

# 'Not Fighting The Same Fight'

This is America podcast, It's Going Down

2019

*[ed. – A transcript from This Is America #92, a podcast from the online platform It's Going Down. This was released in 2019, the same month in which we put out our statement 'The Future of Return Fire' with its stated intention for this current volume; a critical investigation of where our project touches and doesn't touch currents that could be gathered under the sign of the Left. Much resonates for us (including – despite the obvious difference in context across the Atlantic – the Left mobilisation around the British Labour candidate during the end of that year, shamefully joined by not a few anarchists; see '**Everything is Sanitised, But We are Constantly Wringing Our Tired Hands**'). This was a moment of broad calls for an anti-capitalist and/or anti-racist 'Left unity' during the far-right street activity coinciding with a reactionary government; see '**It Depends on All of Us**'. Since these words were spoken, the party of the Left has returned to power in that nation-state; with the predictable results foreseen below.]*

**TIA #1:** We wanted to speak on the topic of the Left, and our relation as either anarchists or autonomous – or people involved in autonomous anti-capitalist, anti-state, anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial movements – and how we relate to the Left. And if we are part of the Left; do we consider ourselves leftists?

I think what's interesting is that, for some of us involved in this project, we became involved in anarchist politics at a time when there was really, I would say, a backlash and a rejection of what we considered leftism. And by that, we mean official organisations and groups that have the legal ability to interact within the State and the economy. So we're talking about official business unions and their bureaucracies. We're talking about NGOs, nonprofits, top-down activists, monolith organisations (Greenpeace [*ed. – see **Green Capital & Environmental "Leaders" Won't Save Us***], things like that), and especially the entire apparatus that's evolved around the Democratic Party, whether that's the Left-of-centre media, whether that's people pinning for certain positions within the state, whether that's people within nonprofits essentially chasing grant money, and so on and so forth: this entire economy and politics that's based around established political and economic life within the existing system.

And that we saw as opposed to essentially autonomous social movements or revolt itself that was organically springing up from... however you want to define it, from the exploited and excluded, the proletariat, the working class, the dispossessed masses; whatever kind of label you want to put onto that. We haven't really had like a nerdy discussion on terms, and what all the different tenants within anarchism are, for instance, on the show, but I think a lot of us

were influenced by the post-left currents that came out after the fall of the Berlin Wall, after the collapse of the Russian communist project. **And post-left anarchism (or post-left anarchy) was a way to reimagine the anarchist project in a world in which the Soviet Union no longer existed.**

And I think it's interesting when you talk to a lot of leftists. One thing I hear, you know, Marxist [*ed. – see **Return Fire vol.5 pg11***] socialists, one thing I've heard again and again, is that although the Soviet Union may have been ultimately deformed worker state, or a bureaucratic capitalist monstrosity of repression, as long as it existed, it meant that there was somehow "an alternative to the existing social order." And I think it's interesting, because you see a lot of the same things; now It's Going Down is sharing anarchist graffiti that's been written by people in Hong Kong [*ed. – see **Hong Kong: Its Relevance to the Rest of Us...***], calling the Communist Party a capitalist state and calling out the police. And there are, of course, a lot of tankies<sup>1</sup> and people on the Left that come out and attack this and say, "Oh, they're CIA hacks, screw them."<sup>2</sup>

But I think what's interesting at the same time, is that there's a lot of people that listen to It's Going Down, a lot of people that interact with It's Going Down, that are coming at this from a different perspective. They're coming, especially, either after the the eruptions that happened in 2016, or the maybe it's the prison strike [*ed. – see **'It Depends on All of Us'***], or Standing Rock [*ed. – see **Return Fire vol.4 pg16***], or the coming to power of Trump or the anti-fascist movement. A lot of people have really embraced the term leftist. And a lot of people have embraced the idea of Left unity.

I think a lot of that comes from the reality that we are under a far-right authoritarian government. And also, a lot of people interacting with a political space, which has a lot of younger people being activated in a lot of different groups. So you might exist in a small town where you and your five friends might be in the IWW [*ed. – see **'It Depends on All of Us'***], and maybe you're anarchists and then you also hang out with some kids that are in the DSA [*Democratic Socialists of America*], or in some sort of Marxist-Leninist group, or PSL [*Party for Socialism and Liberation*] or maybe they're Maoists [*ed. – see **'The Position of the Excluded'***]. And you exist in this broad leftist scene and those are the people you interact with.

Whereas before, with a lot of anarchists 10 years ago, that never really would have happened. You didn't really interact with a lot of people that were in those groups. Whereas now it's it's a whole different ball-game. And some of that's because of the situation that's been created with the rise of anti-fascism, and a lot of people are coming together to organise against a broader external threat. And a lot of that's just the situation politically that's been created by Trump; all of a sudden, there's a bunch of new people that want to get involved.

We just kind of wanted to have a space to talk about leftism and our relationship to it and tease out some of these things. I think at the end of the day, what I would say is that I think regardless of if you consider yourself part of the Left or not, I think the main question is how we relate

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<sup>1</sup> ed. – Pejorative for leftists, particularly Stalinists (see **Memory as a Weapon; Indigenism & its Enemies**), supportive of authoritarian Communist regimes; coined in Britain by dissident Marxist-Leninists (see **'It Depends on All of Us'**) referring to party members who favoured the Soviet tanks that had crushed rebellions in Hungary (see the supplement for this volume of Return Fire; **A Poem by Kenneth Rexroth, Painted across the Rooftops of the World**) and Czechoslovakia.

<sup>2</sup> ed. – Similarly to how the Chinese government itself attributed the rebellion to 'outside agitators' (see **Eric Laursen Owes Me a Lamp**) from the West; as it similarly has during a significant rebellion in late 2022 against harsh COVID restrictions, leading to their easing.

to people in struggle, how we relate to bureaucratic and recuperative organisations that don't hold our politics. And also, who do we see as our allies? I think those are the most important questions. And I'll just stop here for a second.

