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Laughing at the Futility of it All: An Interview with Aragorn!

Aragorn!

2015

Aragorn! is an anarchist publisher (at <http://littleblackcart.com>), talker (<http://thebrilliant.org>), and has been involved in building Internet Infrastructure since the late 90s.

***The beautiful idea:** Anarchism means many things to many people. Classical anarchism in Europe defined itself in relief to its three opponents: the church, state, and capital. In our historical estimation, we find that anarchism in America has been known in any given time much more through its associated struggles. Decades ago, it was synonymous with punk rock. Even before that, it bore the face of immigrants: Emma Goldman, Johann Most, Sacco and Vanzetti. Contemporary anarchism has been linked to the anti-globalization movement and more recently, Occupy. The picture gets even more complicated if we expand our gaze globally, especially when we include Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Does the same fire burn in all of these times and places? Is there something that persists beyond a shared name? To be direct: what is anarchism?*

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<https://incivility.org/2015/10/13/laughing-at-the-futility-of-it-all/>

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The answer I now give to this question is that anarchism is the start to a conversation. As someone who loves that particular conversation, I use the word freely, contradictorily, and in public places. I continue to find the implications of words – words spoken out loud, not hidden behind word-processing software – to be bracing. The power of saying “I am for a Beautiful Idea called anarchism” out loud still makes me feel something – something akin to how I felt at a punk rock show (where my politics did originate), something not jaded.

But that conversation quickly turns to something else. We may share a dream of a world without coercion-in-the-form-of-the-State or persuasion-in-the-form-of-Capitalism but it is likely we share little else. I am happy to keep it simple, to talk about the glorious history that ended in the Spanish Civil War, or about how doggone rotten this world is, with its politicians and captains of industry. But of course for many (most even), they want to turn the conversation somewhere else entirely. Their interest is an Anarchism as revolutionary ideology, and when they cut to the chase, they could not be more clear what *the idea* is all about for them: What is to be Done?

This wholly other direction tends to lead to (or be) sets of men acting like pocket Lenins pretending to rigorously and honestly consider how they and theirs are going to Take Down the Whole Fucking System! (See <https://itsgoingdown.org> for many examples.) The delusional conversations about building movements and the logistics of such hold little interest to me.

I am absolutely concerned with the implications of the idea in my daily life. I am also concerned with living out, with my body, these implications. Mostly, this has involved something unattractive to many people. For me, the daily life of anarchism is one of conflict, of taking responsibility for the people you disagree with by *being* in that disagreement (versus pretending it does not exist), by not suffering fools, by honoring my hostility, and by being willing to admit when I am wrong. As I have aged, the tenor of this

Working with difficult people (most of our authors and editors qualify) brings its own rewards. These people are who I have chosen as my family, if that terminology works for you, as my comrades, in that we tend to share a lot of history and conclusions, and as my adversaries, in that we are in battles about emphasis, jargon, and audience all the time.

Publishing is my preferred way to have these conflicts because at this point in my life, a record of energy, personalities, and disagreements has value to me. In a real way, I see our work as an effort to help the next generation of rebels start from a better place than we did. The Internet is not, in fact, all that helpful here: the pacing is wrong for how the human (especially young human) brain absorbs information. LBC provides a way to get this information slower and has allowed us to show something that I was not all that sure was possible before I started. This body of ideas and the people who have discovered and nurtured them is compelling, rich, and dense. All that is left is the small problem of finding the audiences for them. – *Fall 2015*

stand-up comedy as a possible solution to this problem, but I am not sure I have the talent to be successful at it. Improv seems more up my alley, but I have not found the time to find a way that would feed me. The internet is such a great platform for comedy while being an even better platform for misunderstanding and acrimony.

