

Because Killing Them All is Not an Option

Anarcho-pluralism as the peaceful alternative

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Hey, anarchists, or really any reader who believes passionately in your political ideals for changing this world: depart with me on a thought experiment.

Your revolution succeeds. Through whatever means you think it possible, your fellow _____s have defeated the authoritarian/fascist/totalitarian forces and are ascendant. You, of course, know that your side will not rule in the same ruthless manner your enemy did.

Now what do you do with all these enemies whom you haven't killed or converted yet? The same beliefs that motivated them to oppose you in the past are likely not to be simply cast aside. After all, you didn't cast yours aside when you were out of power. As somebody experienced with dissidence, you know all too well that such people can take a long term view of their agenda and undermine the society you want to build in countless subtle ways.

Well, if you're Lenin, you kill as many as you can and install a ruthless regime of your own to deter revolt of the rest. If you're Washington, you expel as many "loyalists" to the enemy side as possible and, oh yeah, if anybody doesn't like it you lead the army against them. If you're Hitler, you kind of just kill them all. If you're Mao, you kind of just kill them all.

See where I'm heading with this? We're so used to being dissidents that we don't even have a plan for success. Not only have we built the assumptions of marginality and defeatism into our politics, but we leave ourselves with a giant, gaping hole in the middle of our view of the world we seek to change. And if we don't address this hole in the middle of our strategy, our revolution is likely to bring about the same kind of reactionary despotism we sought to overthrow, because there's always going to be some asshole who's willing to be the "serious, pragmatic" son-of-a-bitch to get shit done.

The only honest anarchists I know recognize that violent revolution is likely to come only after a large majority of people have rejected the establishment, and that any outward revolution will be, at most, a lagging indicator of the shift in public opinion, not the cause. These activists stress education and outreach. On the face of it, I think this is admirable for reasons I explained in my last post. But what about people who, even in the face of arguments you find compelling, simply do not agree with you? How do you deal with them? You can neither ignore the problem nor resolve to just kill them all, because the latter undermines the legitimacy of your victory and the former just invites somebody in your camp to do the same.

Let me pose a possible solution: yes, outreach and education as much as possible. But not just printing pamphlets and screeching at people; genuine dialogue with people who make you uncomfortable; dialogue that allows you to uncover peacefully what the ill-planned, knee-jerk revolution will uncover violently. You need to understand the strains of belief among your fellow man and not just call them bigoted or evil or stupid, but genuinely *address them*. We need to reach the hearts of people and not just change the label they attach to themselves, and that is harder work than most people consider when they advocate for propaganda (nothing wrong with propaganda, just that it's not the end-all-be-all of the task).

But we need a back-up plan, and here's my suggestion: anarcho-pluralism. Because people hold beliefs that are rigid and often unshakeable in the face of majority or forceful opposition, we need to be able to go our separate ways if we cannot resolve our differences. Of course, every attempt should be made to have as good of a relationship as possible with these people, but we must be ready for their rejection of premises and values we find compelling. If that means the theocrats or the fascists or the racists get their own little territories to be autocrats, well, what's the alternative? Killing them? Imprisoning them?

Here's the upside: by not marginalizing them within a majority society they find alien and intolerable, but instead letting them have their own sphere of influence — no matter how despicable we might find its exercise, we keep the door open that someday they will come around of their own accord. The kind of counter-revolutions that darken the history of initially pure revolutions around the world always happen because what was the ruling ideology becomes an insurgent ideology. People can feel like they are victimized and oppressed, even if they were previously oppressors, because their views are not realized — similarly to how we feel now. But by letting them build their own societies and live their own lives:

1. we establish a respectful, minimal relationship with them where, at best, genuine dialogue is possible and, at worst, our revolution is not threatened or tainted by violence and counter-revolution,
2. we deny them the ability to play their people off against an enemy. Suddenly, these little dictators have to actually demonstrate they can follow through on their utopia. If we believe in our ideals, we should welcome their attempt and eventual failure,
3. we establish our society as a haven for their dissidents and a counterexample to their society, undermining them much more thoroughly than by sheer military, political or cultural subjugation,
4. we benefit from the lessons of their experiment, and they from the lessons of ours, and finally
5. in the case of grossly unacceptable societies, we are much more certain that any violent means we adopt are justified. For example, say one of these splinter societies adopted human slavery. I'd be much more willing to fight to free these slaves than to fight potential slaveholders on mere ideological and moral concepts in the abstract. If "killing them all" is in fact unavoidable, this approach at least provides the basis for genuinely considering an attack as a last resort. It also forces each of us to really take responsibility for our use of violence in a given scenario, instead of justifying it according to some sense of ideological purity.

At the core of this approach is the understanding that none of us have a monopoly on the truth. If we desire freedom in order to express ourselves and our conception of truth better, we must allow others equal freedom — in spite of how distasteful it may seem to us. Finally, if we truly believe in the principles of egalitarianism and liberty, we should expect that the less regimented and controlled the world is, the more likely our ideas are to emerge spontaneously. And nothing will undermine the fascists, the theocrats, the bigots, the petty dictators, and other assholes like having to abandon minority politics and actually govern according to their sad principles.

This approach also forces us to come to terms with the true significance of our agenda. It's not just about the workers or the productive class or the people rising up; it's about starting to genuinely address the dark sides of our world, instead of just overcoming it in some outburst of eschatological exuberance. If this causes us to be more careful in how we revolt, well, we should be careful.

Finally, what about the people who would suffer under these other totalitarian societies through no fault of their own? Here we have to be practical: ridding the world of human suffering cannot be our political goal. In any society, even ours, people will suffer. Look at our rich, flush society and how much even privileged people cause themselves grief and heartache. The real question is: do you want to fight a fucking war over it, or do you want to start healing that suffering in the nuanced and personal manner that is required?

Again, we have to face the fact that mere military victory doesn't solve anything, and that it is a patient, thoughtful, engaging people that truly changes minds. If we are really caring and open-hearted, we will not fool ourselves into thinking evil can be simply vanquished by some faux-end-times conception of revolution. We will remain sympathetic to suffering, willing to continue the unending work of reaching out. Anarcho-pluralism allows the revolution, the transformation to continue even after we win.

Idealists and realists are always juxtaposed as if they represent two unreconcilable approaches. But in looking at these two camps with respect to revolutionary politics, perhaps this is only the case because they both go about their tasks in such a totalitarian manner. Idealists consider the revolution successful only if the ideals are adopted by 100% of the people. On the other hand, pragmatists consider themselves successful if they are able to rule with 100% of the power.

True transformation of society must be more subtle and thoughtful, and anarcho-pluralism provides a framework for ongoing transformation in just this manner. You can be idealistic and realistic by simply living and letting live; all you have to give up is the desire for the shallow smugness of instant moral satisfaction in exchange for a genuine, long-term commitment to your ideals. If these beliefs are worth fighting for, aren't they worth continuing to work for after the peace accord? Or are you only in it for a final triumph of good over evil?

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