

Another War Was Possible

**Revisiting the Movement against Capitalist Globalization from Our Dystopian
Present**

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By revisiting the struggles that took place at the turn of the century from the vantage point of our current dystopia, we can grasp how much is at stake in today's struggles.

This text appears as the introduction to the book Another War Is Possible, just published by PM Press, which documents the experiences of one anarchist fighting against capitalism and the state across three continents in the course of the so-called anti-globalization movement. You can read more about it in the appendix.

It was the end of the 20th century and capitalism had triumphed.

"Really existing socialism" had collapsed. Elections were taking place everywhere, bringing new politicians to power to sign neoliberal trade agreements. In place of dictatorships, the free market reigned victorious.

Francis Fukuyama declared it "the end of history," proclaiming

the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

For politicians, advertising agents, and corporate executives, it was a time of jubilation.

The social ferment of the 1960s had ebbed. In the United States, radical politics largely subsisted in subcultural milieux—environmental movements, radical bookstores, the hip hop and punk scenes. Europe also had the rave scene, the squatting movement with its network of social centers, and the vestiges of the powerful movements of the mid-20th century. On the opposing side, there were fascists, but they, too, were largely confined to subcultural milieux. Outside those enclaves, social peace prevailed, as everyone scrambled to get their piece of the pie or waited for their ship to come in.

It was a fools' paradise. Globalized capitalism was moving wealth around faster and further than ever before, but in the process, it was concentrating it into fewer and fewer hands, slowly immiserating the vast majority. Anarchists knew that the apparent unanimity around the new world order would not last forever. Eventually, there would be another round of conflicts and history would continue moving forward. The real question was how the lines would be drawn.

We met at hardcore punk shows. We were reading about the Panthers, the Yippies, the Ranters, the Diggers, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker. When we heard that someone had spray-painted "NEVER WORK" on the wall of the Boulevard de Port-Royal during the May 1968 uprising, we took it literally, embarking on a life of crime.

Others took a different approach, drawing on a different toolset. We quit our jobs; they unionized their workplaces. We squatted buildings; they did tenant organizing. We rejected formal organization; they created federations. We hitchhiked to events; they showed up with vans full of gear.

Eventually, we began to run into each other at conferences and demonstrations. Everything that rises must converge.

An anarchist sails across the heads of the police into the embrace of comrades during demonstrations against the presidential inauguration on January 20, 2001.

Fortunately, anarchists were not the only ones who had a bone to pick with the reigning order. On the first day of 1994, just as the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation rose up against the Mexican government in Chiapas, setting a powerful example of grassroots struggle against neoliberalism. Inspired by the EZLN and other anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements, people around the world began to organize protests, networks, occupations, global days of action.

To most people in the United States, taking on the authorities seemed absurd, if not downright quaint. Corporate media journalists refused to even say the word capitalism aloud, substituting “anti-globalization” as if we were part of a worldwide movement for parochialism. The bitterest conflicts were over “violence”—to be precise, over whether it was acceptable to respond in kind to the perpetual top-down violence of the state. But the most difficult challenge was to enable people to imagine that the capitalist world order was not inevitable, that *another world was possible*.

Nonetheless, for a few years—let’s say, from 1999 to 2001—the chief conflict playing out on the global stage was between neoliberal capitalism and the grassroots movements that opposed it. On June 18, 1999, thousands of people converged on London for a day of action heralded as the Carnival against Capitalism, during which some of them almost succeeded in destroying the London Stock Exchange. The following November, demonstrators successfully blockaded and shut down the summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. Over the next two years, almost every major international trade summit occasioned fierce street conflict.

“Should we try to get across?” I shouted, but we were already running, it was a split-second decision, we were already on the bridge by the time she answered “Let’s do it—we’re doing it” and we were sprinting for the other side. Behind us, I could hear the POP, POP as the cops fired tear gas and rubber bullets; around us, I could hear the impact of the bullets, the clatter as the canisters landed, the hiss as their noxious contents filled the air; ahead, I couldn’t see anything, the gas blotted out the sky, there was only the unknown—and beyond that, if we were lucky enough to reach it, a city to destroy, a world to create.

The stakes were higher than we knew. If all of the people who were on the losing end of cutthroat capitalism failed to grasp that it was the source of their misfortunes, they would be susceptible to nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and demagoguery when they realized that the market was not fulfilling their hopes. But if we could make our case that capitalism was the chief cause of their misery, they might join us in our efforts to build a new society. There was a short window of time in which it seemed possible that we might succeed.

This was the war in which the author of this book participated—a war fought to forestall all the senseless wars that came afterwards. We were fighting for a world in which all human beings could encounter each other as equals, in which the profit imperative would not trump the needs of human beings or the threat of climate change.