Publisher's secrets: *You are part of a successful anarchist publishing project for a few years now, Ardent Press, and its associated distributor, Little Black Cart. Being entirely volunteer-run, it seems that you all are not beholden to the traditional Faustian bargain of needing to publish big sellers in order to subsidize the cost of less popular releases. This means that you can be picky about what you publish, and you are, but you all also support perspectives not held by the editorial group. What kind of considerations go into choosing what material to publish? What are the lessons to be learned from appreciating and promoting material that you do not agree with? Are there any other novel insights that publishing have taught you?*

Little Black Cart is the distributor. Our publishing arm is LBC Books, and we have a series of imprints, Ardent Press being one of them. The editorial line for our internal definition of Ardent Press falls along the lines of being a series of books that, when taken as a whole, describe our impossible position. I would prefer to stand somewhere between *Nihilist Communism*, which argues a deeply essentialist line about who the revolutionary subject is, and *Willful Disobedience*, which expresses the deeply joyous and individualistic pursuit of desires, rather than at either pole. Now multiply these tensions times ten and you have the editorial project of Ardent.

We run about four internal imprints, and work with others on their works, with the ultimate goal of demonstrating what a broad contemporary anarchist perspective looks like. It is not a position with a position's positivist singular clarity but an orientation of critique, velocity, and hostility towards the staid, ideological, arrogance of past anarchism.

changed – I am not as willing, for example, to scrap with people who are dumb online, and my living is more comfortable than most – but it is not particularly difficult to get me to shout. But at this point in my life I would almost always rather have a conversation.

Anarchism contra Activism: *As we already mentioned, anarchism seems to be a political category of many posthumous births. Now with the popularized image of anarchists as activists (or as existing in the popular imagination as a group of opportunistic political thrill seekers exemplified by black bloc), we want to know what you think of the relationship between anarchism and activism. It is clear to us that this question should not re-instantiate the theory/praxis binary. Since as early as Sergei Nechaev's Catechism of the Revolutionary, there is the notion of a radical form-of-life, where the principles of the revolution are inseparable from the life of the revolutionary. We also know there are many individuals who espouse radical politics only as a tonic for their bourgeois guilt or as a means to moralize against friends and enemies alike. So, first, what do you see as anarchism's relationship to activism? Would you contest the popular equation of anarchism with a form-of-life devoted to activism? Second, given the dangers of individuals becoming enamored with their participation in struggles with limited scope, how as anarchists are we to expand the concept of winning beyond the modesty of single-issue activist campaigns?*

There is a category that I have been using to describe this attitude on which I will try to expand here. I have been calling these people – these anarchism-means-(only)-action, waiting on the next riot, post-insurrectionary anarchists – the Strugglismos. This is an unfair (but true) smear of the way that they have reverted North American anarchism back to the old canard of “the activists versus the critics,” which probably hit its peak just before the anti-globalization period and is exemplified by the essay “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Divide” by Murray Bookchin. But to be clear, my reason for using this term is not to

smear any particular person. I like (or have liked) many of the people who have expressed this reductive attitude.

Ultimately, I fear that energy sunk into political work on the “main stage “ (#BLM, gentrification, and anti-tech companies) is work for the very politicians that we (as anarchists) should be resisting. Obviously, a lot of this is contextual, and I do not have the skill set to judge a wide variety of situations (so I do not). But there is a lot of sloppiness that is hard to pin down. This is probably particular to the Bay Area, which has a rich vein of Maoist-influenced ideology running through many of its self-described anarchist projects, but I have seen plenty of examples elsewhere, including in Europe.

To put this a different way, the Strugglismo perspective is looking for other people’s struggles to intervene in, much the same way as alphabet soup communists of front organizations (many of which have seduced anarchists). Their strategy is borrowed from the Italian insurrectionary anarchist movement, but it is quite different. Let’s see if you can tell the difference. Around 2009, the Insurrectionary Anarchists of the Puget Sound area began to throw events such as banner and flyer drops around the issue of police violence against the local population. While in the early 2000s (as early as 1995 by some estimates), locals around the Italian town of Val Susa began to sabotage and protest the building of a high speed rail line in the town. Insurrectionary Anarchists came to participate in No-TAV. This distinction, between intervention by parachute versus by political desire, is a core anarchist question (and concern). The unfair characterization of Strugglismo points to the characteristics it shares with activists of the NGO, anti-globalization, and “ally not accomplice “ variety. Again, this is not about an individual but an approach.