**TIA #2:** So I think a lot of the discussion around the "post-left" in the last few years has really been a devolved version of where that critique really came from. So we have to think of post-leftism as a critique, right? We have to think about what it names; and to understand what it names we actually have to go back to the 1950s.

So in the 1950s, after World War Two, what happened in Europe was that the Communist Party under the Comintern [Communist International] (which was run by by the Bolsheviks, by the Soviet Communist Party), had started a process in which they were essentially trying to purge non-Stalinists from the Communist Party all over Europe. And even in the United States; the Communist Party in the US took this incredibly hard Stalinist turn during that period.

Now, what we have to understand about that period is that communist parties before that weren't like that. There was an element of ideological rigidity, depending on where you were, but generally, communist parties from the early 20th century on into the 1940s were kind of philosophically amorphous. You had your Rosa Luxemburg [*ed. – dissident socialist yet hostile to anarchism, and who tried to erase the latter from the history of May Day; see Return Fire vol.3 pg87*] types, your left-communists [*ed. – usually opposed to popular fronts and electoral politics*], you had council-communists [*ed. – an anti-Leninist Marxist current in Western Europe*] and communist parties, you had IWW members of the Communist Party. And you also had hard authoritarian Leninists in the Communist Party, and they all existed in various factions within these various different communist parties.

What the Comintern did in the 40s and into the 50s, was they started funding the factions that were sympathetic to Stalinism. And then used their propaganda machines (that were built on that funding through newspapers and radio stations and stuff) to engage in what essentially equated to political purchase. All throughout Europe. This happened in Italy, in France, and so on, Germany. And this was all part of sort of the Soviet Union's attempt to build a political sphere of influence all throughout Europe after World War Two, to combat the American sphere of influence, which was the result of the Marshall Plan [*ed. – American 1948 initiative claimed to aid economic recovery in Western Europe after WW2*].

During that period of time, you started getting theorists like [Albert] Camus, or Simone de Beauvoir in France, starting to talk about the problems of authoritarian communism. **And what they were saying, it wasn't so much about the outcomes. It wasn't about the fact that there was repression. It wasn't about the fact that there were mass purges and famines in the Soviet Union; although they definitely mentioned those things. What they were making was an existential critique.** And they were saying, "Look, if we are to embrace the idea of revolt, as this concept in which we assert our existence in the world, then it makes no sense for us to do that inside of a structure (namely, an ideologically-rigid, grand narrative of Leninist communism) which simultaneously also crushes that assertion immediately. All of the problems of the Soviet Union, they were arguing at the time, were really a result of this sort of existential nullification that existed at the core the ideology of Leninist communism; which is one which is grounded in a general narrative of human existence which all of us are supposed to fit within, and we're supposed to construct what Leninists called "the new man"; they had an idea of the utopian person.

**And we were supposed to become that person and any objections – any critiques of that – were not only wrong, according to Leninism, but were dangerous, were preventing us from reaching utopia, and had to be purged out of existence. Then what they did was they imposed a normalisation process. They were eliminating difference, political difference within both the Soviet Union and, later, the rest of Europe, or were trying to.**

So out of those critiques grew movements like the Situationist International. And the uprising in France in May of 1968 [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg96*]. And out of that grew theorists like Jacques Rancière, who were starting to really push this critique further. You got Italian autonomism, people like Paulo Virno, Mario Tronti, who are really trying to push this critique further and starting to talk about, how do we have an anti-capitalism which doesn't become ideologically rigid? How do we start to think through the idea of revolt which stays revolt, and doesn't collapse into a normalising concept of a predetermined utopia.

And in the 1970s (late 1960s, and 1970s), in the US, those currents were named the New Left, and you had people like Abbie Hoffman starting to articulate critiques like this. But after the movements of the 60s and 70s died off what was left behind was this rigid, authoritarian leftism that we saw limp along slowly, all the way through the 1980s.

And with the collapse of the Soviet Union, something really interesting happened. Which was, on one hand within the American context, American capitalism declared victory, and said “there are no other ideological options. History has been determined. This is the utopian project from this point forward.”

And that's what we largely live inside of right now. We live inside of a world in which the idea of political possibility has been totally stripped away. But that is simultaneously sort of collapsing and barely functioning at the same time, right? It's this kind of suspension within a state of crisis that we find ourselves in [*ed. – see Capitalism & Electrification*].

But at the same time, you started having a lot of people saying, “wait a minute, maybe the problem wasn't just Leninism. Maybe the problem was the grand narrative in itself.” Not just the Leninist appropriation of trying to determine the future for everybody in a singular way. But maybe it's that entire enterprise, that entire attempt of trying to determine some utopian future that will sort of normalise everything and have to eliminate all difference, and that move towards that utopia.

Maybe the problem is deciding what the future is. And really, maybe what revolt needs to be, is this kind of explosion of possibility, this kind of breaking out of the particularity of our life, this kind of assertion of our own existence. And picking up this critique from the 1950s, really, that is what post-leftism names. And for whatever people feel about Bob Black<sup>3</sup>, you can go back to *Anarchy After Leftism* and that point is very clear; that really, post-leftism was an articulation of that critique, it was a way to articulate an anarchist politics not from a position of political ideology, but from the position of existential theory. The thinking around existence, concepts of

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<sup>3</sup> ed. – Long-term anarchist author key to post-leftism; best known (aside from works such as *The Abolition of Work*) for his caustic altercations with perceived enemies, most famously with someone outside of the anarchist scene but during which both parties called the cops on each other.

ontology,<sup>4</sup> these ideas of what it means for us to exist in the world as unique people in a time in place around others.

**TIA #1:** Well, what I would say is that in the current context, especially when we look at the mass struggles that we see in front of us that define our era (for instance, Standing Rock or Ferguson [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.3 pg76*]), or the prison strike, or, you know, any of these things: by and large, one of the main things that holds them back from expanding beyond the limits that they reach is the Left. So for instance, Standing Rock, the idea that [then-President] Obama was going to come in and negotiate some sort of settlement and end everything (which of course didn't happen; basically, he just pushed it off until Trump came in and then Trump was able to send the police and so on so forth). If you go back and look before that, obviously, the Obama administration was at war with that struggle trying to defeat it in other ways.

