needs the invisible fist."

September 29 in Washington was a singular and unique opportunity to announce to the world, as well as the "homeland," that there was concerted and public opposition to "America's New War" in the belly of the beast; not to mention making the seamless link between militarization and globalization (or at least start to make the argument publicly).

Instead, there was a withdrawal from any sort of street presence, although D.C.'s Anti-Capitalist Convergence should be commended for adjusting and publicly expressing opposition to war. Unfortunately, the Mobilization for Global Justice's retreat did have a tangible effect on the scope and scale of protest.

I don't want to underestimate the climate that we're in, but it's exactly in times like these that we need to be clear, open and assertive about our dissent to the prevailing climate of war hysteria. We can't simply surrender the public terrain — in the streets, in the media, public terrain broadly defined — to apologists for war, exploitation and national security.

Beyond packaging the retreat as a "reflection," it's sometimes even presented as a way of displaying sympathy with the victims of September 11. That is not just wrong, it's plain offensive. The "Don't protest to sympathize with the victims" position has been expressed publicly by union leaders up here in Canada. In the U.S.A., it's been expressed by the AFL-CIO, which has gone back to its old AFL-CIA ways. Not surprisingly, they have a selective definition of who qualifies as victim.

I also don't want to understate the tragedy in New York City, Washington and Pennsylvania. There was a tragedy, a terrible tragedy. But it would trivialize those deaths in New York, and it would trivialize other unnecessary and tragic deaths — such as the children dying in Iraq because of Western-imposed sanctions, or the deaths of Palestinian civilians — it would trivialize all those

needless civilian deaths if we didn't look at the broader context and root-causes of "terrorism" and exploitation and act accordingly. To not do so would be to surrender the terrain, once again, to the flag-wavers and apologists for American hegemony.

Then again, should we really be all that surprised about flag-waving from big labour or mainstream environmental NGOs? After all, they were flag-waving back in Seattle. The Sierra Club's Seattle slogan at the time was "No globalization without representation," and mainstream union opposition was anti-Mexico and anti-China.

These critiques of elements of the anti-globalization movement is not intended to be sectarian, but rather to assert the importance of a clear, radical opposition to war and its root causes. As well, it exposes some of the weaknesses of the broadly defined "anti-globalization" or "global justice" movement. A movement that, for a lot of people, is about a politics that can be basically defined as "being for good things, and opposed to bad things" — that kind of shallow politics does not easily translate into a principled opposition to war.

Despite the challenges within the "anti-globalization movement," much of it has clearly moved from an anti-capitalist politics, to an anti-war politics (which obviously, does not forestall an anti-capitalist analysis). But I want to clarify what is meant by "anti-war" or "peace."

Of course, we're not just talking about peace in isolation, but a real peace, or peace with justice. But there have been a lot of simplistic citations recently of Gandhi and Lennon — I'm talking about Lennon the Beatle, not Lenin the Bolshevik. Lots of chants like, "All we are saying is give peace a chance."

I'm asserting that by talking about being against the war, all we are saying is not simply "give peace a chance."

Let me draw this out. On the Canadian national news, two days after the attacks on New York City and Washington, there was a report about protestors on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, singing, "All we are saying is give peace a chance," speaking out for peace, which I suppose we all instinctively feel is a positive thing. And then, on the same report, you have John Manley, Canada's Foreign Minister, coming out and saying, essentially, that we live in a tough world, and sometimes you have to fight for what you believe.

Interestingly enough, John Manley is right, and those "peace protesters" are wrong. John Manley isn't right about what he is doing — he is complicit in the West's crimes against humanity. The "peace protesters" are right about that.

However, I think we need to acknowledge that there is a struggle, a fight, against oppression. That struggle has been ongoing, prior to September 11. It's been ongoing for over 500 years, if not longer. It's a fight that has been led by movements in the South — movements of the poor, of women, of indigenous people. Their struggle is inextricably linked to ultimate peace.

The status quo of September 10 was not peace, and in any case, there's no going back there.

The anti-war sentiment is often portrayed as a contrast between hawks who are for war, and doves who are anti-war. That kind of contrast, which arises from simple calls for "giving peace a chance," is a strategic dead end.

Let me be clear, when it comes to fighting poverty, I'm a hawk. When it comes to confronting oppression and exploitation, I'm a hawk. When it comes to expressing real solidarity with worldwide struggles for self-determination and autonomy, I'm a hawk.

I talked earlier about facing realities that are now more amplified than ever. Those realities include the attack on civil liberties, which is really about the criminalization of dissent, as well as a chill effect that goes beyond what is actually written in laws.

Those realities also include the crisis of asylum seekers, which predates the new war and comprises literally millions of people worldwide. Their plight is worsened by the attacks on the rights of immigrants and refugees. A directly related reality to the attacks on immigrants and refugees worldwide is racism. And I assert that racism is much much more than some people with pointy hats and hoods, or about people urging everyone to “tolerate” other cultures.

Unfortunately, I don’t have the time on this panel, and especially writing this up at five in the morning now, to go into these areas as much as I want to right now. Instead, I want to address one more topic.

