From Embers, anonymous
‘The Fantasy of a Well-Oiled Machine’

Transcribed, annotated and printed in Return Fire vol.6 chap.8 (winter 2024–2025). To read the articles referenced in the footnotes, PDFs of Return Fire and related publications can be read, downloaded and printed by visiting returnfire.noblogs.org or emailing returnfire@riseup.net

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You’re listening to From Embers, a weekly show on CFRC 101.9 FM [campus-community radio station] about anarchist and anti-authoritarian ideas and practice. We are broadcasting from the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples on land that has come to be called Kingston, Ontario, Canada, because of the thievery and brutality of the Canadian state and its empire-loving parents. From Embers is about fires, some real and some metaphorical. Fires started generations ago and tended to over the years; little sparks all across this territory that we hope will grow, spread and engulf the thieving state called Canada and the capitalist system that has plagued this land since the fur trade.

As many of you know, May 1st is marked by anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarians around the world as part of International Workers Day, or Mayday.[1] Here in Ontario, some demonstrations this year [2019] were themed around building resistance to the right-wing Ford government,[2] whose

[1] ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg87

[2] ed. – Provincial government of Premier Doug Ford.

austerity measures are bringing deep funding cuts to public services across the province. At a rally at Queen's Park in Toronto, according to one report back, anarchists and radicals decided to make things a bit more confrontational, by bringing a homemade replica guillotine dripping with fake blood, with the words "cuts are political violence" written on the side. The reaction, at least in politics and in the mainstream media looked like this:

"Of all the anti-Ford protests outside the Ontario legislature, none has been like this. On Wednesday afternoon, amid another demonstration, a handful of protesters brought a homemade guillotine to Queen's Park. It was smeared with fake blood, with one protester holding up a sign saying 'chop chop'."

"It was disrespectful. It was cruel, and it's a credible threat that has been referred to the Ontario Provincial Police."

The situation in Toronto got me thinking about the image of the guillotine and other symbolic gestures towards political violence. I certainly noticed a rise of guillotine memes in the last couple of years. And I wondered why that is. Then I came across an article called 'Against the Logic of the Guillotine', posted to the CrimethInc. website, which placed the guillotine in its historical context, and engaged in an in-depth discussion about revenge fantasies, political violence, and imagining liberatory revolutionary alternatives. That piece is at once challenging, hopeful and controversial. All qualities that I thought would make for a good discussion for this podcast. So tonight, I'm going to be speaking with one of the authors from CrimethInc., which is a decentralised anarchist collective and publishing project. It's been around since the mid-1990s. We discuss the ideas in the article and tease out some of the philosophical tensions that underpin it. To be clear, my goal with this piece is not to call out or shame the guillotine crew in Toronto, as the media and the so-called progressives have been doing now for weeks. In fact, I applaud their courage and creative exper-

As for struggles today, it helps to be connected to people who are struggling against [Jair] Bolsonaro[40] in Brazil or people in Russia under the terrible conditions that prevail there now, who are still trying to do solidarity with all the different people targeted with the torture cases there.[41] The fact that people have not given up that that gives me hope. And then on the other side, the certainty which is increasingly clear for all to see that the prevailing order cannot go on indefinitely. That just underscores how urgent it is that we be seriously taking action in such a way that that we will be prepared to make sure that what comes after it is not worse.

[40] ed. – Elected president that year. *"March 31st [year above interview released] was the anniversary of the 1964 coup that kickstarted a 20 year military dictatorship, responsible for the disappearance, murder and torture of countless political figures. […] The president approves and shows interest in participating in commemorations, because he claims there was no dictatorship, it was a needed authoritarian regime to prevent the country from turning "red". His followers now form a new wave of "dictatorship deniers", fuelled by anti-communist (pro-USA) conservative views. They even changed last Christmas' color, and blue Santas were spotted all around the country. The whole situation feels like a cruel prank, if it wasn't for the President's unprecedented visit to the CIA (the institution that financed the dictatorship back then), and the talks with Trump over the future of Venezuela."* (Brazil's "Dictatorship Deniers")

[41] ed. – see 'The Vital Space of a State'

for us, because then we're not losing anything anyway. But if we act, showing that there could be another world, at the least it gives the tragedy that we're enmeshed in weight, and it means that there will have been something beautiful in the world when it comes to an end. And I think that rather than having this long view of history, where we're like, "well, the enemy will be defeated in the end" (there'll be nothing we have to return to the present moment and become capable of acting in the context that we're in), but guided as if like navigating by the stars by a vision of the best thing that our lives could be, because ultimately, we don't know what the future will hold. And it could hold beautiful things.

I'm just wondering what, what is giving you optimism and hope right now? Like what what's going on around the world that that you find personally inspiring at this time?

That's a good question. I mean, for me, the fact that people are still struggling at this point, after all the defeats of the 19th century and 20th century, after all the people who were removed from history by guillotines, capital punishment, firing squads: all of those things give me give me hope. I remember being in Berlin at the end of the 20th century, at Køpi, which is one of the famous squatted social centres there. And being in a room with a few hundred people in it, punks, anarchists, aspiring revolutionaries. And it coming home to me that half a century before in Berlin, everyone like that had been killed. Everyone with any dream of liberation had been killed, into the millions, huge numbers of people. And that despite that, the children of that generation were still able to reinvent anew, from nothing, the dream of liberation and revolutionary social change. For me, that reminder that you can't guillotine away – that you can't execute away – the part of the human heart that longs for freedom and for some sort of meaningful togetherness; that always guides me.

imentation. And want to be clear that this is not the same old pacifist condemnation of violence.[3] Instead, I hope to encourage some constructive, critical reflection on the images that we project of a freer world and the consequences that they have.

