The Discourse Is Not the Territory

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When evaluations of reality become seen entirely in terms of their utility as *rhetorical weapons* it ruins a group's capacity to get an accurate lay of the land and efficiently strategize. Everything becomes about winning debates, not about ultimately winning ground.

One of the main things the social media age has done is collapse divides between private and public conversations. This leaves everyone constantly on edge for how they posture and maneuver rhetorically contra the outgroup — to the point of overwhelming honest internal discussions. Most productive conversations require a limited or specific audience. This is necessary to discuss any specialized topic or claim that not everyone on the planet agrees with or has caught up to. Since the social networking tools we use are clunky and don't provide us with fine-grained agency in who we include in a given conversation, people revert to policing audience through sharply uncivil rhetoric and aggressively tribalist social norms. This is often a very rational stopgap measure given our very primitive internet technologies.

To give a classic example, antifeminists showing up in the mentions of feminists going *"yeah but have you ever considered that women get free drinks?"* is very much akin to someone interrupting a graduate philosophy seminar to declare *"have you ever thought that the color green I see isn't the color green you see?"* Discursive exclusion is often necessary for the exploration of advanced topics or theoretical projects that haven't become universally accepted. There are far more cranks than actual theoretical physicists, and we generally consider it valorous if physicists sometimes work among each other to develop ideas further rather than spending literally all of their time teaching the ignorant. The same sort of specialization applies in political and cultural movements. Since we can't kick cranks — or just outgroup members — out of some conversations online, folks get increasingly aggressive with them and signal their willingness to get aggressive.

One standard is to barrage any outgroup member with asymmetrical argumentative devices where the response must necessarily be longer or more complicated than the initial claim. Most internet debate exploits different scales of complexity in language and argument rather than substance. This can take the form of flak — throwing up so many rapid fire claims or citations that someone is incapable of addressing all of them. But it usually takes the form of policing discourse to make sure it constantly fits simple slogans or narratives, avoiding thorny nuance that might be exploited by the outgroup. If the outgroup can point to a tension or apparent contradiction that requires much energy to explain, then the game has been lost. Thus do various camps defensively collapse themselves down to simplistic narratives and well worn rhetorical devices. They

correctly intuit that anyone introducing nuance or undermining a simple established narrative poses a risk to the entire community and could open the floodgates to sealioning trolls.

The unfortunate consequence of this however is that people become increasingly pickled in nonstop exclusionary posturing. Everything is done to constantly fend off the outgroup getting a word in sideways.

If a group depends on an underdog narrative then it becomes impossible for them to admit when they have an advantage they can press. If a group depends on an inevitable victor narrative then it becomes impossible for them to admit when they face a serious danger and adapt to it. Language becomes less about trying to accurately model the objective underlying world that we operate in and more of a weapon or landscape of contestation. But while it's certainly true that discourse is an arena of conflict and inherent social positioning, we risk entirely abandoning the individual's prior-to-society need to get at objective reality.

Maps influence the state of the world, yes, but maps also model underlying objective reality. One can talk about the dynamics of social influence in the construction of maps, but a general that has a more objectively accurate map of a physical battlefield will do better than a general that does not. At the end of the day, popular or even ingroup perception is not the universe, and the universe kicks back.

A significant danger we all face is getting locked in strategies designed to win rhetorical positioning, not recognizing that the ground can shift and still trying to keep tabs of it or prepare for different contexts.

David Graeber's best essay, in my opinion, "The Shock Of Victory," explored how unprepared anarchists in the counter-globalization movement were for a change of context. The moment we started winning certain struggles we felt lost at sea, unprepared for a change in tactics. Incapable even of recognizing or admitting that we had won anything.

What's interesting about underdog or destined-for-victory narratives is that they attempt to build up or give credibility to a position or group based not on their defining attributes — like the core values being asserted — but on a particular lay of the land. This makes them incredibly brittle in the face of actual landscape changes or even small deviations from the narrative. Members can no longer afford to even *look* in a direction contrary to the narrative, and thus they can't exploit advantages or harden themselves against vulnerabilities.

Unfortunately this is a pathology that can hit anarchists especially hard in comparison to authoritarian groups. Maoists or fascists with very tightly policed organizational cores have space to talk frankly among themselves, space to admit, as Richard Spencer did, things like "*antifa is winning*." Similarly the maoist cadre controlling a liberal group will often have a second meeting where they openly admit everything they said before the liberals was a lie and where they explicitly plan further lies.

Anarchists are less capable of deception. Not only because we instinctively recoil at dissonance between our means and our ends. Our movement is massive, decentralized, and open. In the era prior to the internet, "the scene" was isolated enough to make possible maneuvers like crying to the liberal media about how we were poor, innocent, oppressed normies — while raising funds with one another on the premise of "*you should support us precisely because we are **not** innocent.*"

Today "the scene" has become increasingly fragmented and vestigial to a larger, online movement. Some of us remain embedded in it and its refreshingly explicit spaces. But most anarchists do not have that luxury. And so our narratives and movement norms have warped to respond to a discourse constantly under siege. We must work hard to avoid being blinded. We must

remember that discourse is not merely chess moves against one another, but also a net that can be draped over and pressed up against objective reality, so as to better empower ourselves.