**Leftism – if we define it as a collection of bureaucratic entities and organisations and bureaucracies tied to the State and capital – expanding beyond that and allowing your role to get beyond that, and allowing our associations and relationships to grow outside of its control; that is often the barrier in which we find ourselves sometimes not being able to go beyond.** Again and again, that's the thing that we recognise the thing to struggle against. It's not always necessarily state repression, although that's of course very real. It's the

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<sup>4</sup> ed. – “Ontology comes from the Greek word *Ontos*, which means *being*. Ontology is the study of what is, of what kinds of beings make up the world. Is the world made of fire or water, as the first Greek philosophers pondered? Or atoms or flows, waves or particles? Social ontology asks what beings make up social worlds: the worlds of humans and other animals as we interact, the groups and institutions we form, our conflicts and wars.

As with psychology, if we don't examine our ideas about social ontology, we risk getting stuck in dominant models that hold us back. For example, capitalist valuing often works with a social ontology that looks something like this: the world is made up of two basic kinds of beings, on the one hand, human individuals; on the other, things – animals or inanimate objects. Human individuals are “subjects” who make free decisions. Non-human things are “objects” to be produced, owned, hoarded, exchanged, destroyed. Human subjects are all different, but also all alike, because they share the same basic nature, the same basic structures of rationality, the same needs and interests. These shared reasons and interests lead them to come together and form groups and institutions.

In various forms, this liberal social ontology is now widespread. But it has had to fight against older ideas, e.g., feudal ontologies like those often promoted by the Catholic church, which saw society as an “organic” whole, a social body in which individuals were born into different “estates”, each of which performed different fixed functions. These older ontologies still survive, of course. In some settings, they remain dominant; whilst in many contemporary social theories, liberal and conservative elements blend together.

Another strong current comes from Marxism. In many ways, Marxist social ontologies branch out of the liberal picture. Marxism, at least in most of its variants, is equally humanist: the world is divided into human beings and non-human things that are at our command. It is just as focused on economic production, and on a universalist view of human nature: humans have the same basic needs and interests, above all economic “interests” realised through material things. But pursuing our interests doesn't lead us to form one big happy society; instead, we are grouped into opposing classes.

Both conservatism and liberalism tend to emphasise social peace. In one, stability comes from a god-given social order; in the other, from universal consent. Of course there is always also war. Holy war against the heretics, infidels, barbarians, and all who threaten social order. War in the name of progress against reactionaries, savages, terrorists, and all who refuse the universal peace of the market and democracy. War is a state of exception from the peaceful equilibrium – though somehow the exception becomes permanent, there are always more barbarians at the gates.

Marxism puts conflict at the heart of social ontology: class war isn't a strange disturbance, it is the very motor of progress. But this war is characterised in a very limited way, as class struggle. The combatants are not diverse and complex individuals, with many shifting desires and allegiances and the power to form their own projects, but economic (or other) categories into which we're slotted by party intellectuals who know our “real” interests” (Nietzsche & Anarchy).

ability of struggles and movements to grow outside of the control of bureaucratic, top-down, reformist, liberal organisations, which are trying to stifle revolt, trying to stifle self-organisation, trying to stifle and put out autonomy and autonomous forms of relationship building, and also the use of direct action.

What's also interesting, too, just to take this to the terrain of history: that is always the position that anarchists have found themselves in. For instance, when the anarchists were involved in the First International,<sup>5</sup> the split with Marx and the authoritarian communists (in which the anarchists rightfully said, "Look, your ideas," Bakunin [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg97*] said famously, "are going to create a red bureaucracy; you're going to create a red dictatorship"). And the split with Marx came because they did not want to get involved in electoral politics. They said, "Look, we can create a stateless and classless society now; we just need to build that movement."

We need to remind ourselves too that at one point anarchism was the dominant, anti-capitalist, radical current within what we would now call the classical workers movement, essentially the broad collection of workers and peasants across the world (that wasn't just white European men in factories, but a broad-speaking movement). **Because you have to remember, anarchism grew and was very popular in everywhere from Africa to Asia to Latin America.** Even if those aren't necessarily the movements and the thinkers that we reference – which we should definitely work to change. Because there's so many thinkers and movements across the world historically that we need to be looking at, not just Spain, and not just people like Bakunin.

But again and again, throughout anarchist history, control or attacks from especially the Communist Party has been the thing which has kept massive anarchist revolutions and rebellion from growing beyond the point which history shows them to be stopped in their tracks. Whether that's what happened in the Ukraine in the 1910s and 20s, or Spain in '36 (and you can go back and listen to our interview with Mark Bray on the Spanish revolution as an example).

**But in the current period, this is definitely a huge part of the situation that we're dealing with now; recuperative elements, reformist elements in social movements, trying to stifle things. And I think to think that we're all on the same page, because we're "leftists," is just wishful thinking.**

**TIA #2:** Well, and it all falls into this theme of unity, right? So it's really difficult for a political party (whether it's the Democrats or the alphabet-soup, Communist Party, XYZ wherever you live) to hijack something when there's not rigidity imposed. And actually the hijacking process (and anyone that's ever been around the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party] or the PSL can definitely see this when it's happening), there's a process of trying to impose rules, and impose limits to say that certain kinds of direct action aren't okay, or we have to take X, Y, or Z political line. And we have to state it in coherent points of unity that we give to the press and blah blah blah. That unity, though, is in itself the very thing that stifles the energy of revolt from being able to take on an inertia [*ed. – see Memory as a Weapon; Barcelona Anarchists at Low Tide*].