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For the purposes of this conversation, I'm just one of many participants in CrimethInc. projects. I'd like to be understood in the way that Alfredo Bonanno[4] described himself as a comrade among comrades.

So would you like to start just by talking a bit about why folks set out to write this piece like what was the impetus for writing it?

Well, the article was written just because guillotine memes have become so common over the last few years. And also in response to… the most widely known vehicle for the radical Left in the US now is called *Jacobin*.[5] So there's these references to this history that very few people are familiar with. And this is taking place in a context of escalating social and political polarisation in the United States. Increasing conflict; people on all points on the political spectrum are angry and disempowered. And from our vantage point as long-time anarchists, we see people on the Left as well as on the Right who seem to be fantasising about authoritarian institutions solving their problems for them.[6] If only they could, they could see revenge executed

[3] ed. – see the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.4; 'Violence, Non-Violence, Diversity of Tactics'

[4] ed. – Walking away from his work as a bank clerk and even as executive in the chemical industry (a salutary indication of the potential of people for change!), this Sicilian became a key figure in social struggles and the anarchist movement from the 1970s onwards, writing many books and speaking widely.

[5] ed. – Magazine named after the most influential political club during the French Revolution of 1789, the Jacobins, whose acendancy led to the Terror: see Calling It Terror.

[6] ed. – see the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.3; Green Desperation Fuels Red Fascism

on their behalf. And which is something that we've seen from the right wing for a long time. But it's disturbing for me to see this from the Left.[7]

I really liked how you discuss this issue in the context of the history of the guillotine, and specifically, going through the French Revolution references that a lot of people make, and contrasting it with the burning of the guillotine in the Paris Commune.[8] *Would you like to just give a bit of that story for our listeners?*

Well, the original French Revolution began famously with the storming of the Bastille, which was a military base, but was also a prison. The liberating phase of the French Revolution began with the storming of the prison. And you could argue that the liberating phase of the French Revolution ended when the Jacobins began to use the guillotine to solve their problems and – as often happens in revolutions – they killed off the most radical elements first, and then they killed off the more moderate people who are competing with them for control of the revolution.

With this, this long standing premise that a revolution will succeed a single authoritarian body is able to gain a stabilised control at the at the heart of things and exercise coercive force over over the entire nation. This is obviously not an anarchist idea. This is an authoritarian idea.

Now, it was interesting for us, looking at what happened in France: first, that it didn't work to keep the Jacobins (the people who were supposedly trying to make the French Revolution succeed) in power, because as soon as they had guillotined all

[7] ed. – Of course this has actually been with us for some time; one thinks of the calls for State execution of British Petroleum executives following the Deepwater Horizon atrocity (see Return Fire vol.1 pg28), or the mingling of (nominally) leftist feminists with far-right, church and conservative groups to call for State-imposed violence and exclusion of the phantasmic trans menace haunting their every public bathroom (see Wounded Healers).

[8] ed. – see For the Love of God

things that I think sit in for our inability to imagine a life more worth living than what we have.

Absolutely. If you believe that you could have a truly fulfilling and beautiful life, including beautiful and fulfilling relations with the people you currently want revenge on, that would probably be more desirable. But right now we want revenge, because we can't possibly imagine that and becoming capable of imagining it. Not in some sort of superficial hippy way that would give us an excuse not to take action, but becoming capable of imagining it in a way that would mobilise to take action, with everything on the table, to transform our relationships. I think, for me, that's essential, it has to be what we're trying to do.

Yeah, and I feel like I do know so many people who can't imagine a better world right now. They just don't have that in them. And they do feel more empowered by letting that go. But I think on a strategic level, it's a huge loss for us to give up on, on imagining better worlds for everyone.[39]

There's another way to come at that, which is that it may be true that there's no future. It may be true. You're on a long enough timeframe, we'll all be dead, and the earth will be eaten by the sun. Those things are certain. Global climate change may also kill us off along with all the other species that are being destroyed. All of those things are true. For me, that doesn't make it any less beautiful to take action in the present. And it doesn't make it any less meaningful. Because the present does exist, the present is real, no matter what will happen in the future.

If in the present, we don't act in pursuit of the things that we consider meaningful and beautiful, that makes the tragedy that's underway a farce. It makes it a travesty. It makes it ridiculous. It makes the whole situation just sort of embarrassing

[39] ed. – see the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.4; 'A Web of Relations & Tensions'

it possible for us to want things that would lead us to another world. That I think is fundamentally the anarchist question.

