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Socialism with an Anarchist Squint

**Authoritarian creep, libertarian socialism, &
democratic planning**

Strange Matters

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Authoritarian creep, libertarian socialism, & democratic
planning
2022

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give way to the myriad organs of freely associated labor and peoples, where the divisions between town and country or between humanity and nature are reconciled, and where the enormous resources of industrial society are at last marshaled to meet the basic needs of all as a human right — a socialism truly worthy of the name. The impasse we've described, this enormous challenge our movement must rise to, is also a golden opportunity to prove by actions, not words, the ideal in which we believe. This could be the moment we take libertarian socialism to the next step in its long chain of historical development, and actually begin to do what we've merely talked about for too long: build a fundamentally new economy along democratic lines, plan it so it can grow to new heights, and challenge the rule of the capitalist class by making them obsolete to the world's democratic destiny.

Which world we are walking towards is at least in part our decision. Libertarian socialists must be willing to take the first step. But ultimately it's up to the working classes, as it's always been, to discover that they do not need masters, that they can self-organize to better results, that already they have the power to run society because on a fundamental level it's they who have built it. Which is to say it's up to us — not just this magazine, but all of us together. And — should you, wherever you find yourself, choose to join us in our efforts — it's up to you.~

Socialism isn't when the government does things or owns things. It's not a form of tyranny that tries to force everyone at gunpoint to become identical worker drones and follow the commands of some bureaucrat's central plan. It's not even the tepid, watered-down welfarist reforms your city councilperson with a rose emoji next to their name is trying and failing to pass, bless their heart, though certainly they're an improvement upon the former. Rather, socialism was and remains a vision of a world where ordinary working people are in charge of the production and investment decisions that affect them — in their workplaces, neighborhoods, cities, and beyond — and manage the economy democratically to meet everyone's needs. While some socialist movements have fallen into the traps we mention above, there has always been another socialism that's stayed true to the core vision of a better world. It has built institutions, changed cultures, fought alongside the most oppressed people before anybody else, led revolutions, been defeated or stabbed in the back, gone into periods of dormancy, occasionally recovered its strength, and bit by bit moved the world in a more humane direction. This other socialism has no consistent name, only many labels, and often the labels come eventually to mean something else. Sometimes, it's gone by the name of anarchism.

But today, anarchism is in crisis. We don't mean that in a cute way. It isn't in reference to that dose of chaotic energy which liberation always requires. It's not about anarchy thriving due to the crisis of the system. It can't be addressed with some cliché about growing pains — “the movement's changing, but that's fine because movements always change!” What we mean is very simple: the anti-authoritarian left wing of the socialist movement is at a fork in the road. So depending on what we do, or fail to do, in the next few years, we'll either find our footing and make a road to the future, or we'll march contentedly right off a cliff.

Neo-Anarchism at the Turn of the Century

Roughly, the arc of our recent history is as follows.

The collapse of most of the Leninist states at the end of the last century, and the full transition of China into a state capitalist regime by the start of this one, was a shattering blow to Marxism of both the social-democratic and communist varieties. The result was a brutally counterrevolutionary era, where the capitalists of the industrialized Global North, powered by the enormous military might of the United States, universally enforced neoliberal economic structures across the globe. The old USSR was liquidated, its assets pawned off in a fire-sale to the financiers, mobsters, and warlords who now head the nationalist dictatorships in power across most of Eastern Europe. Countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia were reduced to debt-peonage. Multinational corporations established sweatshops and conflict mines in poor countries to produce, under hellish conditions, the cheap commodities that fueled the prosperity of the rich countries. The states of the world converged on a shared menu of oppressive methods (centralized mass media, militarized police, mass-surveillance systems), often purchasing these from the leading military powers. And even the rich countries saw their social-democratic welfare states, that concession to the classical workers' movement which alone had guaranteed a minimally decent standard of living to the working classes, systematically dismantled.¹

¹ For the grisly fate of the USSR, the gangster capitalist 90s, and the rise of Putin, see Ruslan Dzarasov's *The Conundrum of Russian Capitalism: The Post-Soviet Economy in the World System* (2014), Masha Gessen's *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2012), and especially Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2016). For general histories of the neoliberal order, see David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), *No Logo* (1999) and *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) by Naomi Klein, Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (2013), Quinn Slobo-

There's much at stake in our new era: we have a lot to lose. But though this global transition from unfettered capitalism to a new age of statist planning — much like the switch to neoliberalism following the decline of the Leninist countries — will close many political doors, it will also open new ones. Yes, there are risks for our libertarian socialist movements; but for those who truly believe radical democracy is possible, not as some distant aspiration but in the way one believes in brute facts, the present moment is also an enormous opportunity.

The time we are living through right now could be the moment that libertarian and indeed democratic socialism more generally give way to various forms of authoritarian cult — Leninist and fascist cults of personality around the genius of great leaders and the awe-inspiring power of the absolute state, cargo cults which promise salvation while depriving people of the very democratic tools by which they could save themselves. If this happens, it will be because (in their fear, in their ignorance) ordinary people retreat from the aspiration of radical democracy into the false utopia of state despotism as their only conceivable model for how to tackle big problems. In doing so, they would empower the ruling classes to do what they have always done and always will do: pillage what the rest of us have labored so hard to create, until where once there was a garden there remains nothing but a wasteland.

But this age could also produce a very different world. From Rojava to Chiapas, from Jackson to Cherán, libertarian socialist movements are placing power directly in the hands of the working classes and building up institutions for the democratic self-management of society on a permanent basis. Theory has not caught up to practice; we are missing many of the tools we'll need to get the job done right. Yet millions across the world remain inspired by the dream of a society where ordinary working people govern production and investment, where those affected by decisions are the ones who make them, where the nation-state and the corporation

best; and as a result our practical debates on questions of great urgency to the movement — whether and how to revolt, how to build dual power, international disputes, questions of imperialism and decolonization, economic reconstruction, the green transition — go round and round in unhelpful theological circles, all while our enemies outmaneuver and prepare to crush us. Most importantly of all, we seem to lack spaces in which to work out these questions, learning not only from one another’s experiences of life, work, and direct action but also from the best of contemporary science in order to forge these tools which we lack. A change of emphasis and a new urgency are required. Paradoxical as it seems, we must both dream bigger and get much more practical at one and the same time.

Thus, this editorial is the first in a series of essays that will be laying the groundwork for what we hope can be a broader reconfiguration of libertarian socialist energies. We want both to recover the suppressed history of libertarian socialist movements — their practical as well as philosophical or artistic achievements — while also challenging the movement to confront and ultimately address its blind spots, contradictions, and open problems. And we won’t be stopping there either. We want our magazine to become an important hub for ongoing research into practical and theoretical questions of the greatest urgency for libertarian socialism, platforming the voices that haven’t been heard and calling attention to the most promising (and usually little-known) new directions. We want to host the most urgent debates on current issues, make the different paths before us as clear as possible, hear from those with different perspectives borne of applied experience rather than armchair speculation, and above all to do these things in a spirit of comradeship and solidarity across borders, languages, identities, and philosophies. Only in this way, we feel, can the movement truly advance to where it needs to be. Even if we fail, success will only come from others picking up the torch and bearing it to its destination.

Though for a long time this fact was masked in the statistics by China’s meteoric rise as a result of its successful economic planning,² the truth is that neoliberalism sabotaged the interna-

dian’s *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018), and Amy C. Offner’s *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (2019). For the international rise of militarized police, surveillance states, and the prison-industrial complex see the UC Berkeley Center for Research on Criminal Justice’s *The Iron Fist and the Velvet Glove* (1975); Angela Davis’s *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016); Aziz Choudry et al’s *Activists and the Surveillance State: Learning From Repression* (2019); Edward Snowden’s *Permanent Record* (2019); Laura Poitras’s documentary *Citizenfour* (2014); Wilfred Chan, “Trump’s executive order confirms US State Department has trained the Hong Kong police” in *Lausan* (15 July 2020); and Sabrina Karim, “Militarized Policing Is a Global Problem With U.S. Roots” in *World Politics Review* (16 November 2021). For Anglophone readers, the best record of the day-to-day depredations of this particularly brutal period of capitalist history are probably the back issues of the left-wing little magazines — *n+1*, *Dissent*, *The Baffler*, *The New Inquiry*, *Jacobin*, *Current Affairs*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Point*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Logic*, *Lux*, *Lausan*, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, *The Caravan*, *New Left Review*, *New Socialist*, *Red Pepper*, *ROAR*, *Strike!*, *Tribune* — from about 2008 to present, as well as those of important predecessors like *Adbusters* and *Lingua Franca* and left-liberal radical sympathizers like *The Nation* and *The London Review of Books*.

² While only dogmatic Leninists would insist on the desirability of its authoritarian system, China’s exact status within the global capitalist system is ambiguous. On the one hand, it unquestionably adopted hyper-capitalistic elements during the Dengist period, colluding thoroughly with the capitalist great powers and becoming the factory of the world at the cost of a sweatshop economy run increasingly by Party-affiliated billionaires exploiting a population of brutally suppressed migrant labor; on the other hand, there is growing consensus its economic growth in recent decades has been in great measure because of the extent to which the commanding heights of the economy remained under party-state control, allowing for a regime of indicative planning similar to midcentury developmentalism rather than the failed Washington Consensus policies adopted nearly everywhere else. Complicating things further, there seems to be some indication that since the rise of Xi Jinping the powerful capitalists of the Dengist period have lost some ground through the recent “anti-corruption” purges, and power has been re-centralized decisively not only in the hands of the Politburo’s Standing Committee but one man. As you might expect, this has all led to messy

tional industrial economy. It led to stagnating growth in most developing countries, the collapse of living standards in many rich ones, and an explosion of inequality across the world.³ A dark era of false prosperity buttressed by lies and enforced at the barrel of a gun, this global consensus from the turn of the century laid the groundwork for the tangle of catastrophes we in our time have been forced to face: the structural malaise of most economies since the 2008 crash, the threat of new inter-imperial rivalries and geopolitical conflicts, and above all the ecological crisis which threatens to destroy the material foundation of all our societies.

