

Against the Party of Insurrection

A Look at Appelism in the U.S.

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10-09-2023

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Appelism is an informal strain of authoritarian communism that has been gaining traction on this continent over the past decade or so. Taking up elements of both the revolutionary party structure and insurrectionary anarchism, this tendency rebrands authoritarian communism as something that looks like informal networks but acts like a party.

Appelists generally do not present themselves as appelists. The term “appelist” refers to *The Call (L’Appel* in the original French) by the Invisible Committee, written by some of the same authors as the 1999 journal *Tiqqun*. This is why “appelists” are sometimes also called “tiqqunists.” Both are terms popularized by anarchists to counteract appelists’ claims that they do not have an ideology or established political network.

Appelists’ dishonesty around this is part of a larger strategy of trying to cease being visible as a distinct group or milieu (which they term “opacity”). They then seek to invisibly coordinate various aspects of everyday life towards a form of communism, with an emphasis on building and controlling infrastructure. This is accompanied by a push to intervene decisively in moments of social conflict such that those situations escalate, struggles gain territory, and people are drawn into their infrastructure. Appelists will typically identify themselves as partisans, autonomists, or communists, if at all, though in North America it is more common for them to also selectively call themselves anarchists.

The most well-known expressions of appelism come from France and are the work of the Invisible Committee, especially *The Coming Insurrection* (2007) and *To Our Friends* (2014).

In the United States, the major proponents of appelism are the publisher Ill Will Editions, the Inhabit program, and social media accounts like Vitalist International. In addition to putting forward their American version of appelism, these projects also translate and republish analysis from *Lundi Matin*, the main appelist platform in France.

From afar, the “party of insurrection”¹ can look confusingly like the ideas and activities of many anarchists, because they take certain key concepts from insurrectionary anarchism, such as autonomy and informal organizing. Distinctions typically emerge when we attempt to broach certain principles, or when their perspectives on social position and practices around power and vanguardism become significant in the course of on-the-ground struggles. Appelists cultivate this kind of confusion because being honest about their ideas is not conducive to their strategy, which requires them to change their perspectives and principles depending on who they’re talking to. Clear positions hamper recruitment, as they appeal to fewer people.

Rather than being a similar vision with a different path of struggle, the goals and methods of appelists are actually incompatible with anarchist objectives and undermine non-hierarchical self-organization. Hence this piece, in which we try to identify the methods that damage anti-authoritarian struggle and attempt to encourage a culture of honesty and internal critique that can help us better understand what we are each struggling for, as well as who we choose to struggle alongside and how.

Throughout most of this text we’ll be articulating our ideas about appelism in relation to appelist theory in order to demonstrate how our observations about the milieu are substantiated by and inherent in the ideology itself. In reality, though, most people in the appelist milieu are not theorists, and leaning on the theory to express what’s wrong with appelism doesn’t really

¹ The phrase “party of insurrection” is used in Proposition 14 of *Comité d’occupation de la Sorbonne en exil* (2006), *Les mouvements sont faits pour mourir* (2007), “The Kazakh Insurrection” (Ill Will Editions, 2022), “Civil War, Dialectics, and the Possibility of Revolution” (Spirit of May 28, 2023), and “On Destituent Power” (Tronti, Ill Will Editions, 2022).

do justice to the ugliness of the appelist behavior that we've encountered in real life. For better or worse, a lot of our deepest issues with the tendency come from personal experience, and are only verifiable insofar as they're part of the accumulated experiences of a variety of anarchists who've encountered appelists over the years across this continent.

In addition to the specific projects we can identify with this tendency, there are a number of people in the U.S. who have been inspired by appelist strategies and are trying to implement them in their networks. Since none of these individuals call themselves appelists, and often deny that such a tendency even exists, it is messy to speak of "appelists," at least in the same way that we would talk about "anarchists," since anarchists self-identify as such. In part because of this ambiguity, we think it is more useful to focus on understanding the dynamics and methods of appeldom, and critiquing the projects dedicated to advancing appelist strategies, than to try to identify conclusively who is or is not an appelist. There are many people who are around the appelist world because they are committed to the same larger struggles or because of social proximity, rather than ideological commitment to appeldom. Our discussion of appeldom in this text is meant not to alienate those people, but to offer some context and frameworks to help them make their own informed decisions and avoid being manipulated.

Many of the problems we'll be discussing in this text are absolutely not unique to appeldom. Informal hierarchies, terrible analysis, abysmal race politics, misogyny, abuse, tokenism and instrumentalizing other people's struggles also crop up in most U.S. anarchist scenes; we've all encountered it. What differentiates appeldom, and what we hope to show in the course of this writing, is that the issues we'll highlight are ones that are incentivized and justified by the ideas themselves, rather than being in contradiction with them—they are longstanding and consistent in appelist writing and organizing. Confronting these ideas and their proponents need not come at the expense of confronting hierarchical behavior and influences stemming from other directions, but instead should sharpen our capacity for critique at large and help us root ourselves in our shared principles more deeply.

