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We Fight because We Like It

Maintaining Our Morale against Seemingly
Insurmountable Odds

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well disposed would you have to become to yourself
and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this
ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

-Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

A reflection on how to understand the anarchist project outside
a post-Christian millenarian narrative of redemption.

“They are just ghosts, the ones who think people fight
to win! They fight because they like it.”

-*And There Was Light*, Autobiography of Jacques
Lusseyran, blind hero of the French Resistance

It is not a question of whether we can win, but of how we wish to live.

I've participated in the anarchist movement for a quarter of a century. In the course of that time, I've seen us achieve inspiring victories against overwhelming odds. From local conflicts to international confrontations, we've forced the authorities to back down time and again, securing space in which to carry out our experiments to invent other ways of living and relating. Some of these spaces have lasted for minutes; some of them have lasted for decades. We can understand the anarchist movement itself as one of these spaces.

I've also seen a lot of suffering and despair. Many of our comrades have been injured, shot, imprisoned, or killed in the course of fighting for the ideals we share. Many more have lost faith that we will ever arrive in a better world—that all this sacrifice will be justified. It can be very difficult to maintain your morale when you're taking on the global order itself.

I still passionately believe that a few people can make tremendous changes in the world around us. But I'm not looking to be paid for my efforts in some future paradise. I'm not an employee seeking the wages of revolution. I do this because the struggle itself is fulfilling.

I don't buy into the progress narrative of the Western Enlightenment, in which life inevitably becomes better and better over time and if we do our part we can congratulate ourselves on being a part of the arc of history that supposedly bends towards justice. On the contrary, the struggles we are engaged in today are very old. In some ways we have gained ground, in other ways we have lost ground, but there is no such thing as absolute victory or absolute defeat, and there are no guarantees as to how these struggles will turn out.

I don't participate in anarchist struggle because I think we will save the world. On the contrary, I fight because I know that one day the whole world will be destroyed—the earth will be consumed by the sun, leaving only ash—and when that day comes, I want the story that ends to be a story of beauty and tragedy and resistance to tyranny. I want the story we live to be a story of joy and courage and togetherness. I fight because it is a way of remembering those who came before us, because it is a way of honoring the creativity and rebelliousness of my contemporaries, because it is an act of care for everyone else whose heart breaks to see injustice and misfortune. I fight because I know that there is no happily ever after, there is no salvation waiting for us at the end of history; there is just what we do together today. That is all the beauty and meaning in the world that there will ever be, and it can be more than enough.

But isn't it more difficult to fight? Aren't we setting ourselves up for gratuitous suffering, taking on such powerful adversaries? Wouldn't it be easier to give up and go with the flow?

Each of us is bound to suffer regardless—that is the only certainty in this world. Mortality is a far more formidable adversary

-Kenneth Rexroth, "For Eli Jacobson" (December 1952)

Further Reading

An earlier version of this text appeared in *Conflictual Wisdom, "Revolutionary Introspection towards the Preservation of the Anarchist Individual & Community,"* in which longtime anarchists reflect on how to maintain longevity while confronting seemingly invincible adversaries. We also recommend:

Desert: "In our hearts, we all know the world will not be 'saved.'"
Green Nihilism or Cosmic Pessimism by Alejandro de Acosta

The greatest weight.— What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence — even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? ...Or how

There are few of us now, soon
There will be none. We were comrades
Together, we believed we
Would see with our own eyes the new
World where man was no longer
Wolf to man, but men and women
Were all brothers and lovers
Together. We will not see it.
We will not see it, none of us.
It is farther off than we thought.
In our young days we believed
That as we grew old and fell
Out of rank, new recruits, young
And with the wisdom of youth,
Would take our places and they
Surely would grow old in the
Golden Age. They have not come.
They will not come. There are not
Many of us left. Once we
Marched in closed ranks, today each
Of us fights off the enemy,
A lonely isolated guerrilla.
All this has happened before,
Many times. It does not matter.
We were comrades together.
Life was good for us. It is
Good to be brave — nothing is
Better. Food tastes better. Wine
Is more brilliant. Girls are more
Beautiful. The sky is bluer
For the brave — for the brave and
Happy comrades and for the
Lonely brave retreating warriors.
You had a good life. Even all
Its sorrows and defeats and
Disillusionments were good,
Met with courage and a gay heart.
You are gone and we are that
Much more alone. We are one fewer,
Soon we shall be none. We know now

than the state. Whether we choose to fight or not, we will suffer. The question is what we want the context of that suffering to be. Will we suffer in pursuit of the things that are most precious to us? Or will we suffer meaninglessly, attempting to flee from pain and uncertainty, as if that could protect us? My experiences in a hundred black blocs have convinced me that it is usually safer in the front.

I've made peace with the fact that we are participating in struggles that can never be definitively won. It's not a question of simply overthrowing a single government or destroying the state as a social form, but the never-concluded process of challenging hierarchy and oppression in all the different forms they can assume. This is not a project that will ever be complete.

For me, accepting that my actions cannot derive their meaning from some future goal is intertwined with the process of coming to terms with my mortality. Recognizing death as inevitable, I don't hurry any faster towards it. On the contrary, my attention shifts elsewhere, to everything that is not death, however small it may be. In a world of death, in a necrocosmos extending across billions of light years of mostly empty space, a cosmos that is already on its way, astronomers anticipate, to universal heat death, the germination of a single seed holds more meaning for me than all the swirling galaxies of dust. We may be defeated by our enemies, we are certainly doomed to become dust ourselves, but if these things are so, then the entirety of what is meaningful consists only of the moments that *something else* is happening, something other than death—be it a loving interaction between two friends, the maintenance of an anarchist social center, the development of a grassroots music tradition like punk or klezmer, an explosion of rioting, or the toppling of a government.

The fact that each of these moments has occurred will remain forever, immutable, in defiance of the vacuum. The cowardice and violence of individual police officers and of the police as an insti-

tution, the egregious acts of ISIS and the KKK—those are just background noise, death and taxes.

From these moments—from our lived experiences of anarchy and freedom—we can extrapolate a vision of the future that is not a reiteration of Christian eschatology but rather a dimension of how we conduct ourselves in the present. We may or may not live to experience anarchy on a scale greater than our hard-won friendships, love affairs, projects, and uprisings. But in the meantime, the vision of that possibility can anchor and orient us in the present, informing our actions, the way a mariner navigates across the sea by the stars. Regardless of what happens tomorrow, when we are able to imagine a utopia, that utopia can gain traction on reality by enabling us to take actions we would otherwise not be capable of. The reality content of a future utopia is determined by the actions it enables us to take today.

In this regard, my ability to believe in the possibility of change—not as something to occur in the future, but as something I can pursue right now—is a fundamental part of my power to live fully, to maintain a healthy relationship to my own agency. This is different from believing in a millenarian vision of revolution. It is not a prediction about the future, such as a scientist might make, but rather a decision about how to relate to myself and my own capabilities.

This is what enables me to take action, however humble, however imperfect, and to learn from my actions, make contact with others, and take action again. The history of anarchy as the lived experience of human beings is comprised of such actions, which will hang in eternity after every empire has triumphed and been destroyed and the earth has been swallowed up by the sun.

not only have we never had any notion or desire to
win
but not even any notion that there was anything to be

won anywhere
and then you know if I really think about it now
to me the word winning seems exactly the same as dying

-Nanni Balestrini, *The Unseen*