But if that era closed many doors, it also opened up new ones. For the anti-authoritarian Left, it presented enormous opportunities. The Zapatista Rebellion of 1994 in Mexico inaugurated a new era of socialist struggles around the world that explicitly defined themselves in opposition not only to capi-

debates — partly theological, partly of substance — about the nature of the current Chinese system. For a view of China as decidedly state-capitalist, see “Why China is Capitalist” (24 September 2020) by Eli Friedman in *Lausan*; for the political economy of how China avoided giving up its planning capacity when it partly neoliberalized, see Isabella Weber’s *How China Avoided Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (2021); for translations into English of recent debates (and, after Xi, non-debates) between the various factions of the Chinese intelligentsia, see the blog *Reading the China Dream*.

³ The economic failure of neoliberalism may come as a surprise to those weaned on stories of declining global poverty. Anyone who’s looked closer knows the real picture is quite different. The IMF itself admitted as early as 1999 (and has consistently since) that its structural adjustment programs increased poverty and didn’t produce growth — see e.g. “The IMF’s Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF): Is It Working?”, International Monetary Fund (September 1999). See also Max Roser, “As the World’s Poorest Economies Are Stagnating Half a Billion Are Expected to Be in Extreme Poverty in 2030,” *Our World in Data* (2019); OECD, *Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class*, OECD Publishing (2019); and Lucas Chancel & Thomas Piketty, “Global Income Inequality, 1820–2020: The Persistence and Mutation of Extreme Inequality,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* (22 October 2021).

theory that life *can* be far more completely democratic than is possible under any of the currently hegemonic political and economic systems. Whether it’s the ever-growing pile of evidence from anarchist-inflected anthropology about the frequency of egalitarian and direct-democratic societies throughout human history (not only among hunter-gatherers but in large-scale polities like Athens or the Haudenosaunee Confederation or even many of humankind’s earliest urban spaces); or the experience of success in worker control on the firm level, in the global cooperative movement and radical factory occupations; or the similar successful experiments with democratized investment via schemes like participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and other cities; or the powerful example of large-scale syndicalist union organizing in twentieth-century groups like France’s CGT, Spain’s CNT-FAI, Argentina’s FORA, and the US’s IWW; or the often inspiring lessons to be learned from large-scale historical transformations led by libertarian socialists in conjunctures like the Mexican, Ukrainian, Spanish, and Hungarian Revolutions; or the ongoing revolutionary movements occurring even as you read this in places like the Zapatista-controlled territories of Mexico or the Self-Administration in Rojava, where millions of people are engaged in the process of creating libertarian socialist institutions; all these serve as confirmation for anyone willing to look at the evidence that other, better worlds remain possible.

Unfortunately, however, we do not think that a retread of what libertarian socialists have already accomplished will suffice to help us meet the true challenges of this new century of ours. Indeed, what we *lack* is very nearly as important as what we have. We have no theory of economic planning; we have no military theory; we have only the rudiments of a science of self-management and organization; our theories of the state are fragmentary and confused; our understanding of recent advances in the natural and social sciences is tenuous at

We're a magazine with many missions. But one of them is to respond to this tricky conjuncture we find ourselves in with something more than vague slogans and moral admonitions.

Libertarian socialism — in both its anarchist and Marxist forms — has already demonstrated in practice as well as in

planning or workplace management, cybernetics has radically democratic implications — ideas which were highly influential in the promising CYBERSYN planning system developed by Salvador Allende's democratic socialist government in Chile, tragically cut short by the coup. See John D. McEwan, "Anarchism and the Cybernetics of Self-Organizing Systems" in *Anarchy* 31 (September 1963); Stafford Beer, *Designing Freedom* (1973) and *Platform for Change* (1975); and Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile* (2011). Finally, and shockingly, the more libertarian socialist, workplace-based theories above prefigured by decades advances in **supply chain management and industrial engineering** that would not spread in the capitalist world until the late 1960s, particularly **lean manufacturing** and the **Toyota Production System (TPS)**. These new techniques, which radically increased output and product quality, consisted of autonomous work teams which set their own goals, of managers being forced to consult their subordinates and listen to their feedback, of workers being convinced to believe in and care about the company mission, and of allowing any worker to stop production and recommend improvements to the work process to produce small continual improvements (*kaizen*). Companies that even partially adopted such methods beat out midcentury Fordist giants with their top-down command-and-control systems, spreading TPS style practices across the world; and while their implementation is necessarily partial and limited (or worse, perverted into a terrible degenerated form) when capitalists and managers still exist, their logical conclusion is essentially anarcho-syndicalist. See Shigeo Shingo, *A Study of the Toyota Production System* (1989); and James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, & Daniel Rose, *The Machine That Changed the World* (1990). All these frameworks — developed by individuals and groups from across the political spectrum, though with a heavy presence of democratic and libertarian socialists — have converged upon a handful of common themes that appear to be the ontological core of democratic economic planning: the primacy of information flows, the power of decentralized and autonomous work teams, the importance of all relevant stakeholders participating in decisions that affect them, and above all the interdependent nature of all production from the individual workplace to the global economy.

talism but the state.⁴ These self-organized into what is often called the global justice movement or anti-globalization movement. The latter is something of a misnomer: in fact, what was at issue was the demand for an *alternative* form of globalization by a broad coalition against the neoliberal order that coordinated across countries to organize large-scale direct actions and conferences. This movement was most active across Eurasia, North America, and Latin America, and it won a number of important victories: the stalling of most global trade deals after the 1999 Battle of Seattle, the popularization of the critique of neoliberalism by intellectuals such as Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky, and the resulting political opening which made IMF debt forgiveness on a massive scale possible, especially in Latin America. Even when the movement faded after 9/11, the international networks and tendencies it brought forth continued to flourish. In Argentina, the mid-00s economic crash produced widespread direct-democratic movements that expropriated shuttered factories and ran them as workers' democracies, along bottom-up principles they referred to as horizontalism. Eco-anarchists in international organizations like London Greenpeace and EarthFirst! were the earliest and most militant opponents of the capitalists leading us towards ecological disaster, long before climate change was a mainstream issue (indeed, they're largely responsible for its becoming one).⁵

⁴ A solid secondary source on the Zapatistas' revolution is Alma Guillermoprieto, "The Shadow War" in *The York Review of Books* (2 March 1995). But it's probably most thrilling and informative to read some translated texts from the Zapatistas themselves, such as the various *Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle* (especially the famous First, Fourth, and Sixth), their first-grade civics textbook *Autonomous Government* (2014), and the proceedings of their recent internationalist theoretical seminar *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra I* (2016).

⁵ Overviews of the global justice movement in all its various aspects are to be found in *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* (2019) edited by Carl Levy and Matthew S. Adams, as well as in two studies edited by Donatella Della Porta, *Transnational Protest & Global Activism: People, Passions, and*

When the Great Recession hit, things escalated. Starting in 2011 and proceeding for the next several years, first the Arab Spring and then the global Movements of the Squares would bring street actions and public occupations demanding radical democracy to every inhabited continent — and it was anarchistic elements within this post-global justice milieu who often played the key role in kicking things off in their respective countries. In the US, a large number of the rank and file in Black Lives Matter and NoDAPL who weren't newly radicalized came from organizing networks lingering from the global justice and Occupy movements — especially those involved in the most direct confrontations with the authorities.⁶ And since 2014, one of the greatest inspirations in global left-wing politics has been the social revolution in Rojava, where Kurdish radicals inspired by the American social ecologist Murray Bookchin and the guerrilla revolutionary Abdullah Ocalan have strived to create a multi-ethnic, ecological, and socialist society in the middle of the century's most brutal warzone, governed not by a state but a democratic

Power (2005) and *Global Justice Movement: Cross-national and Transnational Perspectives* (2007). By far the best history of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle is *The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle* (2009) by Rebecca & David Solnit. For the little-known story of the movement's surprising successes, see "The Shock of Victory" by David Graeber, *Rolling Thunder: an Anarchist Journal of Dangerous Living* No. 5 (2008): 13–21 and hosted on the Anarchist Library. For the Argentine factory occupations, see *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* (2006) edited by Marina Sitrin.