THE PROGRAM: TERRITORY & POWER

Inhabit's "little orange book" is the most concise presentation of appelist strategy in the U.S., so we'll start there. Inhabit offers a program that consists of a few simple steps, beginning with the following: 1) "find each other," and 2) create autonomous infrastructure, or "hubs" (usually rural land projects or other spaces where they are "building the commune"). In this process of mass "exiting" and of gradually "subtract[ing] territory from the economy," we ultimately reach steps 8 and 9, in which infrastructure is "destituted" and we "become ungovernable" because we have built enough autonomy to make the government and economy superfluous. When these eventually disappear, the communes and infrastructure set up by appelists will have replaced it: "seize power without governing."

Creating autonomous infrastructure has been critically important for many radical movements across the world and throughout history, from conflictual squats to self-organized social centers in Europe to liberated land in Latin America. However, the proposals that Inhabit puts forth for autonomy have several significant problems:

- It's not specified who we are finding when we find each other. This allows for any number of alliances, including problematic ones, such as with politicians or people who lean

towards right-wing libertarianism. It is also very difficult, despite *Inhabit*'s detailed attention to imagery of struggles and proposals for the future, to clearly understand who and what the "we" of *Inhabit* is actually against.

- Settlers in the U.S. or Canada buying land and starting a land project, or starting businesses in gentrifying neighborhoods, typically doesn't constitute a liberatory project, but rather replicates settlement as a key aspect of how our enemies—settler colonial states like the U.S. and Canada—function. *Inhabit* skips over this problem completely and does not discuss settler colonialism.
- Indigenous-led struggles are cited as inspirational examples, but there is no mention of race or gender, nor of colonization, as ethical or even strategic concerns en route to destitution. To completely omit discussion of race in a struggle based in the United States—or anywhere, for that matter—amounts to a variation of colorblind racism. Breezing right past any discussion of gender roles in the "commune" is yet another cost of *Inhabit*'s unrelenting emphasis on what we have in common. "The commune" is turned into a mythic superior entity into which individuals, with all their messy differences and varying experiences of systemic oppression, are asked to melt for the common good.
- The concept of "destitution," in which partisans "starve" the economy by not participating in it, assumes that capitalism and the state power behind it will wither away if enough people exit from their grasp. This idea is just hopelessly historically inaccurate, and it would seem to encourage our struggles to be less conflictual, when in reality conflict is integral to any battle against the state.

The simplicity of this program is a marketing strategy, designed to appeal to as many people as possible, and it's from this approach that many problems emerge. Who we organize and live with, who we align ourselves with, our complicity with capitalism and other forms of oppression, the need for risk-taking and violence, the relationship between our personal desires and our responsibilities to others—these are all complex questions that we are constantly navigating as we move through this world towards anarchy. No little orange pamphlet advertising a nice-sounding "life in common" and glossing over the harsh realities of racism, gender, and settler colonialism can provide the answers.

We have often observed appellists drawing false equivalencies between their land projects and Indigenous attempts to defend and/or reclaim ancestral territory and traditional lifeways. This is counter-productive to the success of the latter projects. As the authors of "Another Word for Settle" write, this kind of "'back to the land' politics [...] at worst set[s] the stage for the development of twisted settler claims to Indigenous land," claims that "will shatter the relationships we should seek with anti-colonial Indigenous allies, and risk strengthening settler reactionary tendencies that we should be fighting."²

² "Territorial autonomy, if seen as a strategy for the destruction of capitalism and the state, includes the long term work of developing zones where cops cannot go, where the means to sustain and reproduce those who live there can be found, where a large group of committed and connected people of all ages has the means and the need to defend that territory, over generations. We can look to where this work has already been done for hundreds of years to see examples: Wet'suwet'en territory, Elsipogtog, Barriere Lake, Six Nations, Tyendinaga, Kahnawá:ke, and Kanehsatà:ke. This work has by and large not been done for hundreds of years by non-Indigenous communities – we are starting

The directive to accumulate property pops up again in the equally programmatic anonymous text “How to Start a Fire,” which does not instruct the reader on arson but does offer the laughably tone-deaf advice to “organize to purchase housing as soon as possible” and to “rent space. Better yet, buy buildings, get property.” Much of their description of building something in common while not “obsessing over the morality or ‘internal dynamics’ of such ventures” could easily describe any type of collectivity—a homeowner’s association, for example. The moments in their writing when they elaborate on what their vision of territorial autonomy might actually look like—for example, their focus on starting businesses as part of their revolutionary project—demonstrate that their utopia is painfully bland, carefully managed, and (based on our experience) very likely built on family money.³

THE PERSPECTIVES: COMPOSING THE PARTY

Appelism is not the only radical tendency that proposes authoritarian approaches to struggle, just one that can be harder for anarchists to clock. Appelism draws from certain communist and other leftist⁴ traditions in significant ways, but dresses old ideas up in hot new language and aesthetics so they seem cutting edge and can sneak in unnoticed.

