

On Moralism, Relation, and Anti(Militarism)

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This piece was written in late May, 2022, as a response to the swift and uncritical support many anarchists in the U.S. began to vocalize and organize around for the Ukrainian war effort against Putin's invasion a few months prior. Primarily, this piece was meant to question US anarchist support for an "anarchist territorial defense unit" under the purview of the Ukrainian state military as well as push us to consider how such a position affects our orientation towards struggle at home.

I've no interest in changing minds. I'm not here to tell you I'm right and you're wrong. I write for those who are thinking along similar lines, to give them some assurance that they are not alone. I write for myself, to carve out space for the relation I desire within a world bent on suffocating us.

Before I begin in earnest let me say this as explicitly as I can: I am an anarchist. I believe in the destruction of all oppressive systems (the state included) through autonomous attack. I have no desire to manage or dictate the terms of others' engagement. I trust that people will attack the systems that oppress them in the ways that they are able in the moments they are able.

I have fought in the streets against the state and against those who wish to wield its power. I have faced courtrooms and held firm when offered deals to make felony charges disappear at the expense of my principles and the well-being of those around me. I have been beaten bloody, held at knife and at gunpoint for what I believe in. I do not write from some ivory tower. I write from an apartment with mold in the walls and a sink that won't drain. I write because I want more than what this world could ever provide.

I write because I've grown tired of seeing other anarchists take positions that preserve the world I seek to destroy.

In February of this year the Russian military invaded Ukraine with an immensity and swiftness comparable only to the media spectacle that accompanied it. For the audience of this spectacle, suddenly they saw war erupt out of peace. Conflict, when accompanied by sufficient spectacle, has the tendency to become exceptionalized. The new conflict is made unique against the backdrop of all other conflicts that we have grown to normalize, rationalize as natural features of distant landscapes; distance being measured as much in degrees of relation as in miles.

Within hours of the invasion several anarchist media projects began to platform writings of a handful of anarchists from Eastern Europe.

Within days there was talk of an anarchist and anti-authoritarian battalion being formed in order to resist the Russian invasion.

Then there were calls for others to go to Ukraine in order to join this battalion. The images conjured were of the Spanish Revolution, of partisan militias, of militant resistance to fascist rule through autonomous groups of volunteers. These images were, and are, a false comparison.

Those that platformed these calls did so uncritically. There was minimal interrogation of the battalion's deference to the Ukrainian State military's command. There was minimal discussion of the forced conscription taking place. There was minimal discussion of the inherent collaboration between this anti-authoritarian battalion and explicitly nationalistic and fascist battalions.

I use the word collaboration as when taking part in the military apparatus of a state, one inevitably collaborates with the other arms of that military apparatus whether intentionally or otherwise.

It quickly became the "anarchist position" to support this anti-authoritarian battalion in their noble fight against the Russian invaders. This is war. There are sides. There is good and there is bad. Which are you?

Moralism, the reactive positioning of defining actions or people on the scale of good to bad based on some moral doctrine, runs deep. Moralism often runs deepest within currents of those who believe they've long since excised its influence from their rationality. Through moralism one abdicates any responsibility to interrogate the social relations that are attacked, reified, or replicated through particular actions or positionalities. In moralism one relies on a dogma of their choice to justify their decisions, to themselves and to others. If one follows the correct moral line, how then could they possibly be in the wrong?

So it is in moralism that these calls for support, material or otherwise, for the Ukrainian state apparatus are rooted. More specifically, they are rooted in the implicit assumption that when state conflict arises, there are no positionalities other than to support one state structure or another, and so the "correct" course of action is in supporting the more "moral" state. This self-imposed binary warps anarchist liberatory principles and slogans, turning them into rationalities for siding with one state apparatus against another.

The truth of the matter is that there exist anarchist positionalities, that explicitly further ways of relating that most anarchists speak to as desires, present within such inter-state conflicts.

There is sabotage of border checkpoints which prevent those seeking refuge from traveling. There is the care work of helping those who sought refuge find housing, basic necessities, community; building modes of care outside of state apparatuses. There is the clandestine attack on conscription offices and other military infrastructure undermining the myth of a hegemonic, supportive citizenry.

All of these actions, and more, explicitly undermine present ways of relating to the world and put forth the possibility of new ones. By and large, these efforts have seen only a fraction of the platforming that the anti-authoritarian battalion has received, a formation that can only ever serve to reify state power given it is explicitly under the purview of the Ukrainian State.