⁶ The Movements of the Squares that began in 2011 and their subsequent impact on social movements around the world can be traced in a number of texts, though no definitive history of it has yet been written. See for example the ROAR Collective, "The Global Square: an online platform for our movement" in *ROAR* (2011); the collectively authored Verso collection *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* (2011); Amador Fernández-Savater et al, "Life after the squares: reflections on the consequences of the Occupy movements," *Social Movement Studies* 16:1 (2017) 119–151; Astra Taylor's documentary *What Is Democracy?* (2018); and John Michael Colón, "The Dictatorship of the Present" in *The Point* No. 19 (Summer 2019).

era United States, see Otis L. Graham, Jr., *Toward a Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon* (1976); Charlie Whitham, *Post-War Business Planners in the United States, 1939–48* (2016); Mark R. Wilson, *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* (2016); and JW Mason, "The Economy During Wartime" in *Dissent* (Fall 2017). Related to this is **input-output modeling**, a comprehensive and ingenious manner of mapping out the entirety of a society's interlinked supply chains (what the Post-Keynesian economist Piero Sraffa called **the production of commodities by means of commodities**). Assuming you have good data, such models can help you make solid predictions about how changes in one industry's output could affect others; they are indispensable for creating realistic large-scale planning targets, and much else. See "The Economics of Wassily Leontief: Input-Output Analysis" (11 June 2013), a YouTube clip of a David Harvey lecture; Wassily Leontief, "National economic planning: methods and problems" in *Essays in Economics* Volume II (1977); and (for a highly technical introduction) Ronald E. Miller & Peter D. Blair, *Input-Output Analysis: Foundations and Extensions* (2009). Then there are the **economic planning practices of the classical anarchist, syndicalist, and guild socialist movements**, which despite their neglect by socialists and economists alike are remarkable in their foresight of later developments in democratic planning theory. They came late to classical anarchism, born not of previous theory but of the experience of the Great Depression and Spanish Revolution — but they had huge consequences. The common theme was the demonstrable manner in which direct worker control of industry, communistic distribution of some basic needs, and decentralized coordination along supply chains allowed for greater output, easier voluntary integration of different sectors of the working class (especially the peasantry), innovation due to leveraging the insight of rank-and-file workers for continual improvement, and ultimately more redistribution and thus higher living standards — all while avoiding famine and other large-scale planning disasters. See Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (2018) [1975]; Diego Abad de Santillán, *After the Revolution* (1937); Gaston Leval, "Libertarian Socialism: A Practical Outline" (1959); and GDH Cole, "Planned Economy and Workers' Control" in *Principles of Economic Planning* (1935). These insights echo developments from around 1950 on from **cybernetics and systems theory**, interdisciplinary methodologies which analyze processes (natural ones, industrial ones, etc) in terms of information flows and control systems. Cybernetics found, much to the surprise of many scientists in whose fields it proved influential, that due to the radical interdependency of component parts and the need for information to flow between them, the most resilient and efficient systems are far more decentralized than the top-down central planning beloved of both capitalist and state-socialist ideology. When applied to the field of economic

are comparatively anti-authoritarian and decentralized, to the extent they've been tried, show a lot of promise. The recovery of this history is crucial to the project of radical democracy. We must first remember and then further develop the methods of democratic planning which worked best in the last century, building tools which allow for the greatest possible participation of the working classes in the planning process while also preventing the famines, resource exhaustion, ecological disaster, and soul-crushing regimentation which were too often the result of authoritarian planning.²⁷

planner must contend with its insights. But conversely, the critics of classical Western instrumental reason, technologies of domination, and epistemic imperialism should remain open to the possibility that to accomplish the goals of radically democratic movements around the world we must learn how to plan in a better, freer, more truly intelligent (because democratic, decentralized, and decolonial) fashion, rather than dismissing the idea of economic planning out of hand as evil or impossible.

²⁷ The lost democratic traditions of economic planning are in some ways too diffuse to summarize briefly. It wasn't just one movement, but several that converged upon similar principles and methods; it wasn't just theories but also practices improvised to confront specific problems; and the historical sources are patchy and spread out across different disciplines. It will be a lifelong mission of the magazine to recover, popularize, and synthesize these frameworks. But by way of inadequate summary, we can tell you about the ones we've found so far. There is for instance the midcentury tradition of **indicative planning** (also called **industrial policy**, **dirigisme**, or **developmentalism**) in the rich industrialized countries during their social-democratic phase as well as the poor developing countries in their developmentalist phase. Though a state-driven system, it differs significantly from Leninist-style command economies in that the state planning agency only indirectly regulates the course of economic development through incentives that are heavier on the carrot than the stick, including subsidies, centralized procurement, favorable legal regulation, and RFP-style contracts for private firms conditional upon their meeting output and export targets. On a technical level such procedures are highly successful at industrializing countries without accidentally killing loads of people, and though they're hardly immune to critique (they've been used by dictatorships, their public-private partnerships can empower capitalists who cozy up to the planners) they are also perfectly compatible with democratic government, cooperativism, and welfarist redistribution. For indicative planning during the New Deal-

confederation of direct-democratic assemblies. These in turn have directly inspired similarly massive ambitions for radical democracy movements here in North America, most notably Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi and the larger Symbiosis Federation of which it's a part.⁷

As we approach our own moment, we can look back more coherently on this history and start giving it a name. The wide-ranging influences of these nevertheless closely related anti-authoritarian socialisms — not only from anarchism but also from autonomist and libertarian Marxism, social ecology, syndicalism, solidarity economics, indigenous rights movements, and elsewhere — have more and more led many to refer to them under the umbrella term of **libertarian socialism**.

Throughout this period, it's not an exaggeration to say that a broadly anarchistic politics of this sort (not yet called libertarian socialism) was hegemonic in the radical movements of most countries with an active Left. In retrospect, what's most distinctive is the peculiar way in which they exercised their influence. The most committed and organized elements of all the movements which emerged in opposition to neoliberal capitalism — the anti-nuclear movement,⁸ the

⁷ See Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, & Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (2016); and Kali Akuno & Ajamu Nangwaya, *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi* (2017).

⁸ We should note here that our editorial board is — like the wider socialist movement — quite divided on the issue of nuclear power. Among us, there are both promoters and critics of nuclear power, as well as a few agnostics and others with complex views. This is a topic of significant salience in light of the ecological crisis; unfortunately, it's far too big a subject to get into here, beyond saying we intend to debate and discuss this in subsequent issues. We note the anti-nuclear movement in our list due to its well-documented importance in the history of postwar anarchism (see for example LA Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Anarchism* [2017]), though one must be careful because this can sometimes elide the difference between the movements against nuclear weapons and

Second and Third Wave feminist movements, the environmental movement, indigenous rights movements, anti-war movements, anti-racist movements, the antiglobalization movement, the Movements of the Squares, etc — tended to adopt a similar set of tactics (assembly democracy, direct action, consensus-based decision-making, working groups) and strategies (leaderless resistance, large-scale nonviolent civil disobedience). But practice begets theory: no matter their initial beliefs, participants in such movements began to act like anarchists and so, more and more, to identify as such too. This remained the case even when the goal of the movement was action on a single issue, rather than an explicit challenge to the whole economic and political system. The movements cross-pollinated, shared ideas and participants and skills, compared notes, and networked instantaneously using the new rapid global telecommunications made possible by the rise of the Internet. In this way, year by year, libertarian socialist methods and ideas continued to spread.

There were different political glosses on this situation. State-socialist critics like head *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara treated it as a kind of hypocrisy. The “anarcho-liberals,” he once sneered in an essay for *Dissent*, use ultraleft methods in what are often little more than rearguard defenses of the welfare state, resulting in an incoherent politics with “the modest ambitions of the social liberals of the center Left, but the flair for the dramatic associated with the most militant anarchists of the far Left.”⁹

The so-called “anarcho-liberals” themselves had a different analysis. The single-issue struggles to ameliorate conditions

those against nuclear power more generally — different anarchists, at any rate, having joined one, both, or neither of these.

⁹ The irony of this statement — coming from the editor of a magazine whose entire brand marries the modest ambitions of the social liberals of the center Left with the revolutionary phrase-mongering and soft spot for Lenin associated with Trotskyism — is not lost on some of us.

to solve an optimization problem. Leninists are just as prone to this psychology as liberals; it’s the mentality at the heart of all technocracy. But it’s a form of derangement. It paints a false picture of the world and then mistakes the map for the territory; it misunderstands the central planner’s inevitable ignorance of the dynamic situation as insight into the true nature of things, thus transforming their greatest strength (the ability to coordinate production across sectors) into their greatest weakness (a tendency to try to force the impossible); it turns the working classes into passive recipients of commands or charity, whereas what they need to become for planning to work is active participants in the process of decision-making; and it creates a single point of failure in the central committee of the planning agency, whereas any systems theorist would tell you that what you want is a dense network of agents with lots of redundancy.

As it turns out, the record of authoritarian planning is largely dismal (all the more dismal the more authoritarian the planning process).²⁶ By contrast planning schemes that

²⁶ The most famous critiques in Western academia of overly centralized, high modernist central planning — although they are sometimes interpreted, including alas by their authors, as critiques of economic planning more generally — are Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*(1961) and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*(1998). But these are just among the few officially canonized examples of a much broader tendency that arguably defined the lives and work of nearly all the most radical socialist and anarchist thinkers and revolutionaries of the late twentieth century (from the early Spanish and Latin American anarcho-naturalists to Adorno & Horkheimer to Lewis Mumford to Rachel Carson to Paul Goodman to Serge Mallet to the Situationists to the various New Lefts to E. F. Schumacher to Leopold Kohr to Ivan Illich to Jacques Ellul to Murray Bookchin to Fredy Perlman to Layla AbdelRahim to Vandana Shiva to indigenous-led movements like the Zapatistas or the water defenders across the Americas). It’s a critique that emerged from lived experience under the yoke of highly centralized and authoritarian industrial societies (whether capitalist or state-socialist) and their planning apparatuses; there is much to commend it; any would-be democratic economic

rest of the movement. These are the materialist underpinnings of the worries which Kuhn and Williams expressed in the theoretical realm. If in fact Gerbaudo is correct that the era we are on the cusp of entering is going to be one of neostatism, then our enemies are about to become a lot more powerful and a lot more violent. And what's more, the old critiques of neoliberalism aren't going to be enough anymore. Because what's going to be at issue isn't privatizations, deregulation, and corporate media consolidation by private capitalists but five-year plans, forced conscriptions, ethnic cleansings, and wars by one or another sort of state capitalist or new ruling class. And what will be required of us is far greater than a change of political talking points. These social changes reflect deep trends motivated by the nature of the twenty-first century's biggest problems. They are coming one way or the other. To be ready, we must change ourselves in turn.

There is an objective need for planning which is motivating the rise in statism; and that means that if libertarian socialists don't develop a non-state or at least non-authoritarian form of planning, we're going to be sitting on the sidelines while fascists and Leninists plan things their way, probably killing us all in the process.