That said, I think that anarchists should be involved in unsexy, difficult, and slow infrastructure work. This seems to have fallen out of popularity due to its lack of social rewards (for many, it is a lot more fun to go drinking after the riot than to do Food Not

anarchists have also attempted to frame contemporary anarchism in their own image. I agree with them as far as their point goes (i.e. that there are issues with leftist understandings and tactics) but have serious issues with what appears to be their unstated assumptions about what that means. To whit, post-left means primarily a practice of criticism *full stop*, which means some version of egoism. What I like about a discussion that starts with the periodization of the second wave is that it is not doctrinaire (outside of citing the influence of the SI and the events of Paris 1968) and has plenty of room for post-anarchists, post-left anarchists, insurrectionary anarchists, green anarchists, etc. to breathe without the finger wagging of *Black Flame*-type criticism (i.e. that they are not *real* by *Black Flame*’s historically-fixed definition).

Humor: *Playfulness seems quite important to you. Comedy has a lot of functions – it can violate politeness to reveal a farce, it be sharpened into a critique, and it can be lightened to break the tension. Yet comedy can also be easily misunderstood or turn downright mean. What are your thoughts on humor? When does it work best? And when is it inappropriate?*

I am an absolutist about humor. I think humor is always appropriate, and it is a central part of what I think it means to be a human in a monstrous, horrific, and unassailable world. I think the funniest people in the world are the oppressed sitting around the kitchen table laughing at the futility of it all. I emulate that experience when I do my humor well. I used to put this into practice universally and suffered a great deal for it (the easiest examples involve being pilloried by the users of the news wire I used to run). I imagine over half of my self-described enemies exist only because they realized at some point that they were the butt of a joke (or ten).

I am exhausted by the hostility of others towards my sense of humor or towards humor in the context of Serious Anti-Authoritarian politics. I am currently re-assessing how I can be funny without the nasty consequences. I have looked into

irony, I think. That, and well, this. And ‘fuck you’ for all of you who were thinking it: I guess when all was said and done, I was nothing more than a god-damned, trendy-ass poser.

Second Wave Anarchism: *You have recently talked about a second wave of anarchism. In your periodization, the Spanish Civil War stands as the archetype for the first wave, and the events of May 1968 in France as the model for the second. This conveniently contrasts the syndicalism of the Republican fighters with the revolutionary everyday life of the Situationist International. Mind expanding on your argument about second wave anarchism? Why do you find it a helpful distinction? What would you say about expanding the periodization to all of 1968 in order to encompass all of the so-called new social movements?*

You made the argument in the question, but the second wave line follows something started in an essay by John Moore (who I still consider a greatly under-appreciated anarchist) published in the Anarchist Studies journal as “Anarchism and Poststructuralism.” I am probably drawing the line more crudely than John did, as his goal seemed more scholarly than mine (he was referring to feminism’s phases and the article is about Todd May’s anarchist contributions). My motivation is to talk about how today’s anarchism has to be understood through the Situationist International (SI).

I have made this argument elsewhere, but I think the SI provide the best, most cruel, anarchist criticism of the first wave of anarchists. An anarchist who has not read chapter 4 of *Society of the Spectacle* (especially parts 90-94) and come away changed vis-à-vis the questions of revolution, timing, and politics is probably not capable of working with people in a contemporary context. I think these questions are central, even if they are not easily answered.

But there is an issue of framing here. I consider myself an ex-post-left anarchist (aka an anarchist) and am aware that post-left

Bombs). But so-called activists doing prisoner support, food infrastructure, collective housing, etc. continue to have my respect and attention.

Final point on winning. This relates to other topics that are far afield of this conversation, but I do not understand those who orient themselves around winning. Perhaps this pertains to what I would call the “nihilist break,” but the idea that the revolution or the length of my life here on earth has anything to do with discrete victory conditions along the line of solidarity (or non-profit) groups seems to lack empirical evidence. The people who do game theory + politics’s reason for sticking with it is often the same reason as everyone else: social, spiritual, and habitual. Does anyone think we are closer to winning in any meaningful sense of the word than we were 20 years ago? 100? 200? Those who claim to be working on winning strategies have at best attenuated their definition of victory to fit the conditions they are capable of achieving. “Winning” is all rhetorical flourish. The motivations of the *Hasta la Victoria Siempre!* crowd are not dissimilar from the rest of our all-too-human concerns except when cameras (or comrades) are around.

