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Desert: a review essay

John Warwick

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In the summer drought of 2018, rivers across Europe hit record low levels, revealing ‘hunger stones’, warnings from past generations that if the water level gets this low, pain is coming. One stone in the River Elbe read ‘*Wenn du mich siehst, dann wein*’ translating to ‘If you see me, weep’.

As I write this, large areas of the arctic are on fire.

In Siberia, a new trade is booming in selling the bones of woolly mammoths as they are being revealed by the thawing permafrost.

Within this context, *Desert*, now republished by Active Distribution, is looking worryingly prophetic.

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Desert, a warning. A review essay originally published in Organise!, the magazine of the UK Anarchist Federation.

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Desert has become something of an online sensation since publication by an anonymous author in 2011. It starts from the quite plausible premise that we will not be able to limit climate change in any meaningful sense; that runaway heating is inevitable, that large sections of the globe will become uninhabitable. As this happens, human populations will shrink rapidly due to wars, malnutrition and the vulnerability to disease that these bring. It is not

an optimistic view of the future. Humanity will not be able to pull itself together to do anything about it. Unsurprisingly, it has developed a cult following amongst Nihilists and anarcho-individualists.

As well as some worrying predictions about the future of the climate, *Desert* also has some home-truths for the anarchist movement, our capacity and what we can hope to achieve. In this it calls out the Anarchist Federation, and other groups, for proposing that an anarchist revolution will be complete and worldwide; suggesting this is unrealistic and that ultimately, we're selling a fantasy not unlike the priests and politicians.

There are some valuable points to consider, and certainly there is some truth in this, however I feel this is a slight misreading of our message.

We do not believe there will be an 'anarchist revolution', we believe revolutions are spontaneous events and that ultimately all we can do is try to push them in a more libertarian and communist direction. We must try to build new structures which are effective against the inevitable counter revolution and which mitigates against the prospect of a single group seizing power again over the working class. What (I think) we meant, was not that we would ever have enough anarchists to take over the whole world at once, but that we will never be able to co-exist peacefully with capitalism. Ultimately, if capitalism still exists anywhere in the world it will always try to expand and regain control of our lives. Whether we will be successful in eradicating it remains to be seen.

The author also tries to put to bed the misconception that there will be a 'singular anarchist future', however this is not an assumption I was labouring under. In revolutionary Spain, a small part of a relatively small country, there was not one system of doing things. Some villages banned money, some kept it, whereas some issued work tokens. We have never claimed to have the perfect system; there is no set programme; there is no end goal. The beauty of anarchism is that it is constantly evolving, that it adapts to new localities and conditions.

ing with the local council to build community-scale solar schemes. When the time comes we disconnect from the grid and have an energy system which we can manage ourselves. Community growing projects increase knowledge of farming practices, build community networks and show mutual aid in action. Group therapy sessions build our capacity for self-care and international networks grow our knowledge of how other communities have faced similar problems and won. Our unions offer an alternative structure which connects knowledge in different industries with regional-scale understanding of production and distribution systems.

Each of these projects would improve our chances if any of the possible future scenarios of state collapse, state domination or corporatism came true. These, and probably many more, are the 'no regrets decisions' we can be making to increase our chance of surviving and thriving in the future. Perhaps *Desert's* greatest strength is making us realise the urgency of taking these steps and being realistic about where the movement is today.

Desert is a welcome addition to anarchist ideas about what the future may hold for us. There has been a debate in the climate movement for years about the best way to frame the problem to increase awareness and action. Do we give messages of hope about what the future could hold if we act now or visions of doom if we get it wrong? Ultimately I think both are necessary, people need to be aware of the risks if we don't get this right and *Desert* injects a healthy dose of doom into the debate. Just don't lose hope, another future is possible.

While I feel these points need clarification, ultimately the message of *Desert* is one that needs to be heard. There is a naivety amongst the anarchist movement that if we can come up with the perfect organisational structures or blue-print for the future, the working class will arise. The fact is that we are at a low ebb and unfortunately the climate isn't going to wait until we regain our strength. We must accept that the revolution is unlikely to come about from positive action on our own part, from some glorious moment, more likely it will be due to the collapse of states as they are no longer able to provide for their citizens. We need to accept this, and we need to start planning for it.

