

# Why Nihilism?

## A Response to John Zerzans “Why Hope? (Critique of the Nihilist tendency in Anarchism)”

Flower Bomb

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For years, John Zerzan has inspired my understanding of green anarchy through many of his texts. I enjoy “Anarchy Radio” and the topics he covers, as well as his sense of humor!

I recently discovered this text online and acting on an impulse decided to write up a quick response to it! As with all my writing, I only speak for myself and my own personal experiences.

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*It's pretty fashionable, among anarchists as well, to sneer at the notion of hope, to explicitly rule out any chance of overall victory over domination and oppression. Desert (2011) sports this outlook on its cover: "In our hearts we all know the world will not be 'saved'," and repeats this statement twice more in its opening pages. Civilization will persist. It's time to give up on "unwinnable battles." In this way the misery of burnout and disillusionment will be avoided and we'll all be a lot happier(!) The Mexican Unabombertype group, Individualidades teniendo a lo salvaje (ITS), also firmly asserts that there'll be no winning. "We do not believe this is possible," they proclaim repeatedly. But it is possible. Our overcoming the disease of civilization is in no way guaranteed, obviously, but clearly it is possible. I prefer what Kierkegaard said of hope: It is "the passion for the possible." More boldly, whatever became of "Demand the Impossible"? When victory is refused are we not at Game Over?*

I haven't read *Desert*, although I have heard nice things about it. I can't help but feel John Zerzan's interpretation of hopelessness and nihilism is that of a miserable pessimism that consumes the individual, leading to either terminal apathy or sometimes, selfinflicted death. While these are very real, debilitating experiences for some, there are others who find joy in personal revolt – here and now – despite the dismal reality of this civilized nightmare.

Within the anarcho-leftist milieu, I have personally witnessed the “misery of burnout and disillusionment” for years at such a high rate I am surprised there aren't support groups in response to it! It's possible that John Zerzan and many others are unaware of the frequency of burnout in leftist circles because it is the last thing the left wants in the spotlight. What kind of “Coming Insurrection” propaganda would expose the misery that results from the laborious task of indefinite, radical organizing and “community building” while chasing the hope of a “mass uprising” or victorious “revolution”?

But for some, it is in the moment of mental exhaustion that a new and exciting thing happens: a personally liberating experience freedom from hope!

Is it *not* a personal "victory" to shed the shackles of obsessive positivity? Is it really "game over" when an individual begins to assert negativity toward the sterilization of leftist, over-hyped positive politics?

*We might recall Herbert Marcuse's OneDimensional Man, which announced the apparent end of radical possibilities, the definitive triumph of consumerist unfreedom. He was delighted to have been proven wrong within weeks of the book's 1964 appearance by the beginnings of a global movement that shook the world. And as the global system now shows itself to be failing at every level, shows itself to have no answers at all, there stands every chance of qualitatively surpassing the Movement of the '60s.*

*But not, needless to say, if we renounce any hope of overcoming. It is wellknown that health and recovery from illness is tied not to hopelessness but its opposite. Consider the Serbian Danilo Kis's last novel, Psalm 44, about a young family's will to survive and resist in Auschwitz, where visualizing hope is a "necessity." For us and all life, matters are grave but we are not in Auschwitz. And yet we spurn hope?*

In response to this I would like to share a quote:

Though we have inherited a great many ideas about how to confront domination, we know that nothing is set in stone. From the shattered tools and bones of our predecessors, we craft our own weapons. Nothing is guaranteed to work, yet we attack regardless. We do so naked, having shed the rags of morality, ideology, and politics that had accumulated over time. We confront this world raw, in all its horrifying glory. We negate every truth and rule and we proceed with a spirit of incendiary experimentation. We dream big, expect paths, pissing in the gears of society's machinery, and when all else fails, we will follow in the footsteps of those who spent their final minutes in the gas chambers singing and fucking. May jouissance be the blessed flame that guides us into the void. - Blessed is the Flame: An introduction to concentration camp resistance and anarcho-nihilism

*Egoism and nihilism are evidently in vogue among anarchists and I'm hoping that those who so identify are not without hope. Illusions no, hope yes. I wonder what we have to offer at large, in terms of, say, analysis and inspiration or whether that's still being asked much.*

During the conclusion of my participation in community organizing and activism, I encountered an interesting question: what now? It was precisely the rebellion of those hopeless nihilist, individualist anarchists who inspired me to see anarchy in an entirely different way. My personal rebellion against society and industrial civilization did not have an end, just perpetual evolution toward more clandestine, joyful forms of anarchy. It was during my retirement from radical organizing that I re-discovered myself, as an individual without the socialized conditioning of leftism, and as a weapon formerly unknown to my own self. I began to see myself and all my capabilities better than I ever had as a leftist. If this discovery lacked an analysis of individualized warfare and the inspiration from others having so much fun with their lives, I'd probably still be suffering from terminal boredom within the left. I had discovered that "hope" was a useless concept that only led to disappointment. But with feral rebellion against societal reality without any expectations, I could experience a freedom impossible under any other circumstances. I didn't just demand the impossible, my anarchy became the embodiment of impossibility with every minute of criminal activity.