Nihilist family tree: *The smear campaign against nihilism has been going on for centuries. Far too many anarchists have believed those lies. You stand as a clear voice within the nihilist tradition. In particular, we enjoy how you historically contextualize nihilism (here, we are thinking of the pamphlets *Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences, and Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century*). The big shock is that Nietzsche is not at the center, because for many, nihilism begins and ends with his name (especially if his teacher Schopenhauer is reduced to a footnote). Would you explain why you choose to begin your history with the Russian nihilists? How would you reconstruct the nihilist family tree? And what has nihilism carried into the first few decades of the new century?*

I will start talking about nihilism by saying that I am not a nihilist. I say this because I do not consider nihilism to be a body of

ideas, positions, and life-ways that one can be *for*. There is something about identity, the act of speaking to one's essential self-hood by using a term (set of terms, or some intersection of terms), that seems like the opposite of nihilism. I am engaged by the problems to which nihilism speaks, which I usually simplify by saying that nihilism. I am also influence by a nihilist-inflected anarchism that finds the notion of revolution to be preposterous. The idea that me and my friends have the power or pulse of others in such a way that we could radically transform society in any meaningful way is delusional; the way anarchists, leftists, and others tend to discuss revolution is like Christians talking about the return of Christ.

Such a nihilist approach/definition is unusual. It does not begin with a philosophical orientation but perhaps something experiential. I spent a decade and a half taking the world-changing rhetoric of anarchism seriously by experiencing house meetings as Important, stirring black beans (when I worked at a collective restaurant) with all the seriousness of a fanatic, fighting constantly about how tightly our values have to be seen in our daily practice to avoid hypocrisy. It took long reflection to see these activities as having value only on their own terms and not as individual steps on a long march towards something that was the *actual* goal of radical activity.

It could be said that this nihilism has been known and named by other terms prior to the way that I have framed it, and that would be true. The reason the Russians and a history snapshot loom large to me is because of the way I see their style, lifestyle, and simple-thinking as very similar to my own entry into the anarchist space. This feels much more important from a body-politic than Nietzsche's observations, in which he noted how the spiritual poverty of the Western philosophical tradition created the modern age. I guess, post-Vietnam, that seemed obvious to so many, just as the response to it seemed just as obviously to be passivity and boredom.

To directly answer one of your questions, I am not sure I would construct a nihilist family tree. I am not so attached to the word. A family tree in the sense of how would one write a political and ideascap in such a way as to make critical, driven, and exuberant people? That sounds interesting and impossible. For me, such an ideascap is equal parts punk, Nietzsche (and his children), and direct experience. But that is what worked for me. I came over-prepared to this position as a child of the failed idealism of the Sixties who met the poverty of cocaine disco parties of the Seventies. I was ready for no future, it was my mother's milk.

What surprises me now is how relevant and feeble these ideas are today. I meet (online and off-) many young people who see the weakness of rapture driven-anarchism, but few of us have many ideas about what to do about it. Trolling on the Internet seems to have become the nihilist practice *de jour*, but it has severe limitations. I hate to give the stupid movie *SLC Punk* any credit, but the way it closed out the options of a powerless political scene by perfectly described the "long term thinking" of privileged radicals still haunts me today:

And so there I was. I was gonna go to Harvard. It was obvious. I was gonna be a lawyer and play in the god-damned system, and that was that. I was my old man. He knew, so what else could I do? I mean, there is no future in anarchy; I mean let's face it. But when I was into it, there was never a thought of the future. I mean we were certain the world was gonna end, but when it did not, I had to do something, so fuck it. I could always be a litigator in New York and piss the shit out of the judges. I mean that was me: a trouble maker of the future. The guy that was one of those guys that my parents so arrogantly saved the world for, so we could fuck it up. We can do a hell of a lot more damage in the system than outside of it. That was the final