We set out from the campus at noon. Hundreds of people were there, ready, suited up—hoods, helmets, shoulder pads, the works. One group was pushing a full-size catapult. I was walking behind some people who were pulling a giant puppet representing the World Bank. Sledgehammers kept falling out onto the asphalt from inside the papier mâché.

Among the crowd, I recognized his crew from the inauguration the previous January. You develop an instinct for such things, even when everyone is masked. In idle social conversations and online forums, we were rivals. But in a situation like that, you want everyone there.

At some point, the police drove a water cannon right at the crowd. A certain masked anarchist ran right up to it and smashed out the window before it could get a clear shot at us. The driver pulled away in a hurry.

Well, that’s fucking crazy, I thought. Wow.

Perhaps if everyone had been able to see what was coming, more people would have fought as hard as the author of this book. Few understood how dire things could get.

Unfortunately, we were not the only force contending to determine how the lines of conflict would be drawn in the 21st century. Provoked by centuries of colonial violence, Salafi jihadists

attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Neoconservatives in the Bush administration snatched the opportunity to invade Afghanistan and then Iraq, precipitating the so-called “clash of civilizations” they had been fantasizing about. The new century opened with a series of bloodbaths.

This declaration of war served to obscure the possibility of any other war, any other stakes for which people might fight. The authorities in the United States and their symmetrical adversaries in al-Qaeda aimed to assert their rivalry as the central conflict in history, sidelining the rebels in Chiapas and the demonstrators who had shut down the Seattle WTO summit.

In the United States, authoritarian socialist parties took advantage of the situation to seize the initiative from anarchists and other horizontally organized projects, gaining control of the anti-war movement through front groups (Not in Our Name for the Revolutionary Communist Party, ANSWER for the Workers World Party). The transformative grassroots models of the visionary anti-capitalist movement gave way to reactive protests addressing uncaring politicians.

The US government passed the Patriot Act. The FBI stepped up operations targeting Muslims in particular, but also environmentalists and animal liberation activists. Politicians expanded and militarized the police. On November 30, 1999, the government of Seattle had fielded just 400 police to defend the summit of the World Trade Organization; in 2017, 28,000 security personnel defended Donald Trump’s inauguration.

Overseas, the brutal US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan cost nearly a million lives, driving more people into the ranks of the jihadists. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria a decade later showed that the invasions had only strengthened the forces that the neoconservatives purported to be attacking. In 2010, when a wave of revolutions began in Tunisia and spread across the Mideast, it hit a wall in Syria in part because of the Islamic State and its supporters. We’ll never know what the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring and other social movements in the region could have accomplished if not for the harm wrought by the so-called “War on Terror.” When the Taliban recaptured Afghanistan in 2021, that only underscored how pointless as well as destructive the US invasions had been.

Bashar al-Assad had hundreds of thousands of people slaughtered to maintain his grip on Syria, yet lost in the end nonetheless. The United States did the same in Afghanistan. These pointless and horrific tragedies are only a glimpse of what awaits if we continue down this road.

The violence and poverty that resulted from all of these wars, occupations, and insurgencies drove refugees towards Europe from Africa and the Mideast by the million. Something similar was taking place south of the US border, as the havoc wreaked by the North American Free Trade Agreement and the militarization of police and paramilitaries plunged whole regions into bloodshed. Nativists on both sides of the Atlantic took advantage of the refugees’ desperation to drum up racism and fear.

Meanwhile, in the former Eastern Bloc, capitalist profiteering left many people worse off economically than they had been before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This generated waves of nationalism, enabling autocrats like Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán to consolidate control. Emulating their model, politicians like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Giorgia Meloni came to power in the Americas and Western Europe. They channeled the rage of the eroding middle class towards openly fascist politics, encouraging their supporters to blame refugees, queer and trans people, Jewish people, and “communists” for the ways that the free market had failed them.

Driven by rampant industrialism, climate change hammered coastlines and incinerated forests. The COVID-19 pandemic—the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation—the

concentration of wealth in the hands of a few billionaires—the genocide in Gaza: all this will be familiar to you unless it has been eclipsed by even worse by the time you read this. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will not be the last of the wars to come if we continue down this road—wars made *possible* by the consolidation of autocratic power and *inevitable* by economic and ecological crises. Looking at the weaponization of refugees on the border between Belarus and Poland and the use of prisoners as cannon fodder in Ukraine, we can see that—unless we change course—life is going to be increasingly cheap in the 21st century.

On June 18, 2023, exactly 24 years after the Carnival against Capitalism in London, the top article in the *New York Times* acknowledged what we had been saying for a quarter of a century: capitalist globalization creates catastrophic wealth inequalities, wrecking the biosphere and generating extreme-right nationalism. The article recited all the talking points of the average anti-capitalist protester of 1999, right down to the criticisms of the International Monetary Fund. Even the capitalists themselves now wish that we had won.