No doubt there's an appeal to authoritarian planning, particularly when people are afraid, desperate, and unsure of what's to be done. At its heart is the idea that someone really smart and really strong — less Big Brother than Big Daddy, really — will swoop down from the heavens and take care of all the hard decisions for us, asking of us only that we lend our passive support as they save the world. And for those who imagine themselves as that savior, there's enormous satisfaction in the smug belief that you and you alone have the expertise, the vision, the conviction, and the physical courage to enact your will upon a passive world, using the enormous power of a well-coordinated industrial society as your chisel with which to carve a sculpture or as your inputs with which

for the working classes here and now were, through their methods, planting the seeds for something far more radical. “[C]ounting how many people involved in the movement actually call themselves ‘anarchists’, and in what contexts, is a bit beside the point,” wrote the anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber, addressing the mandarin Marxist professors of the *New Left Review*. “The very notion of direct action, with its rejection of a politics which appeals to governments to modify their behaviour, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative—all of this emerges directly from the libertarian tradition.” The prefigurative methods in question are familiar to anyone who's seen anarchists in action: direct-democratic assemblies for collective deliberation and decision-making, attempts to achieve consensus rather than a majority of 50%+1 forcing the rest to do as they command (or, more realistically, just walk away), modification of proposals on the fly to integrate critiques as improvements and gain buy-in, working groups which meet separately to work on specialized tasks and report back to the main body, and scaling up through federations made up of mandated and recallable delegates accountable to their home assemblies.¹⁰ Graeber's basic point is that these

¹⁰ One of us attempted a few years ago to give an overview of libertarian socialist organizing techniques in the following manner:

Imagine a room full of people where there's something that needs to get done by way of collective action. It hardly matters (and this is a crucial point) what kind of room it is—a classroom, a board room, the factory floor, a church, a committee, a working group—because there are always pretty much only two ways the room can be organized.

In one scenario, the room has got one person or a few people in the front giving orders while a huddled mass of followers passively listens and obeys. Decision-making is concentrated in the bosses up front; the rest of the group, if they give any feedback at all, only do so when asked, and generally, focus on doing what they're told. The expectation is that they must do so. Perhaps if they don't, they'll be punished. Or maybe the bosses have convinced them to accept a set

practices constitute alternative, radically democratic forms of governance; when single-issue campaigns are structured in such a manner, they don't just win their demand but also teach people *how* to self-govern; this self-governance itself is anarchism, and turns people functionally into anarchists (whether they identify as such or not); and when enough radically democratic movements in society mobilize enough people, the real goal comes into view:

A constant complaint about the globalization movement in the progressive press is that, while tactically brilliant, it lacks any central theme or coherent ideology. (This seems to be the left equivalent of the corporate media's claims that we are a bunch of dumb kids touting a bundle of completely unrelated causes—free Mumia, dump the debt, save the old-growth forests.) Another

of beliefs by which passive obedience is right and just, or there are no alternatives. Often, there's a combination of the two. Regardless, what results is a principle of command—some decide, the rest execute the decision, and power flows from top to bottom.

But that same room could be organized along different lines. In this scenario, the people in the room are arranged so they're facing each other in a circle. There's probably a procedure for deciding who can talk when, but there are no obvious distinctions in the rank or power of the participants. Anyone can voice their opinion, and everyone must listen. So different points of view are heard out; proposals are put forward; people express their concerns; problems are raised, solutions brainstormed; and eventually, after a process of deliberation, the group decides by one means or another what it's going to do. Then, having made their decision, the group puts it into action. Why? Not because someone told them to, not by some order they passively received, but because the action is justified in their minds by the simple fact that the people affected by the decision were the ones who made it. What results is a principle of mutuality: each person contributes insights, everyone decides, and no one can simply force the others to do what they say.

For more, see "What is Libertarian Socialism?" by John Michael Colón in Assembly (2019).

which the winner will determine what form of political economy will succeed it.

And in fact, the broad contours of that political economy are already taking shape. Since the coronavirus crisis, governments across the world — from Washington to Beijing, regardless of their conscious ideological orientation or the party in power or the political system within which they operate — have been embracing forms of economic planning and direct intervention into the economy that would have been unthinkable all through the neoliberal period. This change is coming about piecemeal, at radically different speeds in different places, and altogether too slow overall; but that it's coming, there can be no doubt. The rediscovery of indicative planning, *dirigisme*, developmentalism, industrial policy — whatever you want to call it — is a rupture of world-historical importance. It is a precondition for solving the ecological and economic crises, and indeed needs to be rapidly accelerated and deepened in order to meet this goal. But it also potentially deeply empowers the nation-state in a way our generation simply hasn't seen, even in the surveillance states of our lifetimes. The ruling class's control over the new planning process would not just help them consolidate their class rule into an even tighter dictatorship; it also risks magnifying the potency of nationalism in a country's politics, potentially driving forward ever more violent great power conflict between imperial rivals. The way in which the increasingly obvious necessity of planning in the 2020s is already beginning to empower the state has led the Marxist sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo to declare that neoliberalism is being replaced by a new dispensation, which he dubs *neostatism*.²⁵

Libertarian socialists have much reason to be nervous about this chain of events — an unease which we ourselves not only share but in fact want *urgently to encourage* in the

²⁵ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Great Recoil: Politics After Populism and Pandemic* (2021)

In other words, Malm fetishizes planning as an abstract concept, but Klein is interested in figuring out what sort of planning might actually work. And it's no coincidence that her questions lead her to democratic answers. Her inquiry is, by the standards of what we need, bare-bones and provisional — by her own admission! But even so, her journalistic instincts and conversations with actual activists and experts on the ground lead her more and more towards an understanding of the importance of decentralization and democracy to good planning. Malm, by contrast, insists on drawing his examples from experiments he refuses to acknowledge failed miserably at anything but building up heavy industry and military capacity.

Conclusion

The allure of Climate Leninism is, as we've said, just one symptom of a far more widespread authoritarian creep across the politics of the industrialized world in the face of the interlinked crises of economics, ecology, and imperialism which confront us in the twenty-first century. Neoliberalism is at this point totally discredited as a political and economic ideology among both the working classes and large parts of the intelligentsia. The institutions that neoliberals created in the period of their hegemony at the end of the twentieth century are in tatters — from the constitutions of the liberal democracies to the “multilateral” trade organizations of the Washington Consensus to the very notion of globalization itself — as, more often than not, fascist or other authoritarian governments sweep to power in any economy the capitalists' market fundamentalism has run into the ground.

At this point, global politics consists of a battle between the socialist left and the fascist right over the scraps of the old neoliberal order (and the varied, desperate attempts of centrists like Biden and Macron to preserve it), a war of position in

line of attack is that the movement is plagued by a generic opposition to all forms of structure or organization. It's distressing that, two years after Seattle, I should have to write this, but someone obviously should: in North America especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization *are* its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately, it aspires to be much more than that, because ultimately it aspires to reinvent daily life as a whole.

It was with this radical goal in mind — the use of direct action movements to create alternative spheres of self-governance within society that bit by bit pushed towards the reinvention of daily life in an anarchistic direction — that in another 2004 essay, Graeber and the Yugoslav anthropologist Andrej Grubacic called anarchism “the revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century.”¹¹

The Situation Today

Anarchist malaise and the democratic socialist turn

Those were the days of our ascent. But what about now?

¹¹ See David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review* 13 (January–February 2002); and David Graeber & Andrej Grubacic, “Anarchism, Or The Revolutionary Movement Of The Twenty-first Century” (2004) on the Anarchist Library.

A recent pair of essays in *Counterpunch* help set the tone. Writing about Graeber & Grubacic's essay in 2021, the Austrian autonomist Marxist Gabriel Kuhn (a self-described "undogmatic radical leftist with anarchist leanings") had a rather pessimistic answer to the question "are we really living in the anarchist century?" He historicizes Graeber & Grubacic as being part of the "movement-of-movements generation," whose naïve belief in the ability of direct action to bring about a democratic future is belied by the failure of anarchism at its ultimate goals ("anarchism's reformist legacy is strong, its revolutionary legacy is weak."). Drawing up the balance-sheet of the twenty-first century anarchist revival, Kuhn writes,

The question, of course, is whether these enduring activist principles have brought us closer to a better, or indeed an anarchist, society. Social movements throughout the world continue, and have recently intensified. There has been progress in many countries with regard to the rights of LGBTQ persons, racial and sexual oppression, and economic injustice. However, the overall picture is far from encouraging. Neoliberalism rules supreme; monopoly capitalism is tightening its grip; the gaps between the rich and the poor are increasing; surveillance has surpassed Orwellian levels; fascism is rearing its ugly head; and the world is at the brink of ecological collapse. Social movements demanding radical change are often carried by reactionaries rather than progressives. If the Left has made any progress, it is in the form of socialist populism, touting the possibility of a social welfare state revival. Anarchy? Hardly. (...) Are we really living in the anarchist century? I'm not sure. The impact that antiauthoritarian ideas have had on social movements has been far from

ences, just as the plans issued by the Communist Party of China's Central Committee are today.

The climate planning we need is of a different sort entirely. There is a clear and essential role for national plans and policies — to set overall emission targets that keep each country safely within its carbon budget, and to introduce policies like the feed-in tariffs employed in Germany, Ontario, and elsewhere, that make renewable energy affordable. Some programs, like national energy grids and effective rail services, must be planned, at least in part, at the national level. But if these transitions are to happen as quickly as required, then the best way to win widespread buy-in is for the actual implementation of a great many of the plans to be as decentralized as possible. Communities should be given new tools and powers to design the methods that work best for them — much as worker-run co-ops have the capacity to play a huge role in an industrial transformation. And what is true for energy and manufacturing can be true for many other sectors: transit systems accountable to their riders, water systems overseen by their users, neighborhoods planned democratically by their residents, and so on.²⁴

Malm, by contrast, seems at times to operate on little more than the idle notion that all we need is to pressure our governments to start issuing muscular, ruthless commands for climate change to beat a hasty retreat and suffer defeat at the hands of the almighty state.