Twenty years ago there were people talking about this in a way that sort of got misunderstood or reduced to consumer politics. So, veganism. For me, the thing that was interesting about veganism was not just that you'd be putting your money elsewhere so that you're reproducing soy mono-crops rather than the cattle industry, in what used to be the Amazon rainforest. But the thing that's interesting about veganism is people intentionally shifting their tastes, intentionally shifting their desires. And we can see this in a feminist framework also; that the things that we want right now might actually be destructive to the people that we love. But through a process of experimentation and developing positive desires experimentally, through – like I was saying about Foucault and pleasure – discovering new things that could be more fulfilling than the things that we currently do and want to do, then we could arrive at a place in which our social relations, and the things we want, could be more integrated, and more mutually beneficial.

So to bring that back to the guillotine, I totally understand why people would want revenge. I want revenge.[36] But I also want to arrive at a world in which nobody would be motivated by revenge, in which no-one would even have cause to want revenge. So when we engage in social change, we can't think of it as a sort of Hatfield-and-McCoys[37] thing. I understand why people want revenge, I want revenge, but our political actions should convey us beyond the world that we live in today and the desires it produces.

I think there's also something going on about the impoverishment of our imaginations,[38] *where the only thing we were left able to desire are basically more power, revenge, these kinds of*

[36] ed. – see Memory as a Weapon; Letter to the Editors

[37] ed. – Two families whose infamous 1863–1891 feud stood in US lexicon for this kind of unending rivalry.

[38] ed. – see 23 Theses Concerning Revolt

of their potential allies, it was easy for the reactionary forces to guillotine them, to gain control of France. This is how, ultimately, Napoleon Bonaparte came to power and the French Revolution shifted into this sort of nationalist quest for Empire, that brought to an end the hopes of that generation for revolution.

What was also interesting to us studying the French Revolution of 1870 and 1871, when the Paris Commune took place, that one of the first things that participants in the Paris Commune did – grassroots, working people in the Paris Commune – was that they went to the place in Paris where the guillotine was kept, and they brought it out. And they didn't start guillotining rich people with it; they didn't start guillotining tyrants. They took it, and they burned it. And for us, this speaks to us across the centuries as a brave and courageous refusal to affirm coercive force – lethal coercive force – as a tool that can play a desirable role in social change.

Now, I want to be clear, I'm not coming to this from the perspective of pacifism. This is an important conversation topic for us, because we believe that yes, we have to employ coercive force in the course of social change; otherwise, you have no way to defend yourself. But it's a really a question about what we fantasise about; what we imagine is going to create the kind of society that we want to live in. And what we understand ourselves as desiring; and desiring to shed oceans of blood.

Now many of us, understandably… You're in conflict with your boss, you're in conflict with your landlord, Donald Trump is president, all these terrible things are happening. It's understandable that people would want to shed blood. But the point that we're arguing here is that we can't understand the shedding of blood as being our political project or our political goal.

To go back to the difference between the French Revolution and the Paris Commune for a second: if you just want to take a class perspective, the traditional class reductionist or

Marxist take[9] is that the original French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, that brought property owners and instituted a sort of bourgeois democracy. It's not unusual that a bourgeois democracy would still be using coercive force as a fundamental part of of their political programme, that they would centralise it in the hands of the State, and see their goal has been to kill everyone who was incompatible with their political programme. But that workers in the Paris Commune, people who are from the proletariat, rank-and-file participants in the struggle understood that as long as there is a State-controlled, centralised, concentrated, State-legitimised form of violence, it's always going to be used against the underdogs. Against the proletariat, against the people on the receiving end of power imbalances. And so, fundamentally, for us, the burning of the guillotine is an expression of revolutionary optimism, and a refusal to use tools that that can't actually lead us to the goals that we're shooting for.

Right. And I think that that leads into my next question pretty well, which is, when you say the logic of the guillotine, can you explain what is meant by that?

The fundamental question here is: what does revolutionary social change entail? Does it mean that we kill the bad people? Or maybe if we want to be a little bit less brutal, that we put them in Gulags[10] or something, so that the *good people* can live freely? As an anarchist, I would argue, no; that's not the way that we have to understand social change.

[9] ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg11

[10] ed. – *"After the Communist Party defeated the opposition in the Russian civil war of 1918–1921, they exiled anarchist and communist dissidents to the Solovetsky Islands, creating one of the first prisons of the Gulag system* (G(lavnoe) u(pravlenie ispraviteľno-trudovykh) lag(ereĭ)*, "Chief Administration for Corrective Labor Camps"). The ancient monasteries in the town of Suzdal and on the Solovetskii Islands in the White Sea were converted into prisons for hundreds of political offenders, who staged demonstrations and hunger strikes to protest their confinement"* (Paul Avrich). Camps lasted until 1991.

that the most important thing is to impose a notion of duty…[34] which we're just now finally starting to see some push-back against that, from people like Saidiya Hartman,[35] who recognise that that militant asceticism is actually not a star that we can follow to a world in which everyone will be free or happier, or white supremacy will be abolished.

If we understand desire as political, what does that mean? The first thing I would say is that certainly we can't pursue a politics that is about suppressing or refusing desire. But also, the things that we desire don't always tell us everything that we need to know about what it would take for us to actually be happy. I think desire usually tells us more about where we are than about where we should be, in the sense that, you know, you talk to a person from a city and you're like, "What do you want city person?" – they usually say something like, "Well, what I really want to be able to do is retire to the country."