So now I ask, what does it mean to have major anarchist publications calling for support for an arm of a state's military? Why do we see other anarchists falling lockstep in line with these calls? My belief is that this comes down to two primary motivations, justified through moralism: complacency and fear. Complacency with the current systems of domination and the relations they engender. Fear of the consequences one risks by pushing beyond the existent modes of relation.

While not expanded upon here explicitly, one should consider how whiteness and euro-centrism shape and define the boundaries of what actions, critiques, and positions are acceptable.

When one abandons the interrogation of the social relations they inhabit (or desire) through the deference to moralism, decision making becomes an objective process by which one assesses a given situation in accordance with their chosen dogma. They remove the “personal” from this process, and therefore can sidestep the questioning of their own reactions, their own emotional responses. Moralism is objective, it is righteous, who cares if it just so happens to always point towards action that maintains relations I’m comfortable with? So what if it always points away from that which frightens me?

For many in the US, anarchists included, war is an abstract and distant force. But war has always been here. War is in the pipelines being built through Indigenous land. War is in police interrogation rooms. War is in the condos casting shadows over the homes of those who couldn’t make the rent. It is in the prisons, and the factories, and the schools, and the courthouses, and the street. War is here and it has been here since the very first ships arrived from Europe.

But if one admits that they are in a war zone, then they must inhabit some position within the conflict. If they were oblivious, or willfully ignorant, to the very fact that war was existent, then logic would suggest they aren’t positioned to attack the systems of power perpetuating war, and may even be complacent in their existence.

So, we see many US anarchists attempt to keep war at a distance. If war can be kept in the abstract, then the sense of self-that-stands-against-systems-of-power can be preserved.

They platform calls for solidarity demonstrations, for donations, for policy proposals all for a distant militarism in order to cover their lack of militancy at home, muddying the distinction between the two in the process. Their words of support or financial contributions to the military conflict overseas serves as donation to the collection basket of their moralism. And so their sins of omission are absolved. There is no solidarity to be found here, no matter how many banners are dropped.

Acting in real solidarity would necessitate interrogating the ways in which one can realize the war at home, necessitate bringing the abstract and distant to your city or town, to your doorstep.

To be in solidarity with the victims of war while maintaining an anarchist positionality would require taking on positions of antagonism to the mechanisms of war in totality. One could attack the factories that build the bombs, undermine military advertising and recruitment, sabotage the transport of weapons, and attack the banks that fund it all. There are infinite positions of attack one could take, but one needs to realize those positions at home in order for them to have any meaning beyond a singular moment. Attack the war machines with which you have proximity and trust in others elsewhere to do the same.

But to realize the war at home risks consequences. It requires a refusal of the world that is far more explicit than most are willing to engage in. I feel that for many, it is a fear of the consequences such a positionality risks that keep them from realizing said positionality, despite their professed politics pointing them in that direction.

Fear is understandable, this type of conflictuality is terrifying and if one didn’t occasionally feel afraid I’d question if they understood what they were getting themselves into. We shouldn’t be ashamed of fear, but when one frames reactions based in fear as analysis for others to act upon, fear becomes cowardice.

On May 7th, Reuel Rodriguez-Nunez was shot 30 times by the Raleigh Police Department after torching two police SUVs, and while attempting to throw a molotov in the direction of the police exiting the precinct. His brother later went on tell local news that he felt Reuel was protesting his treatment at the hands of these police from previous experiences in custody. Reuel was 37.

In his actions he sought an end to the violent systems he experienced. He sought an end to the world that created those experiences.

Aside from a few retweets or likes on a short write up, I saw hardly any anarchists engage with this news. Those I spoke to typically shrugged their shoulders and said something about how sad it was, suicide by cop and all. The same people and platforms who put out calls of support for a state military apparatus, the same people who refer to anyone critical of those calls as “pacifists,” had fuck all to say about Reuel. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.

Supporting a state military apparatus is wholly incompatible with solidarity with the actions of Reuel and others like him. Supporting a state military apparatus reifies, reinforces, reincarnates the very world such actions seek to destroy.

As I said at the onset, I’m not here to change minds, I’m not here to tell you you’re wrong and that I’m right. I’m here to carve out space and demonstrate a position. I’m here to state very plainly, I am an anarchist seeking an end to the world.

If you seek something similar, I ask you to make personal the interrogation of the ways of relating your positionalities make possible or undermine.

If you seek something else, then honestly, I’m surprised you read this far. See you in the street, I guess.

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