That's not to say that imagining futures together is not valuable. Understanding together what a utopia might look like can help us to get there. These ideas can break the spell of capitalist realism and help people begin to think of new relations between each other and new relations to the rest of nature. This is where *Desert* brings an important message. Whilst talking of these utopias we must also be realistic about what we can achieve in the here and now. We must not preach these utopias as if they are just around the corner or they will be easy to achieve. Anarchist ways of organising have a lot to offer but we as a movement are a long way from being able to build alternative power structures, from being able to provide for communities. This is where our true weaknesses lie: we are not the CNT in 1930s Spain. We do have the structures in place to be able to take over or defend our gains if a revolution happened tomorrow.

Somewhere along the line this sense of realism has been lost amid hopeful speeches aiming to inspire people to anarchist ways of thinking. In early 20th century Italy, Malatesta discussed with other anarchists how they would provide for the people after an uprising in the city- 'We'll feed ourselves from the warehouses' was the reply. But how much food was actually in the warehouses? Malatesta checked and was surprised to find barely any. He realised

the city could not survive without help from food brought in by railroad, the same railroad which would also bring reinforcements for the army if it was kept it open. He surmised: 'we must face the cannons if we want the corn'. This is a useful story of realism meeting revolutionary exuberance. It will not be easy and *Desert* acknowledges that. We can achieve a lot, just look at anarchist disaster relief efforts across the globe, but we should also be aware we may not be the only force trying to consolidate ourselves as the capitalist order collapses.

Desert paints a future in which capitalist civilisation crumbles as it becomes unable to provide for its citizens in any meaningful way. Many will die in the global south (the author seems slightly blasé about this fact) but humans will expand north into the previously uninhabited zones. What will remain are pockets of societies, some more anarchist than others and some more successful than others. However, this is not the only way a society ravaged by global heating could evolve. Let me discuss two other possible dystopias.

First, as global warming accelerates the state realises the threat this presents and that it must step in to manage the crisis. The industrialised countries in the temperate north close their borders to keep out climate refugees and foster an increasing nationalism, an us vs them narrative over access to resources. The land purchased by US and European corporations in Africa is used to maintain our standard of living. How many disruptions to supply will the US tolerate before it sends in its army to subdue the locals and manage food production? In this dystopia, society continues in the temperate zones, albeit under strong state control and rationing of resources. Those outside these zones become client states, forced into production to service Europe and the US with food. In reality, this is simply an acceleration of the current dynamic between the industrialised nations and their former colonies.

Second, as climate breakdown becomes increasingly obvious with drought and famine in the less temperate zones, the potential rewards for technologies like direct air capture of CO2 become huge. States are deeply indebted trying to manage extreme weather events and the upgrading of infrastructure, meaning the development of these technologies is in corporate hands. Will Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos be kind to us when they have the power to save humanity, or will they extract as much as possible for their empires? Already they have international operations which flaunt local laws and are developing their own currencies to do this further. In this future the corporations are the ones who build alternative power structures outside the state. For those who can afford it, or who can sell their skills, the climate crisis will be managed. For everyone else, the future is less rosy.

In planning theory, when dealing with uncertain futures, one approach is to map out the possible scenarios and try to pick a strategy which works with each one. This is often termed 'no regrets' decision making. While the solution might not be optimal in any given scenario, it will allow you to survive whichever possible future turns out to be true. Essentially, you're not putting all your eggs in one basket.

Desert has offered one possible scenario and I have given a further two here. What strategies can we develop which benefit us no matter which turns out to be true? I would like to suggest as a start that in each of these scenarios, being able to provide for ourselves would be incredibly beneficial. The less dependence we have on the state or corporations, the less likely they are to be able to enslave us further.

Unfortunately, taking back the land has proved somewhat tricky despite our best efforts, but perhaps this isn't the only way we can view this problem. Providing for ourselves could mean engag-