Now, your average city dweller would be really bored in the country. But they fantasise about living in the country. Because that is that desire is produced by the stresses of city life. It doesn't mean that they'd be happy in the country, but it does tell you what the problems are with being in the city. In this sense, like [Michel] Foucault says, pleasure can be more transformative than desire. Desire is produced by our experiences in the past, but pleasure can surprise us. Pleasure can take us by surprise and introduce us to new desires that we didn't have before.

For me, the interesting thing about understanding desire politically… I mean, desire is what causes us to produce the world we live in and to reproduce this world. This world reproduces desires that keep us in it. If we think about desire politically, we're thinking about how to create situations that produce other desires that would in the making. They would make

[34] ed. – see You Are the Good Cause

[35] ed. — see 'All That Wildness Names'

a few years earlier.[32] If the iconography that we act under, if the banners that we put at the front of our our marches, direct everyone's fantasies to incorporate this authoritarian history of revolutionary struggle, we can be sure that we will have the same problems again.

This idea of the revenge fantasy is identified as an understandable desire by people who are oppressed and dominated. But there's this distinction between desire and a politics of liberation. And I'm just trying to try to figure out what is being said about what is this relationship between people's desires and people's politics? Because I think this is an oft-debated sort of binary in our in our scenes here.

That is a super interesting question, right? I felt like when you identified that in our discussions leading up to this interview as a tension within different CrimethInc. texts, I thought that was really smart. So there's a question about what the role of desire should be in revolutionary politics. There's a couple frameworks for how we understand desire that we probably shouldn't emulate. One is the sort of vulgar populism, which is like whatever people want, let's make sure they get it. If everybody wants to wide-screen television, then our job is to carry out a class war in which we secure wide-screen TVs for everybody.

Another idea how we should relate to desire is this sort of aesthetic militancy, where you prove that you are more militant than the next person by being willing to give up on things. I feel like the sort of atmosphere of anarchist and generally Left organising in the last quarter century has really shifted from having this sort of optimistic, desire-based approach to this sort of hostility to desire and just mutual suspicion.[33] Everyone thinking that everybody else's desires are a problem, and

[32] ed. – On this, we recommend Aragorn Eloff's essay 'Beyond Bolivaria – a critical look at the fetishization of Chávez and '21st century socialism''

[33] ed. – see 'The Position of the Excluded'

If we regard people as static, as fixed quantities, if we reduce people to their status in this society, rather than focusing on the relations between people and the potential that all human beings have for change: if we take that approach, we're bound to end up utilising some sort of guillotine-logic where revolutionary social change means subtracting certain people from the world. That is, this logic doesn't distinguish us from any other authoritarian party, including the most despicable ones. For me, the goal that we should have is to transform our relationships, and to create situations in which people who currently are not able to have a positive or mutually-fulfilling, mutually-beneficial relationship can have such relations.[11] And like I said, there will be conflict, there will be struggle, there will be violence on the way to that, but that is a totally different goal than thinking that our use of force should be guided by the intention to destroy our enemies.

I think you make a nice point about this, too, when you're talking about people not wanting to get their own hands dirty or not taking these things seriously enough that they are willing to engage in the kinds of violence that is implied by the guillotine themselves. It's always about someone else doing it in a sort of rationalistic kind of form.

This is why guillotine memes, specifically, are distinct from other kinds of revolutionary fantasies; Molotov cocktail imagery or the traditional black-bloc imagery of a bunch of people acting together to defend themselves from police violence. Those are tactics or tools that that can be employed without implying the concentration of force in the hands of a bureaucracy. The guillotine is to be used against people who are already in your power. I would argue that it's cowardly and irresponsible to kill someone that once that person is powerless before you,

[11] ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; 'Centering Relationships'

and that that should not be should not be what we're fantasising about.

This whole question about tools here: are tools neutral? Of course, people fantasise about using the tools of the system against the system. You can look at every tool and its historical application; if we can identify what happens when revolutionaries get their hands on those tools and use them. This is not just an abstract question. This is a concrete historical question.

Some of the problem here is about the absence of collective memory.[12] Some of the problem is that people who are reposting guillotine memes have not read the history of the French Revolution. People who are who are fantasising about getting their hands on their oppressors don't know what happened to people like them the last time that happened and was guided by a party or an authoritarian organisation. So the issue here is not about whether we can use revolutionary force or revolutionary violence. It's specifically about the fantasy of a well-oiled machine doing the work for us.

And that's why there's a correlation actually, between the guillotine itself, which is like a basically turns capital punishment into a spectator sport… Historically, it's this ritual in which people who have already been captured are brought out in front of a bunch of other people and executed as this spectator sport, legitimising the power of the state, confirming it. The meme about the guillotine… because a meme is just that, people who are posting memes – by and large – are not the people who are in Rojava right now, engaging in these hard questions about what to do with captured ISIS fighters,[13]

[12] ed. – see The Revolutionary Importance of Celebration & Cyclical Time

[13] ed. – Unfortunately, in the years since, it seems clear that responsibility for this question has been passed on to those least to be trusted with it: their coalition partners (see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; 'The Temple Was Built Before the City') against ISIS, the US government, which is involved in most aspects of the prisons holding tens of thousands

that we always hope to foster. And that, we think, is one of the really strong points of the the anarchist movement historically, that it's a space of self-education and debate in which there are no dogmas. In which we are always trying to reevaluate the strategies and symbols that we use and being critical of ourselves and each other: but constructively, I hope.