All of these tragedies had yet to occur when the struggles described in this book took place. Who knows—if more of us had fought harder, we might have averted some of them.

But we can't fault the author of this book. He was always in the front lines.

The anarchist black bloc marches out to confront the police during the riots in Québec City protesting the proposed (and ultimately defeated) "Free Trade Area of the Americas" in April 2001.

We ran into each other at a book fair some years after the events described in these pages. I recognized him from the streets, but we had never had a proper conversation.

Unexpectedly, we hit it off immediately. In person, it didn't matter that I was an adventurist dropout and he was a boring platformist.

He wanted to know if we were going to release a sequel to a certain controversial memoir we had published about a delinquent living on the run. "Politically, it's trash," he said. "But as a story, it's so exciting."

I didn't share his high opinion of it. I thought the humor compensated for the lack of character development, but speaking as a career criminal, the subject matter was positively banal. We had printed it as a strategy to undermine the materialism and timidity of kids from the suburbs, not to appeal to seasoned anarchists like himself.

He persisted. "Come on, you have to do a sequel!"

I told him that he should write a memoir of his own, recounting his adventures in the streets. That would be worth publishing, I said.

It only took him two decades.

World history is a vast stage. On the scale of all humanity, each of us is only one out of billions. But it is up to us how we approach our role in the drama. We can see ourselves as spectators and passively accept our fate—or we can understand ourselves as protagonists and set out to discover how much influence we can exert on the course of events.

The author of this book took the latter approach. As a result, he participated in a surprising number of the historic events of the turn of the century. The litany of his adventures attests to how much a single person can accomplish with a bit of determination, whether in a time of social peace or of pitched conflict. Fortunately, he survived and, with a little encouragement, managed to write down some of what he experienced.

The result is the valuable historical document that you are holding in your hands. Not everyone who lives through epoch-making street-fighting on three continents has the opportunity to write such a memoir. Buenaventura Durruti didn't.

Like Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* or Emma Goldman's *Living My Life*, this book offers a firsthand record of a pivotal time period. You can learn a more about what things were really like from such a text than from any secondhand summary.

But this is not simply historical reference material. None of the struggles described in this book have reached a conclusion. All of them continue on a much larger scale and with even higher stakes: the struggle against fascism, against the violence of borders, against the subordination of ecosystems and communities to the demands of capitalism, against the violence of the police and the military, against autocratic power.

Another war was possible—and it still is today. If the consequences of our failure to abolish capitalism at the turn of the century were two decades of butchery, economic crisis, ecological disaster, and fascist reaction, think what will ensue if we fail to rise to the challenge this time. History didn't have to turn out the way it did in 2001—and it doesn't have to continue down that road now. This book remains timely because it tells part of a story that *you* have to finish.

There are many ways to participate in these struggles. Physically fighting fascists and police officers is only one of a wide range of tactics, and it is hardly the most important. From the author of this book, you can learn what some of those who came before you tried and what you might be able to do yourself. We—the survivors of the previous round—will be fighting alongside you.

If we don't speed it on its way, capitalism will take another century or more to collapse. It will sweep us into wars like nothing we have seen before. The resulting catastrophe will bury all of us in the wreckage.

Let's fight together for a better future. Another war is possible.

"Across centuries of darkness, we can already see from here—the sun on the horizon of a new dawn."

Further Reading

- The Anti-Deportation Collective
- The Battle of York
- Epilogue on the Movement against Capitalist Globalization
- Genoa 2001: Memories from the Front Lines
- It's Safer in the Front: Taking the Offensive against Tyranny
- Québec City, April 2001: The Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Offensive
- "This Hotel Is a Detention Center"

Appendix: Another War Is Possible

The following is our description of the book Another War Is Possible, which appears on its back cover.

At the turn of the century, the movement against capitalist globalization exploded onto the world stage with mass mobilizations in Québec City, Washington, Genoa, and other cities. Anarchists faced off against heads of state, captains of industry, and riot police by the thousands. While the authorities sought to bend all living things to the profit imperative, anarchists set out to demonstrate a way of fighting that could open the road to a future beyond capitalism. The twenty-first century was up for grabs. And every time, Tomas Rothaus was there, fighting on the front line.

In *Another War Is Possible*, we follow Tomas from his days as a young militant to his tenure editing the publication *Barricada*. In vivid prose, he recounts the lessons he learned from veterans of the Spanish CNT—his first experience trading blows with police in the streets of Paris—his adventures slipping across borders to participate in epoch-making riots. With Tomas, we breathe tear gas, we tear down fences, we tour the squats and battlefields of three continents.

Along the way, Tomas shows that the tragedies of the twenty-first century were not inevitable—that another war was possible. His testimony is proof that another world remains possible today.

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