²⁴ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014), pp. 115–117.

aspects of a green transition. Whereas Malm's examples are drawn rather ad hoc from the Russian Revolution, Klein's come from regions and countries that have attempted aspects of a green transition and run into specific challenges with NIMBY-ism, biophysical cost structures, political intransigence, and neoliberal market ideology. And based on those experiences, she proposes concrete solutions to specific problems — a virtue which is sorely lacking in the phrase-mongering of Climate Leninists. To name one example of many, just by way of illustration: Klein at one point tells the story of how local cooperative ownership of green energy concerns has been used to circumvent and co-opt localist obstructionism, so that (as a president of the World Wind Energy Association put it) "it won't be NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), it will be POOL (Please On Our Land)."

Klein is a journalist, not a theorist. She spends most of her book talking to people from the worlds of activism, government, reportage, and science, listening to what they have to say. On those occasions when she does generalize from these specific examples, however, a vision of the planning process emerges which is radically different from what the Climate Leninists are selling us:

This relationship between power decentralization and successful climate action points to how the planning required by this moment differs markedly from the more centralized versions of the past. There is a reason, after all, why it was so easy for the right to vilify state enterprises and national planning: many state-owned companies were bureaucratic, cumbersome, and unresponsive; the five-year plans cooked up under state socialist governments were top-down and remote, utterly disconnected from local needs and experi-

negative. It has made social movements more diverse and creative, facilitated the challenging of internal power structures, and highlighted the importance of self-empowerment. Yet, there are reasons why many political actors who embrace these elements do not embrace anarchism. The reasons can be cultural or ideological. I'm sure that plenty of academic arguments could be made for why the politics of these actors could still be called anarchist, but it's a rather pointless exercise. Analytical categorization might have its place, but it is politically irrelevant. The political strength of a term comes from its application. No appliers, no strength.

Grubacic's response to Kuhn was heartfelt, but also short and rather feeble. "Our essay suffered much misunderstanding"; anarchism is the common sense of social movements today; the conversion of the Kurdish movement to libertarian socialism was sincere and not an act. All well and good, but you can't help but smell a whiff of evasion. Graeber, for his part, could hardly answer — he'd died just a few months before.¹²

Now Kuhn is no state-socialist apologist; a veteran of antiglobalization struggles, he has contributed much to the Marxist wing of libertarian socialism in both theory and practice.¹³ For an activist of this caliber to be speaking so pessimistically bespeaks deeper troubles. And he's not alone. An anarchist called Kristian Williams from the Pacific Northwest recently published a pamphlet called *Whither Anarchism?*

¹² Gabriel Kuhn, "What Happened to the Anarchist Century?" in *Counterpunch* (15 February 2021); Andrej Grubacic, "The Anarchist Century: A Response to Gabriel Kuhn" in *Counterpunch* (15 February 2021).

¹³ Enough, in fact, that the US put him on a no-fly list! See Matthew Rothschild, "European Anarchist Has to Cancel Trip to the U.S." in *The Progressive* (19 February 2010).

that was something of a cult hit in movement circles. In it he speaks frankly about the current situation:

Anarchists [in the later twentieth century] stopped thinking of themselves as a social force potentially capable of organizing millions of people, destroying the existing power structure, and reconstituting society. The *language* of revolution remained, but the *idea* was largely lost. The anarchist vision shrank, from the One Big Union and the General Strike, to the affinity group and the poetry reading. At first simply adapting themselves to a political reality—to the experience of defeat, alienation, and marginality—anarchists started defining themselves by those same features. They became enamored with their outsider status, at the expense of their broad, popular aspirations. (...) Likewise, for a group so fixated on countering power and the state, it is surprising how rarely today's anarchists have bothered to put forward a theory about either one. It is as though we determined that they are bad, then decided to give the matter no further thought, as one might take a sip of milk, discover it sour, and simply spit it out. The inability or unwillingness to develop a theory of the state (or more modestly, an analysis of states), one that can take account of both the differences between governments and also the changes within them, has repeatedly steered the anarchist movement into blind alleys. In the thirties, the anarchists failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the New Deal; in the 1940s, the movement split over the question of whether democracy should be defended against fascism;

solve the ecological crisis.²³ This last point is of great significance: Tooze is not a normal economic writer or professor but is widely regarded as a kind of tastemaker in economic policy circles, someone who rubs shoulders with politicians and is feted by capitalist institutions. In the past, by writing about obscure dissident ideas within economics, he has helped to put them on the map. If nothing else this indicates that the ruling class is taking Malm seriously — and not only that, but his idea that only “draconian” methods (whatever that means!) can address the ecological crisis. To say the least, this bodes badly.

But isn't it strange that it's these arguments, these perspectives which are getting acclaim in the mainstream — especially when years ago a far more consistently democratic socialist writer, one loosely associated with the 90s neo-anarchist movement, so obviously called the question first? We're referring, of course, to Naomi Klein, whose 2014 book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* was a deeply researched polemical argument that the ecological crisis can only be addressed by economic planning on a scale that would likely require some form of eco-socialism. But the major difference is that Klein sees this eco-socialism as being necessarily democratic — not just for moral reasons, but because democracy is in some ways the only way we can get the job done right. And, to be frank, her book is simply much more credible on the nitty-gritty of what a green transition would actually look like (which makes it all the more strange that Malm is the one now getting all the attention for his somewhat slapdash scribbles on the subject).

Not only does Klein affirm the importance of planning over and over again, she focuses her attention on a number of specific indicative planning schemes that can facilitate particular

²³ See James Butler, “A Coal Mine for Every Wildfire” and Adam Tooze, “Ecological Leninism” in *London Review of Books* (43:22 18 November 2021).

Yet to critique these things is invariably to critique Leninism itself; when you've gone through the checklist, very little remains of the static dogma. Malm has made the Leninists a model for planning, yet the simple truth is that they weren't very good at it. The bluntest way to put it is that if we actually did implement so-called Climate Leninism, the eponymous Leninists in charge would fuck up, prevent anybody from saying so, then lie to cover their asses until everything dies. (And really, if we wanted that, why bother with revolution? We just as well could have stuck with capitalism, which in its present form is producing identical results!) Feedback mechanisms of the sort provided by democratic and pluralistic societies — whether it's scientists, engineers, citizens, and journalists with the freedom to report what they see, or decentralized control over productive processes by workers with local knowledge — are an aid and not an obstacle to large-scale coordination. The idea that centralization equals efficiency is a superstition that's been debunked over and over again. Dictatorship is the enemy of sound planning.

Despite all this, Malm's ideas about Climate Leninism have received widespread attention among not only radicals but the bourgeois intelligentsia. An illustrative example: Malm received what was in effect a symposium in the *London Review of Books* (probably the leading intellectual periodical in the UK) last November, with two long essays back-to-back on his recent political writings. One of them, by James Butler, focuses on Malm's advocacy of radical direct action and pipeline sabotage, asking wistfully and almost with approval, "Where are all the eco-terrorists?" The other, by Adam Tooze, focuses on Malm's arguments for eco-Leninism, analyzing them with great sympathy and little critique while largely agreeing with Malm's assessments that even the most progressive elements of the Western democracies have demonstrated no capacity to

and under neoliberalism, many anarchists have seen the necessity of fighting to defend and preserve welfare programs but lack any theoretical justification for doing so.¹⁴

Williams and Kuhn raise strikingly similar challenges to a strictly dogmatic or doctrinal vision of anarchism: the con-

¹⁴ Kristian Williams, *Whither Anarchism* (2018) pp. 23–24, 26–27. Of course, one can object rather strongly to this with the observation that it's anarchist social scientists more than anyone else who've helped reconfigure recent academic ideas about the nature and origins of the state. This is particularly true of the work of David Graeber, James Scott, and Camilla Power. These analyses demonstrate, among other things, that the state is not a single coherent body but many component parts, raising the question of whether anarchists oppose all or merely some of these; that large-scale planning doesn't necessarily require centralization, which may actually be a hindrance to it; and that the struggle to reorganize formal institutions is closely tied for practical reasons to wider struggles against hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, and militarism. Indeed, Williams himself seems to have precisely this literature in mind when he goes on to write:

I suspect that such a project would need to begin with the recognition that states comprise networks of institutions, and that these institutions have different, sometimes competing—and even conflicting—needs, functions, strategies, and agendas. I further suspect that, even according to anarchist principles, different parts of the state must be approached differently. I doubt that anyone, in real life, has precisely the same attitude toward the police department, the water bureau, the IRS, the EPA, state universities, and the public library; there are some parts of the government we wish to abolish, and some we might want to capture and democratize. Other conclusions, concerning the differences between liberal and totalitarian governments, or the need to defend specific programs under certain circumstances, likely follow. On the whole, our opposition to the state would probably need to become less total and more strategic—not so much a smashing as a dismantling, with specified pieces to be recycled or repurposed. (p. 27)

But his larger point may still stand that these individual insights have yet to be digested by either anarchist theorists or the anarchist movement — or extending his frame of analysis, by libertarian socialist theorists and movements — in such a manner as to reconfigure the overall self-conception and objectives of libertarian socialism itself. Even if we know our theory (which, let's face it, many of us don't), we may not have internalized what its implications are for our practice.

trast between anarchism's reformist wins and revolutionary rhetoric; the manner in which direct action is often used as an excuse *not* to build lasting institutions, rather than a tool for doing so; and an incoherent attitude towards the rise of the welfare state, or indeed an inchoate theory of the state in general.