Anarchist theorists abroad have suggested that, more specifically, appelism is a descendent of Blanquism. This ideology is an authoritarian communist strain of insurrectionalism based on Louis Auguste Blanqui’s idea that revolution should be carried out by a relatively small vanguard of highly organized conspirators in a secretive party structure, positioned to lead insurgents through a unified strategy.

The authors of “Blanqui or the Statist Insurrection” write: “[Blanqui’s] conception of insurrection as the result of a strategic movement and not as a social event led him to conclude that the end justified any means. For him, it was not the method that counted, but the result, that is, the effective conquest of political power” (26).

Furthermore: “If the insurrection is defeated despite the courage and enthusiasm of those who take part in it, it is because ‘organization is missing. Without organization, there is no possibility

from zero, and thus even if prioritizing our own territorial autonomy seemed ethical, it would not be likely to be strategic because settler communities in a settler society have much less structural conflict with the colonial system. It does not make us weaker to prioritize the fight for the territorial autonomy of communities of which we are not a part. It makes us stronger, if by doing so we build relationships that contribute to revolutionary contexts in which the goals of settler revolutionary networks converge with those of anti-colonial Indigenous groups” (“Another Word for Settle: A Response to ‘Rapprochements’ and ‘Inhabit,’” 2021).

³ From *The Coming Insurrection* (2007): “There is no reason that the interminable subsidies that numerous relatives are compelled to offload onto their proletarianized progeny can’t become a form of patronage in favor of social subversion.” From “The Next Eclipse” (2018): “A craft brewery or ice cream company that builds its own local production network can be a partisan project”. From “How to Start a Fire” (2017): “Get property. Pirate radio. Build stoves. Learn to cook. Learn Languages. Get arms. Open street carts and businesses. Occupy buildings. Set up cafes. Diners. Restaurants. Pizza shops. Book stores. (...) The family lake house is repurposed to sleep a hundred for a summer strategy meeting. Slowly, something is growing.”

⁴ The term “leftist” comes out of the parliamentary division (in European and other countries) between right and left among elected political representatives. Leftism in the U.S. context similarly is embedded in the mechanisms and perspectives of a radical wing of a political tendency that includes such representatives. As such, leftism often involves big-tent approaches to organizing, as well as a tendency towards wanting to manage and control struggles, which usually end up being in conflict with anarchism’s more liberatory principles. We reject the inclusion of anarchism within the left in order to clearly distinguish ourselves from those kinds of compromised and managerial tendencies.

of success.’ This seems obvious, but how does one obtain this organization, this coordination, this agreement between the insurgents? Through the horizontal, pre-emptive and widespread diffusion of an awareness, of understanding, of an intelligence of the necessities of the moment (anarchist hypothesis), or through the vertical establishment of a single [militaristic] command that demands the obedience of all, who are kept in ignorance until the necessary moment (authoritarian hypothesis)?” (23). This authoritarian theory of insurrection is expanded with the influence of the Italian communists of *Autonomia* during the ‘70s, with their emphasis on lyrical style and forming networks of autonomous spaces, as well as the Situationists, with their self-appointed position of the intellectual avant-garde.

Appelism also takes up the more traditional communist idea that the international working class is the main character of anti-capitalist struggle, but repackages the idea as the “imaginary party” of insurgents against capital. When reimagined as informal, individuals across the world don’t have to get a membership card to be in the party, and in fact they rarely consent (or are asked) to be included in the appelist strategy. This is very different from an anarchist framework of internationalism in that it effectively subsumes diverse struggles, creating the image that everyone is contributing to a grand plan that has already been set in motion by others, instead of recognizing those struggles on their own terms.

Along with other varieties of authoritarian communism and the broader Left, appelism calls on us to unify under some banner (imaginary or otherwise) under which individual dissension or internal conflict is viewed as divisive or counterproductive to the vaguely articulated common goal. In appelist discourse, this manifests largely around the idea of “composition” and the vague shared goals of an international “imaginary party.” That is, their politics rely on a rebranded version of up-down realignment, in which left-right distinctions among the proletariat are less important than our common fight against the “elite.” Composition is their theory of how these different interests, from good citizens to those they deem “Black proletarians,” can unify into a “historical force.”

