

# **The Nihilist Recuperation**

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In criticizing nihilism,<sup>1</sup> we do not wish to scorn this philosophical and revolutionary current nor all the people who identify with it. Rather, we want to signal a role it often plays. It is not a characteristic intrinsic to nihilism, but it is a historical and frequently repeated characteristic. First, we want to affirm that we are inspired by the powerful blows struck by nihilist comrades, from the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire and their contemporaries to historical groups like Narodnaya Volna. We consider ourselves part of the same struggle and we make this criticism from a point of solidarity.

Of all the radical anticapitalist currents, nihilism may be the only one that was denominated and to a certain extent created by the Spectacle itself.<sup>2</sup> The term “nihilist” originates in a book by the Russian writer Turgenev (an interesting writer, but in the end a progressive and not a radical), who uses it to describe the new revolutionary anarchists and socialists who were appearing then in Russia. They were the people who believed in nothing—“nihil”.

Adopting this name as an ideological identity would be like, if in a hundred years, radicals around the world called themselves *koukouloforists* or *blackblockists*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in its origins, nihilism is a term applied by the press to ridicule or generate fear around a political current.

One characteristic of the original nihilism was its absolute rejection of Christianity and any superstition or nonrational belief, and, as such, a strong adherence to rationalism. In this matter, far from being radical, they were embarrassingly out of date. At the time, Christianity was already being replaced as state religion by science itself, by the very rationalism the nihilists fetishized.

To put it another way, their desire to seem very radical surpassed their capability to arrive, through critical thought, at a truly radical analysis that could identify the roots of the system they hated.

Today, one notices the same pattern. The nihilists hate (and with plenty of justification) the Left and anything that resembles—even just a little—the Left or its practices.<sup>4</sup> But they have not

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<sup>1</sup> By nihilism, we understand a current of struggle that is not well defined but can be recognized through a certain affinity in the following questions. 1) A rejection of capitalism, the State, the Left, society (understood as the complex of forces that organize daily life), and any form of domination or pacification of conflict. 2) A practice that centers exclusively on physical and heavy attacks against the social peace, the buildings or agents of the system, and secondarily on the organization of propaganda and communication about these attacks with the purpose of encouraging their reproduction in other places (one finds a clear vision of the second priority in the communiqué of the CCF prisoners in Greece, “Letter from the CCF in solidarity with the comrades repressed in Italy” published April 5, 2012). 3) A belief in the total negation of the system, in such a way that the formulation of proposals or visions regarding self-organization or the creation of a libertarian world or community are also rejected. 4) A pessimism regarding revolution that might abnegate the possibility of “winning” and even the concept of revolution, but in any case bases the motivation for fighting not in the possibilities of realizing a revolution but rather in the personal necessity to attack and to not live like a slave.

<sup>2</sup> The “*indignados*” might also qualify, except that to become radicals and anticapitalists, participants in this movement first had to get over their very identity of being indignified citizens.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: The original version uses the word “*encapuchistas*,” modifying the Spanish word for “masked ones,” used by the press to describe anarchists or masked rioters. “Black bloc” is an imprecise translation, as it is a term that originates not in the press but in the struggle; however in the English-language press there is no equivalent to “masked ones”.

<sup>4</sup> In their communiqués of April and May, 2012, *Anarquistas Nihilistas* sharply criticize the Left. The November 1, 2012 communiqué of “*Coordinadora Nihilista II*,” claims, together with “*Lobos Negros*” the smashing of about 130 cash machines in the prior three months. The text does not specifically name the Left, but talks about an “activist attitude” and the various labor unions. The authors reserve their greatest criticism for the anarcho-reformist CGT labor union. The criticism centers on an incident in a march the day before, when the CGT peace police attacked a

noticed that for decades already, the Left is expiring. Currently, it is the Spectacle that holds much greater importance in carrying out the function of recuperating struggle. Ironically, but faithful to their origins, current nihilism is the most spectacular of anticapitalist struggles.

Its greatest impact is in virtual space: on the internet and in the media.

After a wave of attacks in Barcelona claimed on the internet by the group “Anarquistas Nihilistas”, many anarchist comrades asked themselves if this impressive series of actions actually happened or if it was a fabrication. Not because we do not believe there are nihilist comrades in Barcelona who are brave and prepared to attack—we know there are—but because many of the claimed attacks occurred in our own neighborhoods and we would not have noticed if not for the Indymedia article. One must assume that in an alienated city, it is normal that you do not learn about the happenings from one street to the next, so it might just be coincidence that the greatest repercussions of these actions played out on the internet. But we know that attacks we have committed within social struggles had a greater repercussion: they were spoken about in the streets and served as a referent—negative or positive, we don’t care—for other people outside our own circles.