And we've seen this time and time again inside the United States. That it's not just on a very practical level that this unity creates a stifling effect. But on a more deep existential level, it's the idea that unity is a primary category that we should all aspire to, is the very thing that stifles us from being able to assert ourselves in revolt, to be able to come to moments of conflict for our own reasons, with our own experiences and with our own tactics, and our own general tendency

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<sup>5</sup> ed. – International Workingmen's Association; an early try at 'uniting' anarchists with Communists and other Leftists in 1864, splitting in 1872 on anti-state and pro-state lines.

is towards doing X, Y or Z type of thing. That it's the idea of unity – whether that's a unity inside of the campaign or unity in the sense of Left unity – that constructs this idea that there's a thing that we all have to be a part of. So whether that's the Left, as in the concept of Left unity, or whether that's the idea of a unified Occupy movement<sup>6</sup> (that anyone that was involved in Occupy... I'm sure you had a few partisans here and there that were really pushing towards the idea of a unified Occupy movement that could articulate positions and so on).

Regardless of the appropriation of the idea of unity, it's the very idea of unity itself, that stifles the difference that is both unleashed in conflict, and that sustains and accelerates conflict. That we have this false notion that we call revolution, as understood in the modern sense, where there's a unified force of people that rise up and impose a new order. **When really what we're missing in that narrative is that there is no unified force; that there's really an innumerable number of people doing innumerable things and incredibly complex moments for their own reasons.** And that later, after the regime falls, a group of people comes in and ends the revolution and imposes sameness, right? That our idea of revolution, as we call it now (so "revolution" in quotes), is really an idea which is based on this concept that what we need to do is have this kind of absolute unified front that works towards a utopian vision. And it's that very idea that's being critiqued in the concept of the post-left; or it's that very idea that's being critiqued in the notion of uncontrollability.

And so we can't be simultaneously arguing to be uncontrollable, to embrace this idea of revolt which is fundamentally unbounded, while at the same time preaching the gospel of unity. We need difference; we need, in some ways, conflict. We need to be able to have non-sameness in order to both be a part of something as ourselves, but to also allow those things to shift and change and morph with the dynamics of events. **Once we start to impose the idea of unity, what we're really doing is we're creating this vision, this category that exists completely outside of the complexities of what's going on. And we're trying to force moments to fit into our definitions.**

That not only is ineffective tactically; it creates political structures which are fundamentally repressive. And so if we're going to escape that trap, if we're going to escape the failure of revolutionary projects for the last 200 years, what that really means is not only abandoning the idea of unity; but it means abandoning the idea of the grand narrative as a whole.

And that doesn't mean that we can't have affinity towards people. That doesn't mean that we can't work with people that are very different. Hell, I've got plenty of friends that aren't anarchists. But what it does mean is that we are not fighting the same fight that the Democrats are fighting, and we're not fighting the same fight that the DSA or the alphabet-soup communist parties are fighting. And we might not even be fighting the same fight that a lot of people that consider themselves as anarchists are fighting. That really what we're doing is we're trying to remake the entire way that we engage in action, not based on a ideologically-rigid position, but really based in a notion of unleashing possibility through dynamic conflict. And both engaging in and antagonising those conflicts as we go forward. That's the thing that I think separates this idea of the post-left (and I don't like the term post-left-ism, but the post left) from the things that really came before.

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<sup>6</sup> ed. – A movement started amidst anti-austerity feeling after the late 2000's financial crisis, spreading around the world into many urban encampments and some more radical perspectives, often with anarchist participation.

**TIA #1:** I think it also begs the question, who do we see ourselves as trying to work with? And I think that obviously, there is a new crop of social movements and collections of antagonists within a variety of different struggles. For instance, water protectors, black liberationists, prison abolitionists, anti-fascists, anarchists of all stripes, autonomous anti-capitalists of all stripes. Obviously there's a lot of different people across a wide spectrum that we consider comrades and we work with, and obviously who will pop up on *It's Going Down*. But again, beyond that, I think that a lot of people that consider themselves as part of the Left are really obsessed with this idea that we were talking about: of Left unity, of making all the alphabet-soup groups in the room work together, when a lot of people aren't really putting the time into actually organising or working with people in their communities, or around them in their workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, so on so forth, that are impacted by the same things that we are; that are getting angry that have no faith in the political structure, are angry at capitalism, can see things are getting worse and want to do something about it. But often, we're so busy trying to sit in the same room with a group authoritarian communists that have nothing in common with us to organise events that aren't even necessarily our cup of tea, when we could be putting more energy into building autonomous forces, that could be on our own terms, and also in solidarity with those around us (that may not even have a political label that are just angry and want to do something about what's going on).

**TIA #2:** Yeah, this is the danger of movement-ism, right? We have a very abstracted idea in the United States of what political conflict looks like. I think in *Fire to the Prisons* [magazine] there was an article called *We Demand Nothing*, which really articulates this very well. But we tend to fall into these spaces in which we are making a number of assumptions. Namely, that we need large amounts of numbers, that the goal should be to change some kind of policy, or to appeal to somebody or another. And sometimes those spaces can be strategically advantageous. But they should never be the assumption of the way that we take upon action. Because in those spaces, what happens is that we start to prize the coalition, the popular front. We start to think through the idea of what does it look like for us as a privileged political space to do a thing to try and force a change in some abstracted enemy [*ed. – see **What is Insurgency?***]. Whether that enemy be a corporation, or the State, or whatever.

**When in reality, that's never actually how resistance functions. That resistance is really a dynamic of conflict: which occurs in a place, at a time, in a very particular way. And when we move into those spaces, we risk losing sight of all of that. That is what really typifies leftism, as we've understood it in the modern era; which is this incredibly abstracted, remarkably conceptual understanding of really dynamic problems that don't respect the dynamism of those issues.**

We can see this, whenever you talk to an authoritarian communist about anything: what will almost immediately happen is they will fall back into their party line to explain any problem. It doesn't matter what it is, it doesn't matter whether the explanation actually really fits; you'll witness a process I like to call shoe-horning where they will sit there and just try and jam an idea into a party line. Not only is that philosophically absurd, but what they're doing is they're trying to say, "look, the particularity of this doesn't matter, the individual dynamics of what's going on don't matter. All that matters is this abstract concept." And from that position, there's no way to be able to think through concepts of effectiveness, strategy, tactics, the immediate deployments of action that we might be thinking through at any moment. There's no way to even gather the



information necessary to be able to do that, because we've already come to a position, which makes all of that irrelevant.