Composition attempts to steer different sectors of a struggle or movement in the same direction (towards the appelist vision of victory), by fabricating (and enforcing) consensus on aims and means and suppressing contradictory or dissenting voices. Often presented as a framework for embracing diverse approaches while fighting for a common goal, composition aims to draw disparate elements into a unified strategy, masking fundamental disagreements “as crucial as the relationship to legality and to institutions (parties, unions, media, etc.), the use of violence and the open door to negotiation.”⁵

The text “The Strategy of Composition,” published by *Ill Will* in early 2023, creates a false dilemma by depicting autonomy and decentralization as resulting in “non-relation (tolerant separation),” whereas composition, “if we wish to restore a horizon of victory,[...] inevitably means accepting compromises.” Composition lays the groundwork for plain old authoritarian power. When one group’s autonomy gets in the way of the dominant group’s compromises, the unruly actors must be brought into line, or risk the movement’s “decomposition.” This framework acts as a way of pacifying uncontrollable situations, uplifting the classic “common front” to make conflicts and contradictions disappear without needing to resort to evoking “the masses”—a phrase that is out of fashion—to do so.

⁵ “Decisions, Compositions, Negotiations” (trans. Ungrateful Hyenas, 2023).

It is useful to distinguish the Imaginary Party, which is what they seek to create through composition, from the appellists who are actually in the know and who create the strategies they try to impose on broader movements. Composition emphasizes the removed, bird's-eye perspective of the expert (the composer, if you will) who oversees where everyone fits, and so is well-positioned to impose their strategy onto groups and individuals that are in actuality fighting for their own reasons and in their own way. An anarchist approach, on the other hand, involves not tolerant separation, but rather coordination and free association between self-organized autonomous networks that may have differing strategies and tactics.

Appelist authors often construct their arguments around a “we” that does not refer only to themselves, but also presumes to speak for the feelings and experiences of a broader “we” that also includes the reader. They tell us how “we” feel, and the reader is swept along into the author’s conclusions, which they are led to feel they reached on their own terms. If the reader feels some resistance or hesitancy, they are forced to bail completely and take up a position on the outside of this romantic collectivity, outside of this “historical force,” which is not such an easy thing to do. This actually draws you, the reader, into their party (or force, commune, etc).

The theory of “opacity,” which holds that their party and its networks should not be visible to the outside, is used to justify appellists’ unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of appeldom outside their inner circles. This is a distortion of anarchist conceptions of informality and security culture in order to make it difficult to identify and challenge hierarchical structures and authoritarian ambitions.

PERSPECTIVES ON RACE AND SOCIAL POSITION: EXTRACTION & ERASURE

The Coming Insurrection’s title is an homage to *The Coming Community* (1990), an influential work by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who was connected to the editors of *Tiqqun*. In this book, Agamben argues that the greatest threat to the state is a community that’s been formed out of individuals who have broken with the particular identities that are imposed on us, a community that simply enjoys its being-in-common without “predicates” or conditions of belonging.⁶

Agamben and *Tiqqun* (correctly) argue that identities like race, gender, and nationality are imposed on us for the purpose of social control. It’s important to fight the ways in which the state compels us to identify with socially constructed identities as though they are essential parts of our individual personalities. The authors take an incorrect turn when this leads them to “reject all identity” (*The Coming Community*, 67). While we also strive to end socially constructed identities, this is not possible when the institutional powers that created and uphold them are still intact. Refusing to consider how our respective social positions might cause us, inadvertently or otherwise, to replicate aspects of structural domination that we’re purportedly fighting against doesn’t help us overcome them at all.

Appelists’ attitudes around identities like race and gender vary widely. Many appellists and theorists adjacent to them do not ignore race at all and are in fact very vocal on the subject of its importance—but in a way that uses the racialized populations they’re discussing for their own

⁶ “What the State cannot tolerate in any way...is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (*The Coming Community*, 86).

purposes.⁷ There's also the case of *Inhabit*, which avoids considering race and gender but insists on a class-based framework, as we'll discuss in more detail later in this section.

Ill Will Editions, the U.S.-based website and set of social media accounts, publishes essays by a wide variety of authors that highlight this diverse and sometimes contradictory set of viewpoints on race and social position. A common thread we can observe across many of these essays and in Ill Will's social media posts, though, is a tendency to romanticize other peoples' struggles and project their own political framework onto them. There also often appears to be a desire to transcend race, along the lines of Agamben's approach (described above), despite the reality of its continued existence as a major shaping force in the United States.

This romanticization and projection is evident in commentaries on the activities of subcultures that the author is clearly not part of (for example, the essay that Ill Will published about sideshows). These often treat the participants like heroic innovators developing the newest tactics for the coming insurrection. These commentaries are presumptuous and feel a lot like anthropological studies. Where the appellists project an identity (the partisan⁸) onto anonymous lawbreakers, anarchists can learn from other rebels without needing to label them or make their actions legible within our own strategy.

The desire to minimize the importance of racial difference across struggles can be found in the tendency of a number of appellant authors to subsume race to class in an argument for unity. This is evident in *Inhabit*'s "Kenosha, I Do Mind Dying," published by Ill Will in 2021. The author attempts throughout the piece to bring the 2020 riots for Black lives back to class struggle, subsuming the importance of race to that of class over and over again, but we get to the crux of it in the essay's discussion of Kyle Rittenhouse and the author's notion of "fratricide."