It did rile up the intended targets quite a lot. The government, the Ford government, spoke about it in the legislature and tried to get a police investigation. I'm wondering if there's another kind of another image that could have been used with more liberatory history that would also have that kind of effect? Because I think that was intended.

That's a good question. And that's a question for aspiring anarchist historians. It's our responsibility to unearth the symbols and the gestures and the accomplishments of the people who came before us; whether they were self-identified anarchists or others, anywhere across the world, fighting against colonialism and other forms of hierarchy. To keep those in our thoughts to bring them back to life and to invest them with revolutionary force. One of the tragedies of the 20th century is that after the Russian Revolution, so many people who had been anarchists became State communists, because it seemed to be successful. And now 100 years later, the reference points that we have for struggle against the State are largely statist reference points.

And it would really behove us to popularise other images, because imagery has power. The image of a black-bloc smashing windows of Starbucks in 1999, during the World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle, was extremely important for catalysing a generation. The image of the Zapatistas[31] taking power. And Chávez had done the same thing *[in Venezuela]*

[31] ed. – see "It Was Wartime"

Caserio,[27] Auguste Vaillant,[28] Ravachol,[29] all the whole Bonnot gang…[30] all of those people were guillotined. The people from the White Rose, the anti-Nazi youth organisation in Munich in 1942–1943: they were guillotined. The Nazis actually guillotined about the same number of people during their reign as the Jacobins during the time that they were in power. So the guillotine has a really rough history as a particular tool that has almost always been used by people that we would not identify with, against people who were courageous and generous in the things that they contributed to humanity.

So when I first reached out to you about this interview, I mentioned one of the reasons that I wanted to talk about on our show is the this kind of scandal that was created at Queen's Park in Toronto on May Day where some kind of anarchist and anti-fascist mix of people brought a replica guillotine to Queen's Park, which is where the government of Ontario sits, and kind of made the dual point about sort of austerity and cuts as well as sort of this guillotine gesture towards political violence. What would you say to somebody who participated in making that happen?

I mean, just that we're part of the same movement with probably compatible goals. And this whole reflection about guillotines is just the sort of comradely criticism and debate

[27] ed. – Anarchist anti-militarist who fled Italian conscription and assassinated the French President in 1894, avenging that State's recent executions of the comrades mentioned in footnotes 27 and 29.

[28] ed. – French anarchist who tossed a bomb into the Chamber of Deputies in 1893, without loss of life: first person that century executed in France without having killed anyone. Émile Henry (see footnote 27) undertook his own attack to avenge him.

[29] ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg44

[30] ed. – All, that is, who hadn't already died in shoot-outs with the law: some of many French anarchists influenced by Stirner (see 'The Position of the Excluded') who took up illegalism, or living from theft from industrialists and banks, as resistance to wage-labour: see Return Fire vol.2 pg22. Pioneers of the getaway car.

that are the real lived version of this question. An average person who's posting a guillotine meme is posting it from the comfort of a non-revolutionary situation, knowing that they're not actually going to get their hands bloody.

But the problem is that when we legitimise these things in times of comparative social peace, the fantasies that we promote right now will eventually – as our society gets more and more volatile, and there are more and more situations of unrest – these fantasies will be the sign-posts to the future that we have to work from when we are in a revolutionary situation. So I think it's very important that we think critically now about which sign-posts are going to get us to the future we actually want to arrive.

One of the ideas expressed in the article is… I'm actually going to read a quote that I pulled out, that says: "If we wish to wield coercive force responsibly when there is no other choice, we should cultivate a distaste for it." And I liked that idea, I agree with that idea. At the same time, I think about… say here, in the context of urban Ontario in Canada, that it's a very pacified society overall. And actually, a lot of what we're doing as anarchists is trying to break through that pacification and break through that social peace; not by calling for mass murder,[14] but calling for people to get angry and to get active and fight back. So I wonder if there's if there's a way to balance cul-

of ISIS fighters real and alleged, all together with their families, their forced brides, their child recruits, and even some Yezidi people that ISIS attempted genocide against. Torture is rampant, the states of the foreign-born ISIS fighters are refusing their repatriation (prefering, perhaps, that the danger remains in proximity to the revolutionary project), and Turkey – key facilitator of the ISIS insurgency and sworn enemy of the Rojavan project – has used air- and drone-strikes on prison security to allow prison breaks. As we go to press, it looks likely that the new US administration of Trump will wash its hands of Rojava at last, leaving it in the sights of their NATO-partner Turkey, and the ISIS prisoners may constitute a new nucleus of the Caliphate directly in the midst of those they wish to exterminate.

[14] ed. – see Calling It Terror

tivating that distaste for violence, but also creating openings for people to become more active in resisting for their own survival?

Absolutely. This, for us, is a pressing and real question. Because we are promoting and practising revolutionary self-defence. For me, one of the important things when we're talking about resistance, when we're talking about revolutionary self-defence, is that it's very important to match our words with deeds. Words gain their force, they gain their traction on our lives, by our habits of of backing them up with action. If you say, "this should happen," and then you do it, next time, somebody says something should happen: it's thinkable that it will happen as well.