But we all know (any of us that have ever spent any time in the streets) that you never carry out effective actions by sitting there and thinking about things in a purely abstract way; unless you're very lucky, and you only become effective by chance. But the actions that are always the ones that are the most effective are the ones that are very grounded in their time and space. And that really requires a dynamism in our thinking, an ability to have conflict and difference, and an ability to unleash possibilities which are just completely impossible and foreclosed upon within traditional leftist politics.

**TIA #1:** I also think there's a point needs to be made in terms why we get involved in struggle. Why do we engage in solidarity with other people that may be outside of our own circles? And it's to spread revolt and to spread certain forms of organisation and affinity and relationships; to spread anarchy. I don't mean like the sense of chaos and people kicking puppies and something like that which the media likes to portray, but literally anarchy; the destitution of of state power and the economy, and the creation of communal and anti-authoritarian and horizontal forms of power and decision-making, and **actual forms of life that we'd like to spend the rest of our lives in.**

As opposed to what I see on the Left, which is people essentially getting in front of struggle, and trying to recuperate that, and create some sort of reason for existence for their own organisations and trying to get in front of things and take credit for them. I mean, essentially, that's the difference fundamentally in the anarchist project in the Leninist project. The anarchist project is to be part of the insurrection, to further the revolt, to the point in which the forms that the revolt is taking can basically allow new kinds of ways of life to basically be the ways in which we actually live. Whereas the Leninist approach is to get in front of the revolt, and then use that as a way to solidify a new form of state power. And those are two completely different things.

But I think that those also play out in struggle. We can see this time and time again, where people that basically want to create a name or a brand, or advance their own organisation, or just get a bunch of members, or, I don't know, just get a nice flashy photo on the front of their newspaper. They put themselves in front of a struggle, they try to take it over, they try to dominate, as opposed to spreading it. You brought up the Situationists; it's there's a quote by Guy Debord I think about all the time. It says "the representation of the working class is the enemy of the working class." And what that means is that the people that supposedly speak for us, that supposedly represent us, are often our worst enemies, and so much so far is that they're trying to basically act as our leaders, act as the people that actually have our best interest at heart, act as our representatives.

We see this all the time with the Democratic Party. I mean, this is what they're trying to do right now is to speak for the angry, disconnected masses, from millennials to Baby Boomers. And again and again, I they don't really have a solution to the crises that we face in front of us. **But they're trying to be the representative of everyone that that is looking towards the future and sees it; sees a dead end.** And for those of us that are not looking for those representational status form of politics, we've got to realise that we are very different than the rest of these people that are seeing history play out as this progressive march towards some different form of state power, some different form of capitalism; which is completely the opposite of what we're pushing at.

**TIA #2:** And this is this is really the crux, right? **I think a lot of the discussion of the Left and the post-left over the last few years has really broken down to a question of people flinging recrimination and their own identities back at each other.** Post-leftism has become, in some ways, a label. And that's really unfortunate; it's become post-left-*ism*. Really, the importance of this distinction is not a word game. And it's not just purely punk rock, DIY, obstinance, or something like that. The importance of this distinction is really a distinction between two fundamentally different approaches to how we exist in the world. One of which: this kind of leftist approach is really grounded in this idea that human life is understandable by any individual in its totality; that there are some universal truth in a deterministic universe that we all exist within and that differences aren't really there. That we all exist within a narrative that is able to be articulated. That we all exist within a future that's able to be determined before it happens; that can be determined by (in the Leninist sense) a group of specialists who are able to tell us how we live.

And whether those are Leninist specialists or whether the specialists come in any other form, that's really a vision of a life which exists in a universe which is already decided upon. **As opposed to this other idea, which is fundamentally the opposite of that; which is the concept that life is fundamentally indeterministic, that we make our future, just like we made history.** That we made history through the innumerable actions that were taken by others, for good or bad. **And that the future can also be up to us, but only if we unleash the possibilities of the present. And only if we do that through a revolt.** And if we refuse the tendency to try and define that, and channel that and turn that into some abstract conceptual utopian project that is meant to completely eliminate the differences that allow resistance itself to be possible.

That's what's really at stake in this discussion, that it's not purely just this question of old stodgy leftists and new hipster post-leftists, and so on. That it is really a fundamental question of whether or not – in a moment of existential crisis, which I think we all feel – whether we are going to do what some have done (which is retreat back into the sort of utopian, ideological grand narratives) or whether we're going to reject that tendency in its entirety, and trying to reconstruct political resistance under a completely different series of ideas. Which aren't meant to channel that resistance, which aren't meant to have that resistance end in some utopian project; which aren't meant to try and define what people do, and how they do it, or where they come into resistance from. That's what's really at stake, because it's not just a question of some sort of political label. It's really a question of how we understand how we exist in the world, and how that existence interrelates with our own dynamics of revolts and uncontrollability and resistance.

**TIA #1:** I also want to make a point. I realise that a lot of people are in small towns that are listening to this; a vast majority of people that interact with It's Going Down are sort of new to this whole thing. I'm not saying that your friend down the street that isn't an anarchist, that's a leftist, is your enemy or something like that, or you shouldn't work on a project with them. What we're talking about, or at least what I'm trying to articulate, is not something that's about like rank-and-file people (or your dad that's a member of a union is a bureaucrat or something like that); that's not the issue. The issue is not about rank-and-file people. It's about how organisations that have authoritarian, recuperative or bureaucratic politics act in relation to autonomous and dynamic social struggles and movements which we are part of, which is always trying to recuperate them and take them over and use them for their own means. We're also not arguing you shouldn't work with people of other tendencies or something like that. I don't want people

to walk away listening to this thinking that's what we're arguing for, that's not necessarily what we're getting at.