"There is a terrifying anger that we all possess, a capacity for violence that's funneled through both 'legitimate' channels like the cops and military and illicit channels like gangs and militias. It's no coincidence that the other side of that capacity for force is the fraternal principle on which all of these organizations are founded. The desire for a sense of belonging and community are, at the core, the real driver of this violence: people will kill to belong. [...] Kyle Rittenhouse represents the funneling of suburban despair through the vile fiction of cultural war.

Exaggerating cultural differences as political—or even ethnic—is advantageous for the elites, because if America were to come to grips with the ruin they have wrought, those hundreds of millions of guns might find new targets. They would prefer we commit fratricide because a left-right civil war is far easier to manage than the possibility that we might leave their terminal civilization, and take our labor with us."

Here the author ignores certain key structural dynamics, seemingly in order to argue for some kind of unity with people on the right who are from a similar class position. In the first paragraph, the author discusses the police's executions of Black people as well as Rittenhouse's murder of BLM protesters as though they are the same thing as gang violence among the poorest and most racially oppressed populations in the country. All these examples of violence, the author implies, are simply motivated by a desire for "belonging and community." This requires ignoring

⁷ See for example Shemon Salam's work, discussed in footnote 9.

⁸ Partisan: "of or pertaining to a party or faction".

the completely different circumstances at play, for example that police (and police violence) exist to protect the state's control over its population, and, like the Rittenhouse murders, to maintain a regime of racial as well as economic subordination.

At the end of the day, it's implied, we are all brothers, and our left-right civil war is something we should overcome so we can collectively let capitalism crumble. This essay articulates a vision of left-right unity that is often echoed in appelist media; for example, some Vitalist International person casually sported a gadsden flag in a very strange solidarity video addressed to those fighting in Hong Kong. VI also tweeted the following about a protest organized by Patriot Prayer at the Oregon State Capitol in the weeks before January 6th, 2021: "as protesters skirmish with police to build an autonomous zone at the capitol, the polarization could pivot from left-right to top-bottom [...] Can "patriots" escape identity politics and build common cause with other exploited people?"

It's interesting to note the use of the term "identity politics" here. This might as well be a quote from Patriot Prayer leader Joey Gibson, who, in 2018, when pressed to clarify his relationship to white nationalists, said "I would say the same thing to them that I would say to any Black nationalist or Mexican nationalists [sic] group, we have to drop the identity of politics and focus on what is on the inside." Is VI, like Gibson, arguing that white nationalism is simply another flavor of identity politics? There are obviously salient anarchist critiques to be made of certain leftist engagements with questions of identity, but if you can't tell the difference between white nationalism and leftist identity politics, you are missing some pretty important details about how race and power work in America.

Perhaps VI has genuinely been confused by Gibson's claims that Patriot Prayer is merely a group that advocates for "peace and love," "freedom," and Jesus, but the links between Patriot Prayer and more explicitly fascist groups are hardly a secret. Long before the 2020 rally at the Oregon State Capitol, antifascists had extensively documented how Patriot Prayer welcomed white supremacists and neo-Nazis into its ranks. What's more, the apparent desire of appelists to graft their own ideas onto every instance of social conflict (e.g. describing the Oregon State Capitol riot as "an autonomous zone at the capital") leads to some disturbing elisions of the actual dynamics on the ground. Far from being anti-state rebels, Gibson and his Patriot Prayer group are rather frequent collaborators with local police departments. They are known for passing intelligence about antifascists to the Portland police and for physically handing antifascists over to riot cops at Patriot Prayer rallies. That "patriots" and police have also clashed on several occasions doesn't change that their project is simply to defend a different (more fascist) vision of the state, rather than to challenge state power. In the bloody history of the 20th century, fascist groups have often fought the police in the streets. That has never made them our friends.

Elsewhere, appelists have made appeals to sentiments that are, if not far-right, at the very least hallmarks of American patriotism. Ill Will's "The Next Eclipse" writes that "America—while flawed and incompletely realized—was inseparable from an inspiring vision of human progress." In 2012, Woodbine collective members found it appropriate to bring American flags to a protest following the murder of Trayvon Martin. Woodbine also dipped its toes into third positionism with their text "Nomos of the Earth" (2014), employing the theories of Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt as its central reference without any caveats.

While capitalism certainly benefits from racial and cultural divisions within the economically oppressed classes, the idea that racism *only* exists as a tool of capitalism is a mostly outdated and offensive one these days. Returning to "Kenosha, I Do Mind Dying," the author of this piece

avoids talking about class in the style of traditional communism, instead using the phrase “the elites,” but ultimately the idea they’re presenting is an old one. The refusal of those of us fighting against all oppression and for total liberation to see people like Rittenhouse as “brothers” is not just a historical mistake that has hurt the chances of a potentially unified working class. We shouldn’t sympathize with racists on principle, but even if we are only thinking strategically, racist vigilantes have always been integral to the maintenance of this country that we are trying to destroy.