These two pieces of writing aren't the origin of such critiques; they are symptoms of a broader disease within the movement, one which people have been hesitant to talk about until recently. All of us, on some level, have felt anxiety about precisely these questions. For above all, the actually existing anarchist movement suffers from a simple *lack of solutions* to any problems requiring large-scale organization in general and economic planning in particular — problems of precisely the sort (the economic, ecological, and geopolitical crises) we identified above as being the *most pressing* the world faces today.

Though it wasn't immediately clear as it was happening, from a post-2016 perspective, it's become apparent that anarchism has been punished for this failure. From the turn of the present century to the global Movements of the Squares in 2011, anarchists and their fellow-travelers had an undisputed hegemony in the most radical direct action movements across civil society in Eurasia, North America, and Latin America. Something like the process Graeber proposes was underway, whereby people in movements for particular issues would, in adopting anarchistic tactics, become something like anarchists themselves. Often such movements were led by marginalized groups such as indigenous people, queer people, and women that previous socialist movements had neglected.

But as the Great Recession and its aftermath plodded along across the 2010s, these movements began to falter. The ones that could be construed as having symbolic or representational goals were victims of their success, becoming integrated into the governance apparatus of the ruling classes via absorption

comparative study by the economic historian Robert C. Allen has shown that Lenin's less authoritarian New Economic Policy, which resembles developmentalist policies adopted by later industrializers in the developing world as well as the planning apparatus of postwar social-democratic countries, would have likely been more successful on roughly the same time scale.

Whatever his actual intent and whatever he says to the contrary, after reading Malm one is left with the overwhelming impression that the purpose of the whole exercise in this book has been to loosen our commitment to the notion that socialism must be democratic or it's nothing, to soften us up for the one-party state by using emergency conditions as an excuse. Yet the great lesson of all the Leninist societies (at times, by Malm's own admission!) is how a society can destroy itself by making an eternal virtue out of temporary necessity. And not only that, but how it's all too easy for those in charge to fundamentally misunderstand what's actually necessary and so lead everyone off a cliff. An honest socialist appraisal of why Soviet planning failed would at a minimum cite its fetish of centralization, its concentration of decision-making power in so few hands, its lack of information flows allowing for proper action, the inability to debate policy frankly due to a near total lack of serious political pluralism, the subsequent decoupling of theory from practice and ideas from facts, and the system's devastating overreliance on coercion as opposed to persuasion or compromise or positive incentives.²²

²² Readers interested in learning about the real, rather than imagined, flaws of Leninist political economy should consult historical sources that deal at length with the operational specificities of the Soviet planning apparatus and the way this intersected dysfunctionally with high politics within the party-state. Among the best of these sources are R.W. Davies, *The Development of the Soviet Budgetary System* (1958); Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography* (1973); Moshe Lewin, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* (1975); and (with a critical eye) Alec Nove, *Economic History of the USSR, 1917–1991* (1992).

management” in the workplace and top-down centralized control over the economy as a whole, where workers are deskilled and must follow orders from above even if they can’t be fulfilled, simply created bottlenecks as people struggled to cover their asses (imaginary steel being logged as having been shipped to the bolt factories which therefore only make the wrong kind of bolts which the construction crew finds useless for their megaproject, setting it back months or years). The one-party state and the need for conformity with the Party line once it was decided upon led to a winner-takes-all dynamic where party factions could never arrive at compromises and a deep inflexibility where the state was consistently unable to change failed policies or even acknowledge their failure. And the normalization of revolutionary terror as a legitimate institution meant that whoever controlled the secret police and bureaucracy could simply liquidate their enemies within the Party, restricting and centralizing decision-making power even further (hence exacerbating all the above) and leading eventually to the dictatorial rule of one man and his yes-men cronies. It’s surprising that economies so dysfunctional were able to generate heavy industry, aerospace, and military capacities at all — but that’s just about all they were good at. They were net food importers where once they’d been net food exporters; they had only the most rudimentary products (often in shortages) for consumers; they constantly lagged behind other industrial countries technologically even after decades of development and struggled to update their plants and processes; their infrastructure was subpar, quickly becoming dilapidated after a few decades; they were mega-polluters with devastating consequences for the regional ecology; many of their workers didn’t want to live there if they were allowed to leave (which is why they usually weren’t); and nobody abroad wanted their low-quality manufacturing exports if they had access to alternatives. Even judged on purely Soviet terms, War Communism is a terrible inspiration: a rigorous

into the nonprofit-industrial complex or repackaged into the marketing of capitalist firms while leaving fundamental power structures intact.¹⁵ Those which unambiguously demanded system change were, one by one, largely crushed through direct and brutal methods of mass surveillance and counterinsurgency — as testified by the grisly fates of the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and indigenous pipeline struggles in North America.

This largely accounts for why the next wave of socialist upsurge took a decidedly different direction. By 2016 global capitalist society was reaping what it had sowed: fifty years of economic immiseration under neoliberalism and centuries of white supremacist ideology to justify colonialism and hierarchy culminated in a global revival of nationalist and neofascist political movements thought long dead, embodied most visibly by the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Spurred on by the urgency of this crisis, and realizing how capitalism had laid the groundwork for the fascist upsurge, large numbers of people who had up to then been liberal or apolitical became interested in socialism. But as this new influx began to integrate itself into preexisting movement spaces, it became clear that only a minority of the new generation of socialists were anarcho-socialists of

¹⁵ As the work of Dylan Rodríguez, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and others has shown, nonprofits are often extremely top-down operations funded by wealthy capitalists as a means of accomplishing their goals (including tax avoidance) and consolidating their political power. Radical activists sucked into nonprofit work are often forced to put aside substantial challenges to the capitalist system in favor of symbolic and media victories that can be spun to rich donors as justifying further funding. Nonprofits are also a favorite tool of the Democratic Party, especially its political machines on the municipal and state level, to manufacture consent for neoliberal policies, recuperate those who would dissent by channeling them into less threatening projects, and deliver votes and canvassers to the machine’s desired politicians come election time in exchange for kickbacks. See *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (2007) by the INCITE! collective.

the sort that had been hegemonic in the prior period.¹⁶ Most were inspired by the social-democratic approach of the Latin American Pink Tide, where electoral socialist movements had won parliamentary majorities and used these to bolster existing democratic institutions, expand democracy in exciting new ways through constitutional reforms, and implement redistributive economic policies which (so the theory goes) would move their respective countries towards socialism. The democratic socialists of the 2010s often hoped to replicate such successes in the Global North; in Anglophone countries, a lot of hope and canvassing hours were placed behind the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn.¹⁷ And as

¹⁶ And even the anarchists themselves changed. Arguably, the movement of many anti-authoritarian socialists away from the label of “anarchism” and towards the “libertarian socialist” label was motivated by the material changes that occurred in this period. On the one hand there was the rise of something like a mass socialist movement in many countries for the first time since the end of the Cold War, often within at least nominally pluralistic organizations with various different flavors of socialist. The initial boost these groups got meant more members, more money, more visibility, and thus greater attractiveness for your typical anarchist to want to get involved in democratic socialist parties and organizations pluralistic enough to have them. On the other hand there was the example of Rojava, whose democratic confederalism is certainly deeply inspired by anarchist direct democracy but also contains elements of social democracy and post-Maoism, with the Bookchinian assemblies and cooperative economy effectively forming a parallel apparatus to a central organ that looks much like a little leftist government. Both these factors inspired movement people who would have called themselves anarchists just a few years before to gravitate towards the broader label of “libertarian socialism,” which rather than being merely a synonym for anarchism came more and more to imply a “big tent” view with more flexibility in its attitude towards democratic states while still emphasizing the creation of ultimately independent spaces for direct democracy.

¹⁷ The anarchists didn’t disappear in this period, and in fact played a leading role in at least two different respects: antifascism on the one hand, on-the-ground social movement action on the other. Anything in civil society outside electoralism was their metier — mass civil disobedience, anti-ICE occupations, wildcat strikes, pipeline disruptions, building cooperatives and new tenants and trade unions, etc — and while they were hardly the only

edge or rigorous sources about the planning question really shines through: he has really picked the single worst possible illustration of his point. The wartime measures adopted by the Bolsheviks were so disastrous for the domestic economy that in order to preserve their regime they needed to reel them back, which is the source of Lenin’s comparatively less authoritarian New Economic Policies through the 1920s. The later command economy under Stalin, which shared many of War Communism’s characteristics, also suffered from similar flaws. Direct expropriation of the peasants without adequate compensation (sometimes without even leaving them with enough grain for themselves) simply disincentivized them from producing, exacerbating existing famines or creating new ones out of thin air that ended up killing millions. “One-man

it’s planning all the way down and merely a question of who does the planning by what means. For more on this alternative framework (derived from a heady mix of Post-Keynesian, Institutionalist, and Marxian economic theory grounded in studies of the real world) see Frederic S. Lee, *Post-Keynesian Price Theory* (1998) and *Microeconomic Theory: A Heterodox Approach* (2018), as well as the profile of Lee elsewhere in this issue (“Wobbly Economics”). Furthermore, there’s equally good reason to believe the industrialization of societies (or, as may make more sense to say, the construction of particular new industries) is the product of conscious planning by networks of agents coordinating through designed institutions, rather than an automatic process operating behind our backs across centuries according to its own inner logic — which would imply that *learning how to do planning well* without the use of the wages system and private ownership of technique, plant, or people ought to be a central objective of socialist theory. This is an insight drawn from the heterodox developmental economics literature, such as Robert Wade, *Governing the Market: Economic Theory and the Role of Government in East Asian Industrialization* (1990); Alice Amsden, *The Rise of the Rest: Challenges to the West from Late-Industrializing Economies* (2001); Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (2002); and Eric S. Reinart, *How Rich Countries Got Rich...and Why Poor Countries Stay Poor* (2007). All this suggests that we — or at any rate our systematic theories — may still know very little about the true reasons why the Soviet-style societies failed and what that means for socialism. Sorting out that intellectual mess, tackling the problem from a million different directions, will be one of the continual goals of the magazine.

dilemma of how to execute control measures in an emergency without trampling on democratic rights.” In fact, he goes so far as to argue that it is solely and exclusively the vague and largely unspecified tradition of “anti-Stalinist Leninism” or “oddly libertarian Leninism” which, of all the branches of socialism, has ever “spent its lifetime mulling over [the aforementioned dilemma] and never letting go of it as a matter of principle.” Yet he very quickly admits this tradition has generated no real answers, and ends on some non sequiturs about how much Lenin loved nature and the like.