This was always my critique of someone like Derrick Jensen,[15] who says, "Every morning I get up, and I try to decide whether to blow up a dam or to write a book." And of course, posing the question to himself that way, he always decided to write the book, right? Not to blow up the dam. For me, this is irresponsible. I would like to think that if I believed that personal and individualistic act, blowing up a dam, if that was the most effective thing that I could do that I would do it and it would be irresponsible not to do that. If, through this process of consideration, I had decided that that would be the most effective tactic.

I think that it's important that the tactics that we employ be reproducible and be tactics that we can engage in immediately. And so, if we're talking about revolutionary violence, then I think it's realistic right now to use examples of things that people have recently done, and that we could participate in.[16] I think it's dangerous to imagine that the more intense the violence or the conflict or the tools that people are using, the more revolutionary the situation is. Like people looking at

[15] ed. – see Wounded Healers

[16] ed. – see Propaganda of the Deed & Global Social Networks

Well, I'm definitely I'm not arguing against the tactics that were used in the SHAC campaign, to be clear. I'm arguing more that if it's necessary to engage in tactics like that, we should be very careful that we keep our real goals in mind as we employ them, that we don't fall into the sort of mental shorthand of thinking that if we can just get rid of the bad people that that will take care of everything. That's what I'm arguing; it's not an argument against any particular tactics. There may even at some point in history have been a time when guillotines were used for good, although in all my research I was never able to come up with one. But the point really is that what guides us is essential there. The earth *is* being killed, and the people who are doing it *do* have names and addresses. And we have to make it impossible for them to do that. Take that as it will.

But the thing that will ultimately make it impossible for anyone to do that is to give everyone a sense of their shared interest in making that impossible. Anarchism proposes a completely horizontal distribution of power. And how would we maintain that? Well, it would take a lot of people understanding the value of the horizontal distribution of power to prevent anyone from amassing and concentrating it so as to dominate others.

And just to drive that point home, can you discuss a few of the people that you did discover, lost their lives at the guillotine?

Oh, goodness. I mean, that is one of the things that that makes the guillotine memes so ironic for revolutionaries, is just that so many people that that we admire or look up to – or at least remember as part of our movements – were killed by guillotines. The famous anarchists from 100 years ago, from the propaganda-of-the-deed era, like Émile Henry[26] or Sante

[26] ed. – see Calling It Terror

Of course, that's why when a line of police charges you, and there's a specific police officer coming at you, you have to engage in a conflict with that police officer. But the goal of that should not be that you then become the person who is dominating that other person; the goal should be to make it impossible for anyone to carry out that kind of domination (or, ultimately, to draw the loyalty – or at least a mercenary attitude – that causes people to become police officers in the first place). Everybody who is the beneficiary of an oppressive system today, when they hear us speaking this way (about destroying the institutions that they benefit from), that makes them more likely to identify with the institutions, for the most part, right? They're like, "Okay, we have to defend ourselves from these fucking anarchists who want to kill us."

At the moment at which it's possible for there to be a mutiny (which is the starting point, usually, for a revolution; when some people mutiny, when some people reject their role in the existing order); at that moment, the people who engage in that mutiny recognise that they have more to gain from fighting against the institutions than from being afraid of us. And so I think it's actually in our interest as revolutionaries to always convey to people that we're not fighting against them personally, we don't desire to exterminate them. That we actually are proposing a different set of relations, that would be more fulfilling for them as well. That it's actually more fulfilling to be in nourishing, loving, mutually grounded relations with other people who are your equals than it is to own a billion dollars worth of assets.

This does go against one sort of strategy that is maybe summed up by the quote, "people are killing the planet, and they have names and addresses." That's another kind of thing that people say, right? Say, with the SHAC case,[26] or something like that, where individuals are targeted because corporations are so nebulous and so difficult to push back against.

what happens in Russia, and imagining that there is more social potential for liberation there because there are more guns being employed. I think this is a really dangerous mental shortcut, the actually conflates revolutionary social change with the use of force. We should be focusing on developing our skills to evaluate what actually constitutes the kind of changes that we want to see.

So in that regard, I actually think that guillotine memes – because they don't refer to something that we are immediately about to do – don't contribute to the likelihood that we will actually take forceful action. I think that we have to combine realistic proposals with immediately following through on those, and that will actually produce more contagious and reproducible examples of self-defence.

We also have to imagine that when we enter into a revolutionary conflict that we might actually win. And if we win, it will be essential that the goals that we are fighting for are desirable goals, so that we don't just set up another version of the same order that exists today, with a slightly differently distributed use of force to keep people in line

Memes or replica guillotines, or whatever they tend to be, kind of gestures towards – like you said – revenge fantasies. Would you make a distinction between guillotine ones and another one that I think of (that comes out a lot), the assassination of Mussolini[17] *after World War II? That's a very common image that gets circulated as a kind of revenge fantasy. Do you think there's any difference there?*

That's a good question. I'd have to do more research about what happened to Mussolini. It's hard not to think of Mussolini, like I was saying before, as a static quantity; as somebody who should just be removed from the world. The goal of fascism is to teach us that there are people who should be removed from the world. And if we accept their premises, even if our conclusion

[17] ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg60

is just that they should be removed from the world, this is a very different thing from expressing a revolutionary optimism. It's in the article, but the counter-argument would be that the worst thing that could happen to Mussolini would be for him to have to spend the rest of his life in an anarchist society in which everyone knew what he had done, and despise him for it. And he would have to show up to the village assembly, and nobody would listen to him speak. Nobody would respect him. But that he would actually be powerless to harm other people: that we wouldn't need to kill him.