Appelism has some very strong populist undercurrents; as we have seen, its obsession with speaking to “regular” people means that it often adopts the language of liberalism, patriotism, or the reactionary right. Meanwhile, almost anything or anyone can be part of the Imaginary Party. This leads to uncritical support for a range of populist movements, while glossing over their reactionary elements.

Consider, for example, another text from Woodbine, which discusses the Maidan movement in Ukraine in 2014:

“In its particular grey urban camo and ice-hued tonality, Maidan is but the most recent elaboration of what we have been witnessing and participating in over the past years, as it plays out in different languages, different places[...] Faced with this incredible sequence of uprisings, to ask “who are the insurgents?” —is it the workers, no, they are the middle class, the poor, wait where are the poor? The white, the black, no wait where are the black people? Where are the women?”— is to miss the point entirely, to treat a situation as an object to be judged, to treat living beings as a mass of subjects.[...]

What is unfolding around the world today—what you see in the eyes of the young man just back from Maidan, in the grinning through the gas that filed Taksim night after night, in the soccer clubs defending Cairo, you or me at Zuccotti at 4am, the kid we met there on the way to defend the park, who saw it on Reddit and just had to go, in these women giving a new meaning to cocktail party—this is absolutely singular. Hence historical. Hence common.”

- 1882 Woodbine, “The Anthropocene,” *Short Circuit: A Counterlogistics Reader*, 2015.

Both Maidan and Occupy were complicated and often contradictory moments of social upheaval. To a greater or lesser extent, each movement contained both liberatory and reactionary interventions and influences. We can be inspired by fierce resistance of Maidan protestors to massive state violence, or by the new possibilities for self-organization and attack elaborated in some corners of the U.S. Occupy movement, but it would be irresponsible not to also examine the reactionary elements present in both movements. Neo-nazi participation in the Maidan movement, or the tendency of Occupy’s nebulous anti-elitist rhetoric to attract reactionary and far-right elements, should not only be troubling, but should also motivate us to articulate and act on anarchist visions of freedom that have no space for these enemies.

Unfortunately, appellists rarely seem interested in this kind of critical participation in social struggle. For them this is “to miss the point entirely.” The same populist impulse to subsume everything and everyone into their commons, their whatever singularity, or their party, leads not only to an erasure of social position, but also to a disregard for meaningful political differences.

There is nothing in common between those of us who want to destroy racial capitalism and class society in their entirety, and the fascists who would rather see us dead.

Another example of the unsatisfactory ways in which appellists and many of their communist associates relate to social position in the U.S. is the notion of “the Party of George Floyd—the composition that announced itself in the 2020 uprising” that the organization Spirit of May 28 recently tried to popularize. The organization, which has since disbanded, used the name of a Black man who was assassinated by the police as the trademark of their Party, branding the uprising that followed as an example of their own preexisting political framework rather than trying to understand the movement for Black lives and against police on its own terms. The organization’s writings suggest that its members expect poor and Black populations to offer a new “revolutionary opening” in the United States, an expectation that is fated to cause even more racially charged resentment and disappointment.⁹

THE PRAXIS: BETWEEN RECUPERATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Appelists are often involved in the same struggles or scenes as anarchists, but their practices are incompatible with anarchism. It is not our goal to label everyone who might be influenced by their ideas as an appelist, but rather to critique those who act like undercover politicians, operating according to the age-old authoritarian logic that the ends justify the means. We refer here to those who will tell you what they think you want to hear, then move right along or get really vague when discussion begins to touch too much on anarchist ideas, making their departure from anarchist principles hard for many people to notice at first. Based on our experience, behind closed doors appellists mostly despise and look down on anarchists as naïve,¹⁰ and refer to working with them as one of their many “unholy alliances.”

Anarchism is central to the appelist mythos. Appelism presents itself as the logical evolution of anarchism, which they paint as a youthful stepping-stone to their more mature strategic conclusions. The story goes something like this—we tried anarchism, until it became clear that it doesn’t “work,” i.e. doesn’t lead us to the version of victory that appellists embrace. This narrative attracts people, often from academic and activist backgrounds, who are willing to make compromises to get results. In “How to Start a Fire,” the authors state that after four whole years of “building force” together, they had learned that “the political identities offered to us—anarchist, environmentalist, Marxist, socialist—were constructed for a historical moment which has passed. They have not, for decades, equipped themselves with the means to actually fight. We leave behind the baggage that has left us weak and burdened but still hold onto what has given us strength.”

⁹ Co-founder Shemon Salam recently released a public tantrum qua essay, “Lost in the American Wasteland,” published by the anti-state communist journal Endnotes, disavowing the Black radical tradition for not having done the revolution for him yet. See also the SM28 piece (written by Shemon and others) “Akron, Jayland Walker, and the Class War,” in which the authors tour Akron after a Black man was shot and then complain about why more people didn’t riot afterwards.