Of course, the problem with War Communism — even as this vague sort of inspiration for the idea of a large-scale planning mobilization under conditions of emergency — is that it doesn’t work.²¹ That’s where Malm’s lack of knowl-

²¹ But not for the reasons you might think. You may notice that in what follows there’s very little talk of “markets vs. planning,” which much economics takes to be the socialist vs. capitalist debate par excellence. Accounts of the flaws of the Soviet planning system are often marred by a story derived from neoclassical economics to the effect that Soviet planning failed for lack of proper market prices, which would allegedly allocate resources semi-optimally in an automatic process; hence it failed because economic planning cannot work. For accounts with a theoretical framework of this sort, see János Kornai, *Socialist Economy* (1992) and Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (1983). Whatever the virtues of these writers when their work is more empirically historical — and Nove’s *Economic History of the USSR, 1917–1991* (1992) in particular has chapters that are unmissable — their attempts to generalize theoretically are marred by the fact that the neoclassical economics they depend upon is fundamentally pseudoscientific. Superior frameworks indicate there’s good reason to believe (among other things) that no price-mechanism automatically allocating resources in any manner, optimal or otherwise, exists at all; that all prices are administered (i.e. set by *someone* pursuing any of several potential strategies and goals) rather than given by “the market”; that all markets are governed by the institutions which compose and regulate them, from trade associations to unions to the state and beyond; that indeed the economy even under capitalism doesn’t actually consist of “markets” as usually conceived, i.e. exchanges between atomized agents, but rather of interdependent processes of planned production composing what we today call supply chains; and that therefore no basis for a dichotomy between markets and planning exists whatsoever, because

the ecological crisis became more and more unavoidable with each new pessimistic IPCC report, the urgency of the need for climate action drew legions to the democratic socialist approach, whose signature policy slogan demanding a Green New Deal from a democratically elected government became the main hope to many for a green transition.

Much of the despair into which the Left has fallen in the past few years has been due to the utter rout of this project. By 2020 both Corbyn and Sanders had lost elections badly enough to be for all intents and purposes removed from the political chess board — and not just, as socialists like to say, because the system was rigged against them, but also due to their failure to mobilize the multiracial working-class coalitions upon which they’d been depending for victory. Proposals for a Green New Deal remain vague at best, and these largely unspecified proposals have remained on the cutting room floor even in those few places which have elected something other than an ecocidal right-wing government. The utterly failed response of the world’s governments to COVID also doesn’t inspire much confidence that the large-scale planning we need to confront climate change will, when it finally appears, be competently executed.

Meanwhile, the rainbow coalition that the democratic socialists wanted behind them at the polls *did* show up in the Floyd Uprising of 2020, where a Black-led social movement of the multiracial working classes against police brutality engaged in protests, riots, occupations, and disruptions on a scale

ones engaged in such activity, they were something close to the single group most often on the front lines. But the attempt of some libertarian socialists to enter the democratic socialist movement and convince them of doing social movement work was mixed at best in its success — the forcible rejection of anything but electoral work by social-democratic “boss caucuses,” often by underhanded and undemocratic means, was nearly ubiquitous. No real synthesis between the left wing of democratic socialism and the institution-building wing of libertarian socialism ever emerged. This arguably left both movements significantly weaker in the face of Leninism’s resurgence.

surpassing anything that's occurred in this country during any of our lifetimes. The Uprising contributed significantly to the fall of Trump's government in the following elections (indeed, it was arguably one police line away from toppling the government during the DC riots themselves, which caused the would-be strongman to cower in his presidential bunker); it left not a single major urban center in the US untouched, far exceeding the breadth and number of participants of even the "long hot summer" of 1967; it placed, for a moment anyway, the abolition of the police on the national agenda as a serious policy proposal; and it decisively channeled millions of people into direct actions that simply overwhelmed the state's ability to respond, demonstrating the power of mass civil disobedience to simply rewrite the political map and create new possibilities where before nothing seemed possible. It must also be said that many of the most radical actions had at their forefront not only seasoned rank-and-file Black Lives Matter activists but also anarchists and other libertarian socialists, whose existing direct action networks had extensive street fighting experience and whose alternative media outlets such as Unicorn Riot and Woke.net were extremely important to disseminating information during the Uprising.¹⁸

¹⁸ Somewhere between 15 and 26 million people participated in the Uprising in one form or another, mostly in peaceful demonstrations, making it by far the largest protest movement in US history. Even at the lowest estimate, they involved something like 5% of the country's entire population, well above the 3.5% threshold which social scientists say usually indicates a street movement powerful enough to overthrow the government — see Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui & Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History" in the *New York Times* (3 July 2020). Perhaps this justifies Trump's retreat into his führerbunker during the enormous DC riots of May 29, when it was widely reported the crowd got so close to the presidential palace that they could be heard from inside — e.g. see Jonathan Lemire & Zeke Miller, "Trump took shelter in White House bunker as protests raged," *Associated Press* (31 May 2020).

any experiments in direct-democratic worker control. Third was a regime of rationing the dwindling pile of goods, ostensibly along egalitarian or communistic lines but in fact in a markedly unequal distribution prioritizing workers in some industries over others, Party cadres most of all, and real or imagined former members of the bourgeoisie not at all. Fourth was an extensive use of *corvée* labor, both in military drafts and in the drafting of "industrial armies." And last but not least was a protracted campaign of revolutionary terror by a secret police force called the Cheka, who had virtually unlimited powers of arrest, judgment, imprisonment (with or without trial), and execution and exercised it in order to suppress not only military deserters but political dissidents. On paper, these were wartime expedients; they went away in the more liberal Soviet 1920s; but most of these methods returned in one form or another during the Stalin period, which makes War Communism an interesting microcosm of at least a certain kind of Leninist economic policy in general.

Having raised the specter of War Communism, Malm is quick to insist that he admires it but isn't about copying it:

Let it be said, then, that invoking War Communism is not to suggest that we should have summary executions, send food detachments into the countryside or militarise labour, just as no one who looks at the Second World War as a model for climate mobilisation wants to drop another atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Many of the perceived necessities the Bolsheviks turned into virtues, we can readily recognise as vices. But, conversely, some of what they saw as their weaknesses we may regard as strengths.

He assures us once that he doesn't actually mean to promote dictatorial methods. He wants us to sit with "the

Ignoring for a moment the fact that the eight-hour work-day and the end of child labor were more often secured by the direct action of radical unions and social movements extracting concessions from states rather than by the strictures of self-professed revolutionary governments, let's try to wrap our heads around exactly what kind of state Malm has in mind for the job of rapid decarbonization.

Malm writes cute little obituaries for democratic socialism in both its actually existing forms — social democracy is dead because the climate crisis has reached a point where gradual reformism is no longer possible, anarchism because its direct action and little nonstate structures can't beat the capitalists or transform the economy. This is why all that's left in their place is "ecological Leninism." In a rather prolix argument peppered with gratuitous quotes from trendy critical theorists (all of whose specialties are rather distant from economic planning — more on that in a second), Malm argues that Leninism is admirable because it "turns the crises of symptoms into crises of the causes"; Lenin turned resistance to World War One into opposition to the capitalism which caused it, and we must swap out the war for the ecological crisis. Accordingly, all of Malm's positive suggestions involve a conception of climate response analogous to the Bolsheviks' policy of War Communism during the civil war.

War Communism is the nickname for the massive, centrally planned, and rigidly authoritarian mobilization of manpower and biophysical resources the Bolsheviks undertook during the civil war period of 1918–1920. The period was mostly a chaotic series of improvisations and so is difficult to summarize, but there are a few main points usually associated with the label. First and foremost was forced requisition of grain from the peasantry, often at gunpoint, in order to feed the army and the cities. Second was the nationalization of all land and industry, which in the cities meant "one-man management" in each workplace by a Party appointee and the dismantling of

Unfortunately, despite what you might call its cultural victory, that conjuncture didn't result in much systemic change either. No lasting institutions or organizations emerged except sometimes at the local level, allowing the millions who had mobilized gradually to disengage. The main attempt to demonstrate by example what more radical next steps for the Uprising could look like, the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle, was if anything far *less* competent than 2011's Occupy spaces at doing radical democracy and resulted in the deaths of two Black teenagers, all of which discouraged any would-be copycats in other cities. Finally, the faction of the capitalist class allied to political centrism rather than fascism was eventually able to gain their bearings and steer the Uprising towards their desired ends rather than its logical revolutionary endpoint. First, as the Uprising was happening, they elevated voices from the nonprofit-industrial complex who disrupted protest actions and watered down radical demands; then, after it had died down, they engaged in a vigorous campaign of "wokewashing" within corporations and the government, putting forward superficial statements of support and symbolic or representational policy changes (e.g. "Black faces in high places," a phenomenon much derided by Black socialists like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor) while endlessly deferring real structural solutions like reparations, full employment, targeted economic development programs, police and prison abolitionism, and support for existing Black institutions in sectors like the cooperative movement and higher education. Such solutions, after all, would significantly reduce the power of capitalists as well as white supremacy, so the white capitalists would rather attempt to elevate or create a few capitalists of color than actually disrupt the racial hierarchy. Thus in the end we find ourselves in a bittersweet moment: more people than ever before have developed a consciousness of the urgency of racial oppres-

sion in the US, even as any real change remains as far away as it ever has.¹⁹

Exhaustion and authoritarian creep

The result of all these changes has been to exhaust both the neo-anarchist project of the turn of the century period and the democratic socialist project of the 2010s. As we enter a new decade, one cannot help but see the signs everywhere. Socialists of both the democratic and libertarian varieties have been very good at identifying problems; some of them have even proven quite brave in putting themselves on the line to combat the bosses; but over and over again, one cannot help but find that they lack anything like solutions, or even a framework for developing these. Though it's hard to prove, the results that we've seen in our experience are harrowing. A radical critique of capitalist society seems more common today than it has in decades. We'd even go so far as to say it's the common sense of the younger generations that the current system can't go on as it has and will soon collapse into something else. But the rise of socialist mass movements has *not*, from what we've seen, empowered young working-class people to reshape the world into a radical democracy. Rather, for many, the failure of the actually existing socialist movements to provide solutions has led them down one of two dark paths. The first is political apathy —