And I think this is a more honourable fantasy – and it's a revenge fantasy, honestly – but it's a more honourable revenge fantasy. Because it's different from a State proposal. For me the more different point of reference would be the assassination of King Umberto of Italy. By [Gaetano] Bresci, the anarchist who had also rescued [Errico] Malatesta[18] from an assassin (there was a gunman trying to kill Malatesta and Bresci – he was unarmed – threw himself on the gunman, disarmed him, saved Malatesta his life) and then a couple years later took all his money and bought a handgun and a ticket across the Atlantic and, at great personal risk to himself, assassinated the Italian king who had overseen the murder of more than 1,000 working people in this conflict in Italy shortly before then.[19]

For me, again, this is a more honourable fantasy. When in your power, it's not about being the dominant force and killing the underdog. It's about an underdog standing up to a much more powerful force. And at great risk, at great personal sacrifice; making a gesture that that points to the possibility that all of us could rise up against our oppressors. I'm not saying that individualistic assassinations[20] are the tactic that we should be

[18] ed. – Italian anarchist (1853–1932), travelled widely to agitate (and was imprisoned in various countries he organised in); died under house-arrest by Mussolini.

[19] ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg89

[20] ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg84

us here. The idea of structural anti-semitism is that when you personify the social structures or institutions that you oppose, as the particular beneficiaries of them, or the particular people who enforce them, that you are basically doing what anti-semites have done, with the banking institutions for example. By saying, "Jewish bankers," right, that even if you're not saying, "Oh, the Jewish bankers are the problem." But you're saying the bankers, the specific people are the problem, rather than saying capitalism is the problem: rather than saying, this set of relations is the problem. You're still engaging in fundamentally the same structure of activity that anti-semitic groups or other white-supremacists are engaging in.

And for me, our adversary is not specific people whom we hope to conquer and dominate. Our adversary is the social relations that enable some people to conquer and dominate others. I feel like we have to be really clear about the distinction between this. Ultimately, to get conceptual, our enemy is enmity. But we have to fight these institutions, these relations, as they're represented and imposed and defended by specific people.

pg61] attributed the success of his Africanista *officers in their war against revolutionary Spain to their experience in Spanish-colonized Morocco; the creation and near-immediate loss of German empire was a source of emotional fuel for the rise of the Third Reich; and colonizing Ethiopia was so important to Mussolini that he sunk endless quantities of troops and resources into the project, though he succeeded only in murdering thousands of Ethiopians.*" Germany's first total genocide of the 20th Century was not in Europe, but in the territories that would become known by the end of that century as Namibia. 'Deconstructing the Columbus Myth' notes that *"the nazi master plan of displacing or reducing by extermination the population of the western USSR and replacing it with settlers of "biologically superior German breeding stock" is roundly (and rightly) condemned as ghastly and inhuman. Meanwhile, people holding this view of nazi ambitions tend overwhelmingly to see consolidation and maintenance of Euro-dominated settler states in places like Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, the United States and Canada as "basically okay," or even as 'progress'."*

employing. And there's some criticism – some legitimate criticism – about whether they played the role that partisans of propaganda-by-the-deed hoped that they would play in revolutionary social change a century ago.[21] But if I have to choose between a guillotine meme and remembering the courageous acts of underdogs, of course, I'm always going to want to do the latter.

When I first saw this article, I understood it as part of a series of things that have come out of the CrimethInc. publishing world that have been critical towards certain ways that the Russian Revolution is remembered, and critical of Bolshevism and this kind of thing. So, is there sort of a current effort within that project to distinguish anarchists from authoritarian communism? And why if so?

I think that the prospects for revolutionary struggle – if not actually for successful revolution – are much, much more promising now than they were 20 years ago. I think there are a lot of people who are interested in what social change would mean and recognise that it's essential to recognise that our species is probably going to go extinct by any number of different threat models if we don't bring about serious transformation of our society.[22] And so it's a very important time to talk about revolution and the different things that it can mean. I don't think any of us have a personal hostility towards people who are currently in authoritarian socialist or communist parties, or who identify with Stalinism[23] or Leninism.[24] But we definitely think that the anarchists proposal is something different, for the sake of everyone who participated in the Russian Revolution of 1917 to 1921: including Bolsheviks who were executed for having brought about all the positive social changes that happened then.