Subsequently, the same group began to post videos with their communiqués, proving that the actions were real. But this did not increase their direct repercussion in the struggles, only demonstrated more clearly their spectacularity.

We agree with the nihilists that we should not wait until there are social movements to attack the system, but we do not agree that we must reject these movements and the people who comprise them. For us, it is important to get to know these others and learn whether they are grassroots politicians or real people, and as such, possible accomplices.

We remember when we were 15 or 12 years old, the happiness, the sensation of dangerous emotion, that we received to learn of heavy attacks against the system. Also for this reason we carry out attacks in the most visible moments: to create signals for other people, lost and troubled like ourselves.

It is clear that the nihilists do not attack simply for personal motives, for the pure joy or necessity of attacking—a motivation we would totally support—because they communicate their attacks on Indymedia with the intent that they be extended. Thus, there is a strategic element to their actions. But strategically, it cannot be justified for a truly radical struggle to adopt and maintain the most spectacular forms and remain above all in virtual space.

When people who were already carrying out incendiary attacks against the system began to use the initials of the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI), they intentionally chose a form that would give them a virtual force and assured that the press would take notice of their existence. When the people who would initiate the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire departed from the well established practice within the non-leftist (or insurrectionary) anarchist space in Greece, and instead of having a temporary existence and signing every communiqué with a new name (or not write any communiqué at all), they formed themselves into a permanent group with a symbolic existence and a protagonism, and they assured their success in the media.

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young person who threw some eggs. The critique of CGT pacification is right on: this oft-demonstrated tendency of theirs is a danger many anarchists sometimes forget, lulled by the red and black flag. Coordinadora Nihilista point out the hypocrisy with which the crowd accepted this action, when if it had been the police that had punched the youth, everyone would have been crying about democracy. It is a good point, although their indignation with the CGT use of violence is problematic because a labor union can pacify a crowd with much less visible means.

We only have to look at the struggles of the '60s and '70s to confirm that the press—and as such, the State—don't like to be confronted with a decentralized and chaotic struggle without a well defined enemy. That's why they fund the academics: to always define their enemy. In each case, when an armed leftist group arose that considered itself the head of the spear and wanted to lead the entire heterogeneous struggle, the press responded immediately, converting the group into a symbol of the whole struggle, fixing them up with a central protagonism and a strong mediatic presence. Put another way, there was a strong confluence between the strategies of the press and those of these groups. Groups like the FAI or the CCF, while they act like the most radical, are really returning to a form of struggle that belongs to the revolutionary Left, and relying on the media to give them their repercussive force.<sup>5</sup>

Some of them also share another characteristic with the Left: like marxists, they seek the revolutionary subject who is the only one capable of rebelling, and the only one worthy of respect. For Anarquistas Nihilistas of Barcelona, it is “the young criminals” on whom they impose their ideas.<sup>6</sup> From a very heterogeneous group such as “criminal youth”, they imagine a wide and consciously revolutionary conspiracy, even though these nihilists without a doubt know very few youth that match the description. And even though they affirm that “We want to join with all the elements of the struggle,” they leave it very clear that they reject the form of struggle, with supreme arrogance, of all the people who are not nihilists or in affinity with them.

Another curious aspect of these groups: often, their communiqués, pregnant with the tone of the most revolutionaries, are directed to the enemy. They are written to a “you” which includes the State, the rich, leaders, and reformists. The preferred audience of many nihilists, in practice,

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<sup>5</sup> For example, one notes a certain worry and disappointment, in the third communiqué of the CCF-FAI of Mexico, that the state Procurator [trans: like a prosecutor] like the media “also joins the silence and the minimization hiding our struggle”.

<sup>6</sup> Or in another paragraph, “savage, problematic, uprooted youths, those youths of ethnic minorities and low social classes, who in a nihilist-revolutionary cry begin to open our eyes” [trans: in the original, this phrase is written simultaneously from a distance (“esos jóvenes”, those youths) and from first person (“empezamos”, we begin) suggesting an unintended confusion as to whether the authors of the communiqué really consider themselves part of their revolutionary subject group]. It could be that some—although not all—of the authors of this communiqué belong to the mentioned demographic, but, on one hand, only a small part of the rest of the criminal youth are familiar with revolutionary nihilism or in agreement with it, and on the other hand, demography is a task of the State, of marxism, or of identity politicians. The quote is extracted from the communiqué by “Anarquistas Nihilistas” of Barcelona, dated April 25, 2012. In their May 9, 2012 communiqué, they make it clear that they are talking about “those kids” as people apart and they indicate that “We struggle for all of them because they are the only ones who—whether unconsciously or not—rebel against capitalist society, who suffer the aggressions of fascists and police.” It can be demonstrated that it is not true that “the kid who has to maintain his family by himself, who passes his days in the street looking for food or in the rubbish heaps” is not the only one who rebels against capitalist society, but he is the one Anarquistas Nihilistas have decided to single out as the revolutionary subject and at the same time a victim for whom others must fight. Since they struggle in the name of the only true rebel, all the rest of us are not true rebels if we differ with the nihilist comrades about how to fight.