We're trying to... at least what I'm trying to articulate is that what I would like is to see us fundamentally go through a process of thinking about is essentially, who literally are our comrades? And who are we trying to have a conversation with? And who are we trying to build with? Is it just lefty groups? Is it just the liberals at the farmers market, who are slightly easier to talk to you than everybody else? Or is it people that are feeling the effects of capitalism and the state and civilization day to day, and trying to build movements and projects out of those relationships, and with dealing with the tensions in class society and capitalist civilization?

There was a great interview we did with the people involved in Parkdale Organise [*ed. – self-organised rent strike campaign in Toronto*]. The person that we interviewed said, "Look, stop looking to the Left; stop looking to the alphabet soup of groups." A couple of years ago, there was all these climate marches. I remember going to one and it was literally just a sea of different tables of lefty groups where they might have had like five members and they're fighting over the same group of progressives and liberals that show up to these things; you know, maybe sell a t-shirt or get a new person to sign up to come to their meeting or something like that. Really, there wasn't that much organising there. It was just about people kind of like keeping that thing going, keeping that circle of people going forward and forward, as opposed to like actually organising or actually working on a project that was building some sort of thing as part of a movement or engaging people in the real world.

I think that the point that the people in Parkdale made was well put. They were able to build a really dynamic autonomous, militant, radical organisation out of their neighbourhood and engage in massive tenant strikes. And they did that by organising in a grassroots way, with people that lived in their neighbourhood, as opposed to sitting down with a bunch of liberals and progressives and tankies and saying, "How are we going to make this work everybody?" It wasn't like that. If it had of been, it would have been a fight over who gets the credit. Who gets to be in charge? It would have been a shitshow.

**TIA #2:** To all those people that are doing active organising; **just like everything else, people can't be reduced to their own political identities.** You might find someone who is a member of an alphabet-soup Communist Party who's actually kind of down; it does happen. A lot of people join those groups, because they're the first group they run across, and they're mad, angry and anti-capitalist and don't know anybody else. And so they join the PSL or something. It definitely does happen.

I think there's always two sort of cautions that I give to everybody. Because when we're venturing out into the world of organising – if that's something one chooses to do, and that's one thing a person can choose to do; there's many other forms of intervention. But if one does choose to venture into that world, you always need to be able to maintain your own autonomy in that space. **If you let that autonomy get away, you will end up becoming a volunteer, essentially. You'll be just one more person handing out flyers or whatever; you'll lose your ability to engage on your own terms.** And always make sure that if you're out there, make sure that you have the ability to engage in your on your own terms. If you cease to have that ability, go start something else, which might be hard and might be difficult, especially for people in small towns, but it is not worth all the time and energy that goes into campaigns when we can't maintain our own autonomy to act as we deem fit.

**TIA #1:** I also want to point out, the instances in which we do see mass coalitions being formed (for instance, like PopMob in Portland [*ed. – to creatively counter the so-called alt-right*], which is definitely comprised of lefty groups and even some non-profits); the kernel of that, though, is what makes it work is the fact that it's based on an understanding that people are respecting everyone's autonomy, and they're respecting the diversity of tactics [*ed. – see the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.4; Violence, Non-Violence, Diversity of Tactics*]. That's what makes it work. It's not because it's some top-down leadership, where everyone has this left-wing unity per se where everyone agrees to the same line. It's that there's a tactical understanding that there's an openness to the autonomy of all the groups, and that there's a fundamental agreement based on shared principles, that people are going to respect that autonomy. People are going to respect that people are going to take different forms of tactics, and everybody has a different role to play. But we're all in this together, in that sense that we're all acting in a trajectory together, even though we may choose different forms in which that action takes.

**I think that's respectable. And I think that if we're going to engage with people that that should be fundamentally the way that we do that. The work that was put into the so-called St. Paul's principles, which came out of the RNC protests<sup>7</sup> many years ago, which essentially are just that; that groups, if they're going to work together, they don't work with the state, they don't talk to the police. They don't talk to the media about internal discussions within the movement, and also that there's a fundamental respect for everyone's autonomy and a fundamental respect for diversity of tactics. And also the people engaging those tactics aren't necessarily going to do something that's gonna impact another group, if that's not what they want to do, too.**

I think that that's a fundamental, going forward; something that we should probably work harder to reinstitute. Especially, you know, it's interesting; in the past weekend, across the US, while a lot of the eyes were on the Boston so-called Straight Pride parade.<sup>8</sup> I mean, there was probably five mass anti-fascist mobilizations. There was something in Berkeley wherever about 300 people came out. There was a handful of far-right trolls; 300 people showed up even without nothing on It's Going Down really about it besides some tweets. Lots of people showed up in Hillsborough, North Carolina: 1,000 people took to the streets against the [Klu Klux] Klan. In Madison, Indiana, there was a couple hundred people that showed up against the Klan, shut down their little "KKK Cookout" of like 10 people with two pizzas, they were shut down. In Boston, there was like 3,000 people that showed up against the Straight Pride parade, which was 100 people at most. These are massive, massive things that are happening still. Some of these things weren't even on our radar here at It's Going Down. It's like, holy shit, this stuff is popping off.

People are getting organised, people are building those relationships. And I think that's great. I think that we can continue to push for those politics of autonomy, of direct action; which to me, are counterposed to top-down, bureaucratic, authoritarian, recuperative politics.

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<sup>7</sup> ed. – Against the political circus of the Republican National Convention; in that year in question, the regular anarchist counter-mobilisation set notable precedents in terms of coordination, strategy, and infrastructure, in front of an almost unprecedented degree of State repression.

<sup>8</sup> ed. – Featuring speakers linked to far-right chauvanists like the Proud Boys, called – on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall anti-police riots by transwomen and their accomplices which launched (although now is often forgotten by) the Pride march phenomena; see **Reclaim Your Queer Fucking Life!** – to counter Boston Pride.