[21] ed. – see Another Way Out

[22] ed. – see Anarchist Ethics in the Collapse

[23] ed. – see Memory as a Weapon; Indigenism & its Enemies

[24] ed. – see 'It Depends on All of Us'

'Antinationalist Nationalism', *"opposition to capitalism and the rich was often directed against caricatures of "the International Jew." Many German nationalists considered the proletariat to be composed of non-Jewish Germans, who were supposedly preyed upon by Jewish money lenders; the implication was that by getting rid of the Jews, the capitalist system could be symbolically cleansed of its parasites."* (This was despite widespread Jewish involvement in anti-capitalist and anarchist struggles.) Hence, anti-Germans are suspicious not just of many anti-capitalists, but of critics of the putatively 'anti-fascist' nations such as the US, Britain, or – most of all – Israel. Dragging behind them the racist progressivism from the hoariest of Marxisms, the text continues, *" "There is something worse than capitalism and bourgeois society: its barbarous abolition," writes one Anti-German, and he goes on to make it explicit that he is referring to Arabic nationalism as well as German fascism. Thinking this way makes it easy enough to pose Israel and the United States as the flagships of culture and progress, and those dirty Arabs as the savages to whom the torch of Nazi irrationality and brutality has been passed. [...] Anti-Semitism has flourished among Arabs; much is made of this by the Anti-Germans, who trace Arabic nationalism back to early connections between certain Arabs and German Nazis. But these few connections would have been meaningless if Arabic anti-Semites had not had been able to make use of Israeli atrocities in the years that followed to recruit converts. The violence in the Middle East today is not the direct successor to the Nazi Holocaust; rather, it is the result of the violence committed by survivors of that Holocaust, who became abusers in their turn – as survivors all too often do [ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg46]."* As we are seeing today in the phenomenal rise of the German electoral far-right once again (with the Left chasing their votes by themselves hardening against immigration, while castigating anti-Zionist protesters during the systematic genocide in Gaza), this hasn't even led to a widespread anti-fascist critique; rather, it has missed what was so key to the rise of fascism – the colonial relationship. While the trauma of World War One is often cited as source of the 'irrational barbarism' which exploded under fascist regimes, but this ignores the fact that this was the first experience of 'total, industrialised war' only between Europeans, not the (would-be) colonial subjects already for years facing the machine-guns and concentration camps (the term used for Spain's internment of civilians in Cuba, but preceded by US containment of Cherokees, etc.). In other words, it was the 'boomerang' of Progress itself (see Return Fire vol.1 pg11). The 20th Century fascist powers were, precisely, those already out-maneuvered on the world-stage in the European scrabble to carve up the world (leaving the largest victors, Britain, France, and their offspring like the US to smugly paint themselves in 'anti-fascist' colours); yet the colonial experiences that they *did* have hugely set their courses. *The Unquiet Dead* records that "*Franco [ed. – see Return Fire vol.5*

I think it's essential that we remember that that happened; that we understand why it happened. And then we make sure that when we bring about the changes, the uprisings and ruptures and upheavals that are ahead of us, that that we go into it armed with a really thorough knowledge of what happened last time people engaged in social revolutions like this and and how we are going to make sure that they have different consequences.

One thing I think about in the context of this debate is some of the debates in Europe that I've read a little bit of in terms of back and forth debates about armed struggle groups. And this question you brought up earlier in terms of things being reproducible, and trying to avoid specialists of revolution and this kind of thing. Is this an important priority for you?

It's the fundamental question. Because this gets at the question of what the distinction is between revolutionary social change in an anti-authoritarian sense, and mere military conflict. We aren't participants in a party that we hope to bring to power, we don't hope to rule others or to determine the shape of all social life, we hope to make it impossible for anyone to do that. And that's the fundamental distinction. And so, when we think about revolutionary tactics, we should be thinking about which tactics will enable everyone to defend themselves against attempts to impose coercive order, we should be thinking about which strategies we can use that will be reproducible, that can be infectious, that can be contagious, which forms of social change we can engage in so that others will see these changes and want to carry them out themselves, rather than understanding what we're doing as engaging in a partisan struggle of Group A versus Group B.

The thing that distinguishes revolution from war, in my opinion, is that it's transformative and contagious. That's actually the reason that, for example, the Russian Revolution was able to succeed; because of the solidarity coming from restless, oppressed people in other parts of the world, the dockworkers

strikes in Western Europe that prevented Western European countries from intervening: all of these different factors that threatened this revolution would would spread. The thing that makes it possible for us to win when we're in a revolutionary struggle is if our desires, our ethics, our forms of liberation are so compelling that others can see themselves in what we're doing, and undertake their own version of it. Or if others who've already been involved in struggles – maybe much longer than than we as anarchists have been – can recognise the possibilities in a shared struggle. This is the thing that offers us the opportunity for a victory that would be thoroughgoing and transformative rather than just another party coming to power and trying to enforce its particular agenda on everyone.

I was really struck when I first read the article about how the word "everyone" is used, in terms of "[a]narchism is a proposal for everyone." And there's a quote in there that says "hope is our most precious resource." And I think it is a very optimistic perspective in terms of the idea that our relations, including with potentially some people who are oppressors can be transformed. Yeah, and I think a lot of what those of us in the radical Left do when we create propaganda or messaging is we're encouraging and inciting people to turn against their bosses, turn against their landlords, turn against their rapists, turn against the Nazis. But I think that there's a different kind of analysis of identity and social roles implied in what you're writing about. Would you be able to unpack that a little bit for us?

The easiest way to combat this is to use a conceptual tool that I know from German anti-fascists, which is this idea of structural anti-semitism. I have a lot of problems with the *anti-Deutsch* critique.[25] But I think this particular tool can serve

[25] ed. – Literally, 'anti-German': an entirely reactionary (in several senses of the word) tendency that dominates the German Left, based ostensibly around (justifiable) social guilt at not having sufficiently resisted the Nazis and their holocaust, yet ending up with the strangest of conclusions. *"Long before the Nazis came to power in Germany,"* reads the critique