Unlike the communiqué from May (“La ciudad de las bombas volverá a arder”), the one from April (“Nueva ola de ataques incendiarios y sabotajes...”) is really beautiful. “For us, our comrades are the ones that that instead of occupying their schools and spouting reformist proclamations, decide to destroy the classrooms/cages [the make the pun “(j)aulas” that does not translate in English] and burn the books.” Finally someone said it!

But they persist in their manipulative contradiction, one the one hand calling for broad solidarity [“We want to join with all the elements of the struggle” and “The actions are dedicated to everyone who was shot with rubber bullets, arrested, jailed, judged, and beaten in the March 29 strike.”] and on the other hand not recognizing struggles distinct from their own. For example, many people beaten or arrested in the strike they mention were progressives or leftists. So, are they comrades or not? Do they only deserve solidarity when they become martyrs?

is that which must be destroyed. But negation is not possible where there is dialogue, of any type. Despite this, sometimes nihilists celebrate their transparency or legibility to the State. For example, “this affinity and complicity [...] is found and recognized through the common desire for the attack here and now, through smoke signals understood sometimes only by ourselves and our enemies.”<sup>7</sup>

It must be said that, even though this so coherent way of living the social war is admirable and inspiring, it is a conception of war very similar to the conception held by the State itself: a conflict between two antagonists that is solved through armed actions by the destruction of the infrastructure, personnel, and organizational capacity of one of them. The fundamental difference with the State is that the nihilist motivation is the desire for liberty and not the desire for power. The nihilist motivation is based in bravery and the ideal, as such it has no limits, whereas the authoritarian motivation is limited by the calculated possibilities of winning. The nihilists will go to war even when they know they cannot win, and that is admirable. The difference with maoist guerrillas is that the nihilist scheme does not include the eventual incorporation of the masses into the political-military organization of the guerrillas. That’s another point in favor of nihilism. But despite these two minimally libertarian elements, the nihilist conception of social war leads to the militarization of the conflict (the development of the conflict according to a statist logic) and as such the increased power of the State to “read,” understand, encircle, and repress the enemy. To clarify the critique, unlike maoism or any other revolutionary but authoritarian current, we do not believe nihilism is capable nor disposed to reproduce a State, but it does take the struggle to a statist terrain.

One cannot propose the creation of a new world without the destruction of the current one. And we cannot plan the form of the new world because currently we cannot imagine future conditions. Moreso, planning the form of the world—or planning the form of any collectivity greater than our circle of acquaintances—is an authoritarian exercise. But the State does not only exist in its material forces, rather also in the social relations it reproduces, and a relation cannot be destroyed without simultaneously creating a new relation. A building can be destroyed without constructing a new one, but a relationship of alienation cannot be ended without the creation of another type of relationship. There is always a relation between the beings and bodies in the same space. Without speaking of the creation of new social relations, we cannot speak honestly about the destruction of the State. To put it another way, we have come upon a bifurcation between the proposal to attack the State and the proposal to destroy the State. The proposal that speaks most of destruction, the nihilist one, may be unable to realize it because it dedicates itself only to the attack. It would be a very sad vision of “permanent revolt”: forever attacking the symbols of the State without ever being able to touch the base of its power.

Because it is a practice of attack and not of destruction (which would also require a creative aspect which the nihilists do not propose<sup>8</sup>), it easily takes aboard the concept of violence. The discourse on violence of many (and not all) nihilists is a dialogue of opposites with the pacifist discourse of the citizen. It is a dialogue between angel and devil, but a dialogue nonetheless. Instead of rejecting the Spectacle’s dichotomy regarding violence, they take the opposite pole from pacifism within the same paradigm created by it. The oldest trick of democracy is to control

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<sup>7</sup> Introductory text to the Spanish edition of the book about the CCF, *Reventando lo existente, reflexiones del combate minoritario*, 2011, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> “Anarquistas Nihilistas” of Barcelona don’t consider themselves incapacitated for their lack of dreams, but rather more “dangerous”.

the terms of debate so that the two shown options, the good and the bad, reproduce the logic of power and the State. It is not possible to arrive at a radical vision within the statist paradigm. Despite this, nihilism from its origins has been the pole of the devil, the evil option defined and signaled by the Spectacle itself. The transcendental conflict of nihilism is this: choose the posture of the bad one that performs all the roles that give meaning to the pacifist and citizen opposition; or choose the project of radical negation of the foundations of the system and as such the negation of the patriarchal hierarchy of tactics, the categorization and fetishization of violence, and the alienated and spectacularized forms of communication.