¹⁰ As an interviewee for SM28 said, “I think anarchism is in complete disarray today and should be abandoned. (...) anarchism is irredeemably liberal.”

Appelists, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more subtly, often reduce anarchism to just one more burdensome “identity” that can only lead to “impotence”¹¹ and “purism,” an obstacle to effective strategy. These theoretical gymnastics are necessary in order to do away with the ethics that are fundamental to anarchist perspectives. Without the “baggage” of an “identity,” they are free to talk to the mass media, act as protest marshals (Atlanta), spearhead the gentrification of Ridgewood, NY, with a yuppie coffee shop,¹² funnel combative struggles into negotiations with the state, organize hierarchically, or run for city council like Ill Will author Nicholas Smaligo. Anarchists have also been known to do some of these things, which is why this text is not just about appelism, but also about developing more honest and coherent practices as anarchists. There is a big difference between holding strong to the conditions of possibility for autonomy and waving anarchism as a “flag of identity in the market of revolutionary processes.”¹³

In reality, the only valuable insights scattered throughout appelist writings are vampirized from the anarchist tradition: informal organization, autonomy, emphasis on the logistics and infrastructures of domination, etc. In the first section, we discussed how the appelist focus on building infrastructure, while initially something that would seem similar to our own goals, in reality tends to reinforce existing racial and colonial relationships to land and place that are fundamental to the continued functioning of the state. In addition, the appelist approach tends to depart from the horizontalism of anarchist practices like mutual aid. While mutual aid projects aim to share resources as part of building trusting relationships in the course of a shared struggle, appelists tend to concentrate material resources and access to them in the hands of a single individual or group. This positions them as gatekeepers of material resources to ensure their own dominant position in key moments of social struggles.

Appelists also seek out power and control through identifying leaders and those in positions of power in liberal nonprofits and legalist organizations and organizing invisibly with them, i.e. among leaders (a method that is justified by the theory of composition). By restricting these liaisons to spaces where they hold social, political, and decision-making power, appelists use these spaces of apparent horizontal encounter to validate their program and amplify their power while delegitimizing any decision-making spaces where they don’t have power.

The quest for power also means that a lot of their practices are driven by optics, a desire to present the struggle as legitimate and/or spectacular to the media and “the public.” This is in part because the strategy of composition involves recruiting large numbers of people, but to us it also suggests that their desire for power makes them overly willing to compromise on certain principles. This concern with optics and public legitimacy often leads them to significantly depart from the project of building autonomy from society’s instruments of domination (which include the media and the spectacularization of struggle).

In France, the incompatibility between the anarchist pursuit of autonomy and the appelist desire for power and legitimacy came to a head at a critical moment in the struggle to defend the territory known as the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes (“zone to defend”). In this case, appelists

¹¹ A quote from “Against’ Anarchism: A Contribution to the Debate on Identities” (2018), published on Lundi Matin, the main appelist platform in France whose content Ill Will regularly translates and republishes. It theorizes: “Calling yourself an anarchist or any other revolutionary identity doesn’t help us in any way, it doesn’t increase our revolutionary potential and it doesn’t help us organize ourselves. What’s more, it isolates us and makes us an easy target for repression. Ideological identities are a pillar on which the enemy relies, and it’s up to us to abandon them.”

¹² Just a few abhorrent things the authors have seen appelists do in North America.

¹³ “Against’ Anarchism: A Contribution to the Debate on Identities.”

went behind the backs of other ZAD land defenders, pushed for a deal with the state to legally acquire the land, and did the cops' work for them by taking down the zone's defenses themselves as a gesture of good faith to pave the road for negotiations (and just happening, at the same time, to clear the road for the police to raid the territory, which they did in the following days). What will it look like in the U.S., now that appellists, brandishing the outcome of the ZAD as a "victory,"¹⁴ are becoming known presences in some important popular struggles?

As we've discussed in this section, appelist ideas are implemented through a variety of authoritarian behaviors and covertly hierarchical social arrangements that shield them from criticism and obscure the ideological basis on which they operate.¹⁵ The idea of "opacity" typically plays out as a fetishization of normativity and respectability, resulting in spaces where social norms like misogyny and abuse can continue unchecked. These behaviors are not unique to appellists, but rather are reproduced by manipulators and managers of all stripes. The specific nature of appelist authoritarianism, though, which is outwardly subtle but explicitly developed, makes them particularly effective at sneaking these behaviors and arrangements into anti-authoritarian spaces.

The relative lack of (recent) anarchist analysis in the US has left a vacuum that appellists have rushed in to fill. We think it's important for us to not republish or distribute appelist writing (unless doing so with the intention of critically analyzing it), or contribute to their projects, in the interest of not giving them any further legitimacy or enabling them to continue recruiting from anarchist spaces. Often, people who we have spoken to who distribute or read appelist texts seem to value the theory but not necessarily endorse the practices stemming from it. We would encourage people to look carefully at the conclusions the authors are drawing from their analyses of current situations and the practical implications of these conclusions. You don't need a sleek website to publish writing, and anarchists need to develop our own infrastructures for printing and distribution.