Related inextricably to racism is that much-avoided word called imperialism. We’ve celebrated the move by elements of the anti-globalization movement to a clear anti-capitalist position. Well, a similar move to anti-imperialism is demanded by the current crisis.

Let me start with a very simple quote from a colonial writer, Joseph Conrad, who wrote the following in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, using the voice of Marlowe, to talk about imperialism. He wrote:

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion, or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”

But of course we need to look into it, we need to look into it a lot. We need to talk about imperialism, not out of some misplaced notion of ideological purity, or because it sounds good, but because its important and strategic toward confronting this war. As countless writers — anarchist and non-anarchist — have observed, the nature of opposition determines in large degrees the nature of oppression.

To quote Nicaraguan activist Antonio Bendana on the importance of clear thinking about imperialism:

“We can’t collude with oppression by adopting their conceptualizations, and abandoning those deeply held by people throughout history. The naming of the oppressor, and the phenomenon of oppression has been critical for mobilizing the forces of change. If we cannot properly name the problem, we will be hardly in a position to deal with it. The first step to stopping the violence is recognizing the existence of an insidious structure that deepens and reproduces social, economic and gender inequalities, along with environmental degradation.”

I’m not going to pretend in the few minutes I have left to give a comprehensive lesson on American imperialism, which would be very presumptuous of me. But there are a few things I want to say on the topic.

Now I’m an anarchist, and I’m not too fond of states, whether it’s Canada or Quebec, India or Pakistan. But I’m also someone with family origins in South Asia, and you don’t have to be a nationalist to be profoundly offended by the fact that more than fifty years after Indians and Pakistanis kicked out the British from their lands, now American troops are using that soil in order to bomb and attack Afghanistan.

What is even more offensive and infuriating is that the progressive forces in those countries that are secular and pro-feminist (that also happen to talk a lot about self-determination and a nation’s ability to control its own resources) are exactly the same people who are opposed, if not outright massacred, as a result of the prerogatives of American foreign policy.

By talking about American crimes and American-sponsored terror, in Chile or Nicaragua or Iran or Indonesia, I’m not excusing the attacks on September 11, 2001. Rather, I’m trying to

expose the astounding hypocrisy for the United States to speak of a “war on terrorism” when their own state terror, direct and indirect, is so overwhelming.

Colin Powell, after the bombs began dropping on Kandahar and Kabul, spoke out against so-called rogue states and warned: “You cannot separate your activities from the activities of the perpetrators.” By that logic — considering U.S. sponsorship of death squads, massacres and torture in Latin America — we’d we bombing Fort Benning, Georgia or the Southern Command in Miami.

George Bush, in his speech to a joint session of Congress — where we’re supposed to believe he transformed himself from a moron to a statesman (sort of like Osama bin Laden’s transformation from 1980s freedom fighter to twenty-first century terrorist mastermind) — stated, “Any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” I guess Bush is having feelings of extreme self-loathing and paranoia.

Again, I don’t say all this because it’s ideologically pure or provocative, but because it’s a message that can and does have resonance, and goes to the heart of the system of domination that imperialism is. It is a strategic response to war, and a message that surprisingly, is not too difficult to present to so-called “average folks,” the evidence is just so overwhelming.

I’ve talked about hawks and doves; well let me conclude by talking about chickens. I’ve been urging clear thinking as a response to the current crisis. Well, one example of sloppy thinking by some sectors of the left is the assertion that the attacks of September 11 are about “the chickens coming home to roost.” I don’t think that’s true.

More accurately, what happened on September 11 was what even the Central Intelligence Agency terms as blowback. When I think of the chickens coming home to roost, I’m reminded of Malcolm X; not an anarchist, but someone with whom we have many affinities. When Malcolm X spoke of the chickens coming home to roost, I presume to think that he meant a rising up of poor people, blacks, the indigenous, women, all oppressed against their oppressors, motivated by radically progressive values of solidarity, genuine democracy, equality and mutual aid.

An indiscriminate attack on a civilian building, in the name of religious fundamentalism no less (if we accept bin Laden’s gang did it), is not about the chickens coming home to roost at all. But the point I’m trying to make is that the chickens should come to roost.

The question was, “What the fuck should we do?”

I responded earlier, “How the fuck should I know,” but I was being disingenuous. There’s no mystery here. And I’m not being terribly original when I say that we need to identify and act in solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed and not be afraid of that identification.

Anarchist politics is motivated, I think, by the idea that there is no trade-off between a radical politics and effectiveness, between militancy and creativity. The stakes are higher now, and that kind of politics is needed more than ever.

What the fuck should we do? The answer was the same before September 11 as it is after September 11: Let’s bring those fucking chickens home to roost.

Thanks for listening.

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Jaggi Singh was scheduled to speak at the New England Anarchist Book Fair in Amherst, Massachusetts, on Saturday, November 3. When he was refused entry into the U.S., Singh wrote this piece, which was read to an audience of about 450 people. Singh was also scheduled to participate on a panel entitled "Current Crises on the Left: What the fuck do we do now!" His written speech plays off the original profanity.

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