The nihilist recuperation is a recuperation of symbolic moments of heterogeneous struggles within a discourse of violence, which is the same task the press performs in regards to these struggles, even though the press does it to generate fear and nihilism does it to generate a simplified and virtualized illusion of its own strength, within a heroic narrative of combat between Authority and the Rebel.

This narrative and the previously mentioned spectacularism are also nourished by the selection of targets for attack: they are often personalities or symbols of the protagonism of the State (like politicians or the façades of ministries) instead of the gears of the State. This focus of struggle is another thing nihilist groups like CCF or Narodnaya Volna of a century ago share with leftist groups like Brigade Rosse and the RAF. We love the thought that the bastards who govern us feel fear or—even better—the bitter kisses of bullet or knife, but we think it is neither intelligent nor libertarian to direct a large part of our attacks against the masks power wears, and in such a professionalized manner that it is almost impossible for such attacks to be generalized.<sup>9</sup>

Given that many of them have opted for a patriarchal hierarchy of tactics, for a vision of themselves as the protagonists in a heroic combat against the State, and they are conditioned by a total rejection of the Left (with which we mean to say, they do not differentiate between the Left as an institutional force and the movements or people the Left seeks to institutionalize), it is practically inevitable that they confront other anti-authoritarians who are not of the same line with an exaggerated arrogance and they confuse them for enemies.

The emissaries and martyrs of armed struggle, even though they may represent very distinct lines, such as Lambros Foundas of Greece or Marcelo Villaruel of Chile, they agglomerate and accept as comrades, as the only ones who struggle, and they speak of all the rest of us as though we were pacifists and reformists.

We know that it's not the case. We know of the many fires we lit ourselves, and of many other equally important things we have done. When they respond to our criticisms as though we were sell-outs, we know they are just afraid of the debate. It's possible that some of them have all their blood in the heart and none in the brain. But we're tired of them breaking solidarity. They have to learn to criticize other lines of struggle without adopting the arrogance and elitism that belongs to a vanguard.

We are anarchists who are critical of the part of our tradition that comes from the Left but we are also thankful for all the errors of this tradition because they are opportunities to learn.

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<sup>9</sup> Translator's note: in past debates in English-language forums, I have noticed an embarrassing confusion between the concept of generalization and the much simpler, less impressive phenomenon of spreading. What happened throughout Greece in December of 2008 was the generalization of several forms of attack. When FAI initials and methods are picked up in a couple towns in the UK, Germany, Mexico, and Indonesia, what has occurred is not a generalization. Rather, those who were already specializing in highly illegal attacks or complex arsons gave a new name to their actions and perhaps stepped them up a notch.

We believe in the total negation of all the foundations of the current system. By this we also understand the negation of its spectacularization, its alienation and isolation, its conquest and annihilation of the imagination, its dichotomy between violence and nonviolence, and its concept of militarization that has also influenced our own struggles.

We'll close with a solidaristic greeting to the comrades of Anarquistas Nihilistas, Lobos Negros and all the people who carry out attacks in the streets of Barcelona. We hope your actions and criticisms continue, but also that the channels of communication and solidarity that join us are improved.

### ***Regarding certain anarchist websites***

Previously we published a companion article to this one (“Comunicado por acciones anarquistas en Barcelona y respuesta a los compañeros nihilistas”, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anon>). It is with curiosity that we note that websites such as Liberación Total and War on Society refused to publish it. It was a communiqué for direct actions accompanied by a text critical of certain concepts of struggle in the anarchist scene. Both websites publish almost exclusively texts of this sort. We would ask them, in what moment did you debate and decide that actions of care, of the transmission of the collective memory of our struggle, of the creation of communal relations of mutual aid, do not constitute important actions? In what text or discussion have you argued why only the attacks matter? And at what point did you analyze and conclude that this does not constitute a patriarchal hierarchy of tactics, or that the patriarchy does not constitute a system of power indispensable to the evolution of the State and capitalism? Can you even articulate your own vision of the roots of the State and capitalism that do not pass through patriarchy? The truth is, we doubt that there was any such process of debate, critical thought or historical analysis. And the question no one can answer: how much damage, how many strategic defeats, will your lack of critical thought provoke, and who will be there, supporting and picking up the pieces when you fuck it up again, like so many other times that have already been forgotten?

But what really disgusts us is how other times you have published our texts, but this time you prefer we remain silent. We struggle side by side with you in the streets, but when we criticize the vision of struggle some of you have, you lump us in with reformists, leftists, citizens, and pacifists. And the most disgusting thing is that if we die in this struggle, a possibility for us as well as for you, you will convert us into the new symbols of your partial vision of the struggle.

Please, a little more self-criticism, comrades!

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