INSTEAD...

Anarchist ideas can't be put into practice through an easy program, but that's part of what's important about anarchy. Anarchy is more like a series of questions that we carry through our everyday lives as well as in our struggles against authority and oppression—this is often called "projectuality," as opposed to "strategy," since strategy is a term that is often invoked to indicate a need to sacrifice the means to the ends and manipulate other people's actions.

"The key difference between an influential, insurrectionary minority and a vanguard or a populist group is that the former values its principles and its horizontal relations with society and tries to spread its principles and models without owning

¹⁴ "The Strategy of Composition" (Hugh Farrell, 2023). We don't want to contribute to appellists' inflated ideas of the influence that their theories have had in struggles such as Stop Cop City, whose dynamics on the ground exceed and evade capture by the intelligentsia of composition. We also don't want to only cite what they say about themselves, as it gives an exaggerated sense of what they are doing. For example, Spirit of May 28 holds delusions of grandeur about the George Floyd uprising: "No other political tendency was able to find its footing in the struggle or had much of interest to say about it. In the past, we aimed to build spaces of encounter between different tendencies. But today it is clear that our party stands alone" ("Among Friends: Reflections After the George Floyd Uprising," 2021).

¹⁵ Some of these behaviors are summed up very well in an interview titled "Conflict in Movement" on The Final Straw Radio.

them, whereas a vanguard tries to control them—whether through force, charisma, or hiding its true objectives—while a populist group offers easy solutions and caters to the prejudices of the masses in fear of being isolated.[...] The influential minority works through resonance, not through control. It assumes risks to create inspiring models and new possibilities, and to criticize convenient lies. It enjoys no intrinsic superiority and falling back on the assumption of such will lead to its isolation and irrelevance. If its creations or criticisms do not inspire people, it will have no influence. Its purpose is not to win followers, but to create social gifts that other people can freely use.” - *The Rose of Fire Has Returned: The Struggle for the Streets of Barcelona*, 2012

Approaching our projects through this lens is much harder, but it gives us the tools to think critically and act for ourselves. Individuals and collectives empowering themselves in this way is crucial to the ultimate success of the anarchist project, which depends on people’s capacity for nuance and critical thinking. It allows a more accurate assessment of the world around us and what we are doing in it, which is more effective than glossing over certain realities to make the world less confusing and to find more convenient courses of action.

A few questions we could ask ourselves, while keeping in mind our opposition to authority in all forms, include:

- How do we imagine the potential impact of our projects? How is this particular project that I’m undertaking moving towards anarchy, insurrection, and collective liberation?
- How can we develop practices of care, relationships, and collectives that find strength in our differences, rather than striving for commonality through false homogeneity?
- What projects and relationships can we build that will undermine racial and subcultural divides between different insurgent groups, while taking into account the racial and other oppressive dynamics that still exist?
- What does it look like to aim beyond moments of insurrection, to when the question shifts from defending the barricades to supplying them? How does preparing for that shift influence our approach in the present?

The “Imaginary Party” structure of the appelists means that those on the bottom, who support the leaders in what they do, aren’t actually entrusted with the full strategy. While those leaders might project a charisma and sense of organization that attracts respect, many in their milieu will also come up against a lot of the same frustrations that are present in traditional left organizing spaces: hierarchy, lack of agency, alienating normalcy, sexual violence, and other oppressions. In the same way that anarchists often attempt to intervene in leftist recruitment efforts by communicating criticisms to the base and demonstrating an alternative through our own projects, we can do the same with regard to those inducted into the Imaginary Party. While we encourage rejecting authoritarian practices and the shot-callers of the appelist milieu, we leave it open to readers to decide how they want to relate to the rest of their networks.

By identifying the principles that are fundamental to an anarchist ethic and collaborating with others on that basis, we can make our struggles inhospitable to those with authoritarian ambitions, whether appelist, tankie, or DSA liberals.

FURTHER READING

“Another Word for Settle: A Response to ‘Rattachements’ and ‘Inhabit,’” mtlcounterinfo.org, 2021 (for how appelist strategy is an extension of settler colonialism)

“Decisions, Compositions, Negotiations,” trans. Ungrateful Hyenas, in *Decomposition: For Insurrection Without Vanguard*s, 2023 (for a closer look at the logic and practice of composition)

Breaking Ranks: Subverting the Hierarchy and Manipulation Behind Earth Uprisings, 2023 (for further discussion of manipulative and vanguardist practices, the spectacularization of the struggle, and the use of radicals as shock-troops)

“Blanqui or the Statist Insurrection,” trans. Ungrateful Hyenas, in *Decomposition: For Insurrection Without Vanguard*s, 2023 (for tracing the perspective of authoritarian insurrectionalism to its source)

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A Look at Appelism in the U.S.
10-09-2023

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