**TIA #2:** You can – even if you’re in a small town, and your five friends are all socialists or whatever – totally organise with them. But that organisation – that process – has to come from a perspective of mutual respect, trust, autonomy. That’s the building block. It doesn’t really matter whether someone’s a member of the PSL, because the PSL, for as much as it tries to present itself as a unitary top-down organisation, in itself is not that. It’s made up of a lot of people with their own motivations and their own reasons that they’re coming to this, their own politics; for as much as they want to parrot the party line. They have their own understandings of that; that’s just basic existential sort of forms of existence. They’re people; they have their own histories and lives.

So it’s never a question of never organising with a Democrat or never organising with an alphabet soup communist or whatever. It is a question of the form that that takes; and really thinking through when we’re going to take action. Who do we trust? Why do we trust them? What is the context that action is being taken in? Can we maintain our autonomy to be effective when we choose to?

Because we might not; we might choose to just go to marches for a while. And for a lot of people, that’s not a bad way to sort of break in, and start to get used to the flow of things. But generally, being able to keep that autonomy, and being able to approach people where they’re at (whether that’s your neighbours, or the person at the anti-racist meeting, or whatever). Those are choices that you yourself are allowed to make. And we need to be able to be assertive in our ability to make those choices. And to resist the attempts to bureaucratize what we’re doing; to turn it into some sort of unitary structure that stifles our ability to resist the way that we feel we need to.

Because that is something that you yourself, and only you, have. And the only way that that ever gets compromised, is if we don’t recognise those things as they’re happening. And we allow ourselves to be resigned to that fate. Even if that means being out there on your own. Sometimes that’s the right decision.

**But in most cases, at least in my experience (I’ve been doing this for a long time), it’s not. And most of the best experiences I’ve ever had come from organising with people that aren’t anarchists; that are just neighbours, or people a couple blocks over dealing with gentrification, or people who are resisting police brutality, or people I work with, but not necessarily people who identify politically in the same way that I do. So we have to be very open to that. But we also have to be just as aware of the dynamics of how that’s playing out. And who might be trying to come in and bureaucratize what’s happening. We have to maintain uncontrollability as a primary principle.**

**TIA #1:** I think the other thing to keep in mind is that, you know what, Trump is not going to be here forever. Much of the Left is going to follow where the Democrats go. And, you know, when the Democrats come to power, you’re gonna see a lot of these people that used to be in the streets with us: they’re gonna go home for a while. A lot of people are maybe going to try to get a job within the new administration or get a job cozying up to the new people in power, or, pushing within that new administration to make different reforms or demands or something like that. So we need to also think about what happens after Trump is gone; because we’re going to continue to do this no matter who’s in power, and we need to continue to not lose our momentum and keep building when the Democrats inevitably get into power.

**TIA #2:** Digging into experiential narrative for a bit; this is exactly what happened in the anti-war movement, 2004 [*ed. – see ‘Each of Us Picks Our Own Mischief’*]. All the Democrats left

and went to go campaign for John Kerry, and then just kind of dropped out. And what we were left with was a group of alphabet-soup communists trying to control an uncontrollable group of anarchists until we got sick of it and just struck out on our own.

**TIA #1:** The other aspect of that, too, is that this was coming after the anti-globalisation movement when essentially the anarchist political mode of operation had essentially won the day. That's how people organised; horizontal power, affinity groups, spokes-councils, you know, blah, blah, blah, direct action, diversity of tactics, so on and so forth. I mean, obviously, there's a lot to talk about in that; we'll have to do a podcast on the anti-globalisation movement itself.

But essentially, that's what won the day in terms of mass organising. And then 9/11 happened, people got scared, people retreated. And then the anti-war movement began. It was basically dominated by Answer coalition on the West Coast. And on the East Coast, it was United for Peace & Justice, which was not even so much a Marxist-Leninist front group, it was more or less like a progressive (I wouldn't even call it anti-capitalist) peace group.

**TIA #2:** But when we struck out on our own, one of the things that happened – especially in relation to United for Peace & Justice – was that anarchists asserted their autonomy.

**TIA #1:** In the face of leftist leadership. So it was a revolt not only of the present conditions, but also a revolt against “the Left” itself.

**TIA #2:** Yeah, and there were a couple of moments where those things happened in person, at conventions; where anarchists would walk out, when we were being told that we wouldn't get legal support for direct action. **But what the result of that was, was the building of a lot of the infrastructure and tactics and theory and modes of operation and networks that construct modern American anarchism today;** that we maintained our position of uncontrollability, we didn't allow ourselves to get sucked back into the anti-war coalitions. And really what has happened in the anarchist space: since then, it's never really been the same.

That we went from a group of people that were largely amateurs, especially anywhere outside of the West Coast. We were kids. And we became people that were coherently capable of carrying out relatively effective political action. And to do that at scale. And within three years, we're doing things like the RNC in St. Paul and the G20 in Pittsburgh [*ed. – successful anarchist participation in counter-protests to that summit of world leaders*]. And that has a very direct lineage to things like Occupy.

A lot of the tactics that we're seeing today; those evolved because we were willing to assert our uncontrollability, in a context of popular front politics. What that meant was that we had to go alone. That wasn't a decision that I think anybody that was there for those confrontations inside of the anti-war movement regrets at all; that it was probably the best thing that we ever did.

This is very instructive, in a lot of ways. A lot of us entered the anti-war movement thinking that we would have a space, and asserting a space; and then when we got pushed back we left. **This is something that we all need to be willing to do. It wasn't not scary. It wasn't that we bounce back without any consequences or anything like that. It took years to really find our feet and rebuilt. But when we did, we rebuilt on our own terms.** And that was the important part. And we carried a lot of resistance movements, not entirely, but a lot of the kind of big headline-grabbing resistance movements, all through the end of the Bush administration into Obama. Because we were willing to strike out on our own.