¹⁹ For a blunt anarchist debrief on the calamity of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, see Black Rose / Rosa Negra Seattle, "CHOP Analysis: Glimmers of Hope, Failures of the Left" on the Anarchist Library (3 September 2020). For an account of the class and racial composition of the Floyd Uprising and the manner in which it was put down using wokewashing counterinsurgency tactics, see Arturo Castillon & Shemon Salam, "Theses on the George Floyd Rebellion" (24 June 2020) and Shemon Salam, "The Rise of Black Counter-Insurgency" (30 July 2020) from Ill Will Editions. For critiques from the Black Radical Tradition of past instantiations of Black counterinsurgency against Black-led working-class movements, see Keeanga Yamahatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016) and Olúfemi O. Táíwò, "Identity Politics and Elite Capture" in *Boston Review* (7 May 2020).

Much of Malm's recent work remains excellent, particularly in its critiques, since it's rooted in his experience as a radical climate activist. He and his comrades in the Zetkin Collective are brave revolutionists who've put their bodies on the line against today's fossil capitalism and tomorrow's ecofascism. But we have a bone to pick with him when, in the *Corona* book, he makes a striking strategic assertion: the only thing that can prevent ecological doom is a kind of Climate Leninism.

The real and perceived failures of democratic and libertarian socialism which we outlined above play an important role in motivating Malm's conclusion. For him, the problem has been a certain lack of harshness and discipline against the ecological counterrevolution. This requires not just a state, but a "draconian" one:

Clearly it would be the state that would have to do this. No mutual aid group in Bristol could even hypothetically initiate a programme of this kind. 'We need (for a certain transitional period) a state. This is what distinguishes us from the anarchists', with Lenin — or with Wallace: 'In the face of the potential catastrophe, it would indeed seem most prudent to begin placing draconian restraints on existing plantation and animal monocultures, the driving forces behind present pandemic emergence.' Note the word 'draconian'. Progressives of all stripes might shudder at it, but they should return to the chapter on the working day in the first volume of *Capital* — the ten hours' day being the original victory of the proletariat, realised when enforcement finally became a little harsh, after all the laxities and prevarication of the early factory legislation. One doesn't curb capitalist exploitation by carrots.

a statement attempts to normalize dictatorial methods even as it sidesteps any actual discussion of the matter at issue, namely whether the one-party state, the secret police, press censorship, the command economy, and other Leninist institutions are a help or a hindrance to the sort of economic planning we need for a green transition. Now, some will argue that a tweet by some random account ought not to be the gold standard by which to gauge the present state of the socialist movement. But in fact the tweet is from Austin González, a member of the National Political Committee of the Democratic Socialists of America.

This talking point on the ecological crisis isn't unique to González either. He seems to be drawing on an existing intellectual discourse whose most vocal and prominent advocate is Andreas Malm. Malm, a professor of human ecology at the University of Lund in Sweden as well as a member of a minor Trotskyist party there, has become something of an academic Marxist institution, having for years been part of the editorial board of *Historical Materialism* and contributed to publications such as *Jacobin*. He gained much serious respect among economic historians in 2016 with the publication of *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, which made a convincing argument that the initial switch to coal from water power in early industrial Britain was not due to biophysical limitations or its superior efficiency (it was actually costlier and less reliable) but rather because of the greater control it gave capitalists over labor, ultimately augmenting their profits. But he has achieved wider prominence in recent years, as the author of a number of highly militant books about the politics of climate change — *White Skin Black Fuel* (2021), *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* (2020), and *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2021) — in which he issues a radical critique of the near total lack of substantive climate action being taken across the capitalist world, from the OECD to China, and devises methods by which to fight against this.

cottagecore fantasies of finding a partner and running away to some isolated bower or landscape of rolling hills, there to live out a more natural existence as the old world comes to an end; or perhaps just fully immersing yourself in the omnipresent online fantasy world, distracting yourself with media tailored to your tastes or the capricious pseudo-communities of fandom subcultures or the petty dramas of the social networks until the system eventually crashes. The second is less common but ultimately more dangerous: as libertarian socialism and democratic socialism lose their sway on the imagination, we have as the years gone by begun to notice how more and more of the politically active people around us — the new faces in organizing spaces, the old comrades who reemerge after a period of inactivity, the voices on our social media feeds — have begun to express a haughty contempt for the idea of democracy itself. Democracy, this line goes, has failed; the signs of its failure are everywhere; it was always, at any rate, an illusion; and any viable solution to great social crises of our time requires dispensing with it as a method or even as a goal.

In other words, where the total paralysis of existing politics hasn't led the young into nihilism, it's pushing them towards authoritarianism. On the one hand it's contributed to the various new fascist movements around the world, which gain power whenever they can provide simple scapegoat narratives unchallenged against their preferred outgroup — seducing white men, for example, by blaming women, queer people, Muslims, Black folks, or whomever for their problems. And on the Left, it's contributed to an ongoing revival of interest in Leninism — its one-party states, its top-down developmentalism, its secret police, its crushing of all dissent — as the only “proven” way to both secure and defend “real” revolutionary change.

“Climate Leninism” as a test case

The ecological crisis is a particularly poignant test, since in recent years it’s gone from being a hypothesis about the future to a fact of daily life. Severe weather, droughts, and natural disasters have already caused mass migrations or even wars. The very same agribusiness models that contribute to climate change may have also contributed to the rise of COVID and similar zoonotic diseases, and climate change itself may have created a riper habitat in southern China for the sort of bats who are among the leading candidates for how the coronavirus got to us. Yet the carbon output numbers keep going up, the waters continue to rise, more and more forests burn as the states of the world do nothing.²⁰ What solutions have the socialists proffered? On balance, it looks rather grim for our movement. The democratic socialists can’t even elect a social-democratic government in most places, and where they do these perpetuate the status quo; the anarchists can’t explain how we get from their current programme of nonviolent civil disobedience, pipeline disruption, and coop-building to total decarbonization within ten years; and while

²⁰ The role anthropogenic climate change may have played in helping to spur the coronavirus remains an open scientific question — though it’s not only a valid theory but in our view highly plausible. The role industrial agriculture plays in spreading zoonotic diseases has been investigated at great length by the evolutionary epidemiologist Rob Wallace, particularly in his book *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science* (2016); a summary of how this perspective can be applied to the case of COVID-19 and its variants can be found in Laura Spinney, “Is factory farming to blame for coronavirus?”, *The Guardian* (28 March 2020); for a revolutionary socialist analysis of the specifically capitalist incentives driving these lethal practices see the Chuang Collective’s pathbreaking essay “Social Contagion” (2020), recently turned into a book of the same name by Charles H. Kerr Publishing; and for a recent scientific overview of theories concerning climate change and the coronavirus, see Saloni Gupta, Barry T. Rouse, & Pranita P. Sarangi, “Did Climate Change Influence the Emergence, Transmission, and Expression of the COVID-19 Pandemic?”, *Frontiers in Medicine* 8 (December 8, 2021).

both have some fun slogans (“a Green New Deal!” “degrowth!” “decarbonization now!” “the house is on fire!” “think global, act local!” “you can’t have infinite growth on a finite planet!”), their practical discourse no less than that of liberals remains at the level of arguing about (say) carbon taxes or consumption choices. Neither has anything like a framework for economic planning and green development, a robust understanding of the trade-offs between different non-fossil energy sources, a solution to the contradiction between industrializing the poor countries and decarbonizing the planet, a plan for reconfiguring global supply chains to be both less exploitative and more sustainable, a detailed description of how to win over a majority of the population to democratic self-management or egalitarian redistribution or even just the green transition itself — indeed, we seem to lack any of the myriad intellectual tools one might need to actually create (rather than just talk idly about) some viable ecosocialism. All the little arguments on all the podcasts and magazine essays stop just short of where these questions begin; on the socialists’ map of the world, this part is marked “here be dragons.”

From the failure of democratic and libertarian socialism to come up with actionable solutions to the ecological crisis, it quickly follows in the eyes of many that radical democracy *can’t* provide a solution at all. And that’s where the ugliness really begins. Consider a recent tweet by a prominent socialist influencer: “You are naive if you think climate change can ever be solved without an ‘authoritarian’ government at this point.” A statement ominous in its ambiguity: it gains its shocking and scandalous effect by bluntly advocating for authoritarianism, but it retains plausible deniability by putting the word “authoritarian” in quotes and thus gaslighting us into wondering if perhaps it’s only advocating for modest measures that we in our oversensitive hysteria might deem too authoritarian — all the better, later, to pull a motte-and-bailey trick if it’s criticized. In proceeding by innuendo rather than argument, such