*There are egoists who seem mainly in love with their sacred Egos, where all is judged insofar as it serves the Self. Meanwhile the reigning technoculture feeds solipsism, narcissism, and isolation the more techno-addicted are its subjects. Did Max Stirner see the natural world as having value only in relation to one's ego? How much interest does the pure egoist have in mutual aid, social struggles or the disappearance of community? I recommend Stirner's *The Ego and its Own* as an important corrective to the appeals of collectivism in its various guises, but tend to agree with Arizona anarchist Dan Todd that Diogenes and the Cynics in the West and Chuangtzu and some of the Taoists in the East did an even better job of it centuries earlier. Does nihilism mean that pretty much everything must go for a decent life to be possible? If so then I'm a nihilist. It's safe to say that nihilism isn't literally nothingism or one couldn't be both a nihilist and an anarchist. If it means the politics of desperation or hopelessness, no thanks. French philosopher JeanFrancois Lyotard put the word in a different light: "With the megalopolis, what the West realizes and diffuses is its nihilism. It is called development." Are there nihilists who take on such institutions and what drives them?*

As for self-serving egoism? If joy, love, play, and adventure were not self-serving than they would render me subservient to someone else – which is exactly what I have come to reject. For years have we not seen how compulsory servitude to sociopolitical systems, The Commune, the Group or even a God have debilitated the power of individuality? Or how outsourced obedience and codependency have crippled the ability to recognize one's self as valuable and worthy of self-interest and freedom? I assume some nihilists out there identify with "desperation" in different ways. I personally relate more to a matter of being determined. But if anarchy could be defined as any activity that contradicts the social suppression of individual freedom, does anarchy not require an element of desperation? Is it unreasonable to be desperate for freedom for the reclaiming of one's life from the civilizing institutions that steals individual livelihood? Even if one feels it is hopeless? For me the will toward experiencing freedom minute by minute drives me to confront any and all institutions that demand my obedience.

Speaking for myself, nihilism does mean everything must go – but without any idea of what kind of life will be ahead. That can only be defined moment to moment and to construct a future utopia would only lead me to surrender, to some degree, the full attention of my present experience.

*There's more than anti-hope on offer, in any case. Two new books remind us of that. Enrico Manicardi's *Free from Civilization* is the first 'AZ' type anticiv offering in any language (originally *Liberi dalla Civiltà*) and Paul Cedenec's *The Anarchist Revelation: Being What we're Meant to Be*, the least pessimistic book I can recall reading. It refers to German anarchist Gustav Landauer, for instance, for the idea that we "need not worry that the quantity of those answering the call will not be great enough, when the quality of its [anticiv] content is beyond question." It brings anarchist resistance and the spirit together in a very wide-ranging and powerful contribution.*

*Dire times but, as Oscar Wilde had it, "We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars."*

In my writing "No Hope, No Future: Let the Adventures Begin!" the "hope" I am criticizing is that which activist leaders and liberalism utilize in order to mobilize mass movements. Similar to how religion offers a heaven at the end of a life of misery, I have seen how leftism offers the same "heaven" in the form of "coming" insurrections or the traditional "Proletarian Revolution". As many of us have experienced though, life, as with wild nature, is very complex. The electioneering of hope and countless other political promises may captivate some, but not all. In the case of this text, I'm pointing out that some discover freedom in the total abandonment of positive politics

including the “utopian future” tied to it like a carrot. For some, nihilism is the pursuit of creating moments of bliss here and now with the rubble of burned down slaughterhouses, the cartloads of retail theft, the spontaneous attacks against fascism and so on. Some nihilists do more than just look at the stars; some enjoy the night sky from the rooftops of squatted buildings, the sunrise from moving freight trains, or the thunderstorms during nighttime property destruction.

The stereotype of the miserable, self-defeating nihilist is just that – a stereotype. It is a one-dimensional portrayal that treats the nihilist as a category rather than a unique individual. And to limit one’s perception of nihilism to mere stereotypes would quite simply render the hopeless, playful rebels of individualized anarchy, as nonexistent as hope itself!

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