That's something that even people in small towns, that history is something that we all need to know; because we almost didn't do that. And the present would be very different if we hadn't.

And understanding where those thresholds are and when it's time to just cut and go do your own thing is really critical if we want to maintain our ability to be involved in a process of re-making what resistance looks like, and breaking it outside of those tired traditional, bureaucratic, ideological moulds that we were left with after the end of the Cold War.

**TIA #1:** For sure. People are going to see; there's gonna come a moment like Occupy or like Black Lives Matter where it's going to seem like the sea is going to open. Or like if you were involved in the explosion of Abolish ICE [Immigration & Customs Enforcement],<sup>9</sup> sometimes these things come and go within the span of a couple months. Even Occupy, which for those that live through it seemed like maybe a decade was really, we're talking about maybe what three or four months. In terms of the camp start and then kind of the rise and fall of the actions and maybe crescendoing with the port shut-downs.<sup>10</sup>

But, again, like these explosions, where do they come from? A great point that CrimethInc. made on our podcast was that if we remember Occupy, Occupy began with an idea from Ad-busters.<sup>11</sup> And their original idea was that we were going to choose one demand [*ed. – a presidential commission to “separate money from politics”*]; and if we could agree on this one demand that this could somehow build into like a mass movement around this one demand, and then we would somehow get this one demand met, maybe, and I don't know, it would grow from there.

Interestingly enough, it wasn't until people were attacked on the Brooklyn Bridge when they marched out during the Occupy encampment... because I remember when I first heard about the Occupy movement, supposedly in New York, I was thinking like, “this sounds dumb, it's gonna be like another dumb protest, it's gonna be a bunch of people with crappy signs standing around.” Which was definitely an aspect to Occupy at some points... but like, “this is gonna be silly, who wants to just stand around outside? This is gonna be another lame protest, boo, ha.” But all of a sudden, these people went on a bridge, they got beat up by the cops. And I remember watching... there was a website called Occupy Together, and you could literally at one point, I remember, you could refresh that thing. And you would see new cities popping up that were forming Occupy encampments.

No one knew what the hell was going to happen. No one knew what was going to take place. **But again, where did this come from? It didn't come from “the Left.”** It wasn't the heads of

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<sup>9</sup> ed. – The same year of this recording; to cite 'Melting ICE, Confronting Fash: Your Guide To a Hot Summer' for just one snap-shot of the moment (which in cases shut down ICE centers for weeks): “In just the last week alone, Trump has openly called for the rounding and mass deportation of millions, only days after it was revealed that migrants will now be housed in concentration camps formally used to intern Japanese-Americans during World War II and ICE officials will now no longer officially keep track of how many detainees die in US custody. [...] As this is being written, people have just finished over 24 hours of occupying the area outside of the ICE facility in Portland, Oregon. Protests several days ago took place in Detroit against the potential deportation of Iraqi refugees. In Florida, mass marches and protests continue against the Homestead child detention center, where thousands of children are being held. In Chicago, people are gearing up for marches against several detention centers, while the FANG collective has called for a week of action[...] These upcoming days and weeks of action give us opportunities to gather regionally and build our collective power, experiment, and also offer solidarity to others on the front lines. June 22nd: Demonstration against opening of former Japanese concentration camp to be used for migrants. Rally in Lawton, Oklahoma.”

<sup>10</sup> ed. – Targeting the major Pacific ports of Oakland, Portland, Longview, Seattle, San Diego, Vancouver and Long Beach, as well as in Hawaii and Japan, against union-busting maritime conglomerates; Wal-Mart distribution centers were also blockaded in Denver, Salt Lake City and Albuquerque

<sup>11</sup> ed. – Canadian non-profit, inspired by artistic subversion but ultimately not a radical project, as their experiment with “grassroots capitalism” – through a slick marketing campaign for their (supposedly) ethically-produced sneakers modelled after corporate giants – shows.

unions, or all these big non-profits, or all these big Marxist-Leninist parties (or “big,” you know, these formations) were sitting down and making this thing happen. No, they hated Occupy. I mean, go back and read from the socialist press, what they thought about the Occupy movement; they hated it, because of its autonomous horizontal nature. They hated the assemblies, they hated that it was basically people coming together, essentially talking about a society and about life and what they were going to do. I mean, they hate that. And they hated the fact that places like Oakland made it very clear: we don’t want the police here, we don’t want the city here. We’re not here to elect anybody into government. We’re here to organise ourselves to carry out actions and also to feed people, to have a giant commune in the middle of the city. And that’s exactly what happened.

This will be the last point I make. But if we go back to a more contemporary example – again, another important thing to continue to talk about, and we’ve talked about it here on this podcast many times, and we’ve had various teachers on this podcast – but the West Virginia teacher strikes that spread across the country. What made them the most impactful is that they came up against the power and control of the unions, and they pushed past it. And that’s what made them a movement to be reckoned with, is that the unions came in and said... because originally remember their strikes were illegal. They were essentially going on wildcat strikes. And you know, the government was even threatening to send in the National Guard. There was hints that maybe violence would breakout; they were really trying to scare these people and they use the unions in part to do it. The union would come back at certain point saying, “hey, now it’s time to go back to work.” And people gave them the finger and people took that struggle on their own and moved power from out of their... well actually, it was always in their hands because remember, this really started within Facebook chat rooms and people talking to each other and people talking about their desire to fight back.

I think that if there’s going to be a kernel, an ethical starting point for all struggle – especially struggle that anarchists support, and autonomous anti-capitalists and anti-colonialists – that’s really where it starts, is people on their own, in autonomous fashion, getting together and deciding to take action and not being held back by these bureaucratic organisations that tell them no. **I think that, like so many other things, is the starting point for for all revolt that’s to come, and any revolt worth its name.**

That’s really this long, awkward conversation we’re having about leftism. That’s really my main point. And at the end of the day, whether you agree with me and you call yourself a leftist or not, I think it really doesn’t matter. That’s really what’s important. I call myself an anarchist.



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