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Nihilism is Not Nothing

No Wing

3rd November 2019

Ask nearly anyone, and they will tell you that nihilism is a belief in nothing. Popularized by the movie, the Big Lebowski, and perpetuated by lazy academics and philosophers, this misunderstanding of nihilism has led to a sort of demonization in anarchist circles. Primitivist John Zerzan frequently laments about nihilism, saying things like “...you start having people that are so nihilistic they don’t even care about life anymore.” To Zerzan, nihilism is simply not caring about life.

Even someone opposed to primitivism, transhumanist William Gillis states ““Can a nihilist be an anarchist?” No. Absolutely not. Nihilism is the philosophy of our thoroughly sociopathic society. Everything we fight.” If primitivists and transhumanists can both hate nihilism together so actively, perhaps that shows they have more in common than one might expect. Perhaps nihilism is a convenient boogeyman for anarchists so entrenched in their own ideologies of primitivism/transhumanism/etc., that those ideologies have started to supersede anarchism?

Is nihilism merely “not caring about life?” Absolutely not! The first nihilists were called so because nothing “that then existed found favor in their eyes”. This does not mean that these

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people believed in nothing, or did not care about life. Quite the opposite! To those who would form the foundations of nihilism, life was important enough to reject those things which would attempt to fetter life. The first nihilists looked around, saw nothing that they approved of, and then set out to destroy those things, while creating structures and circumstance that did please them. Nihilism stems from people wanting to realize their desires through action. If nihilism was simply people not caring, as Zerzan claims, then nihilism could not make the claim of having killed a czar, and nearly toppling an empire. History does not support Mr. Zerzan's claims.

Can one be an anarchist and a nihilist, as Mr. Gillis claims is impossible? Of course! In fact, from Renzo Novatore, to CCF, to the FAI, anarchists have been nihilists for over a century, and almost as long as the phrase "anarchism" has been used in politics. Mr. Gillis is either making grandiose claims, while being ignorant of history, or he is claiming that people and groups who have done far more in terms of creating anarchy than himself are not anarchist, and even the enemies of anarchism! Again, reality flies in the face of those who would make false claims about nihilism.

Mr. Gillis claims that nihilism "is the philosophy of our thoroughly sociopathic society". If only that were the case! If only our society was rooted in the rejection of coercive social norms, and attack on oppressive structures! That is what nihilists do...I am not quite sure how that makes them the enemies of anarchism.

"Negation of every society, of every cult, of every rule and of every religion. But I don't yearn for Nirvana, any more than I long for Schopenhauer's desperate and powerless pessimism, which is a worse thing than the violent renunciation of life itself. Mine is an enthusiastic and dionysian pessimism, like a flame that sets my vital exuberance ablaze, that mocks at any theoretical, scientific or moral prison." — Renzo Novatore

Renzo Novatore, an Italian nihilist anarchist from the early 1900s, specifically combats this idea of nihilism as some exacerbated hopelessness, and rejects nihilism as a “powerless pessimism”. Novatore understands that rulers can come in many forms, “theoretical, scientific, and moral” even. As anarchists, should we not be vigilant towards all concepts as potential rulers? Should we not attempt to tangibly oppose that which coerces us? Should we not attempt to create circumstances that better suit our desires? For Mr. Gillis, these acts would be far too nihilist, which leaves him holding an anarchism which would seem quite ineffective. I would argue that nihilism is a compliment, if not inherent, to anarchism.

Far from a belief in nothing, nihilism challenges us to act. It encourages us to create the world we want to see, and to do it right now. As the early nihilists took from Bakunin, “The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!” Nihilism is not some hopeless end, it is a bright beginning!

“(Nihilism) stands like an extreme that cannot be gotten beyond, and yet it is the only true path of going beyond; it is the principle of a new beginning.” — Maurice Blanchot

So, why is there this concerted effort against the concept of nihilism from many different corners of anarchism? Why are some people so bent on opposing what is definitionally, and historically, something that has been very much ingrained in anarchism? I would argue that it is exactly because of the way that these figures have positioned themselves among anarchism. The unwillingness of nihilism to accept dogma stands opposed to the very dogmatic stances that anarchists like Gillis and Zerzan have taken. Having painted themselves into corners as transhumanist or primitivist, people like this likely feel threatened by a nihilism that would reject transhumanism or primitivism as static ideologies. After all, nihilism calls for a fluidity of ideas that moves along with the fluidity of desires, and has no interest in “theoretical prisons” that claim a certain way to anarchy. Gillis and Zerzan have built themselves up on

very specific sets of ideas, and they understand that nihilism challenges these ideas that they sit atop....Either that, or they really are just uneducated and ignorant as to the true origins of nihilism.

“Any society that you build will have its limits. And outside the limits of any society, unruly and heroic tramps will wander with their wild and virgin thought — those who cannot live without planning ever new and dreadful outbursts of rebellion! I shall be among them!” — Renzo Novatore

Nihilism stands against the prescriptivism and dogma of pre-fabricated ideologies. It encourages action, and moves people to both negate which oppresses them, while creating their desires. Far from being a passive rejection of life, nihilism stands tall as an active celebration of life, of our ability to create and destroy. Nihilism understands the need for a constant vigilance against the calcification which occurs in all ideologies and all societies. Without that vigilance, even the most ardent anarchist stands vulnerable to the very rulership they claim to fight.

“Defeated in the mud or victorious in the sun, I sing life and I love it! “ — Renzo Novatore