

In Defense of Hope

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I had another piece to publish today, a new piece I've been working on for a moment, but world events ruined my timing. It was a piece about anarchist ethics and violence, but it might fit the context of the repression of the people of Palestine poorly. Both sides of any conflict are capable of committing atrocities (and usually do), and it's important to not cheerlead any atrocities, but it's also important to recognize that in this particular struggle, there is an oppressor—the state of Israel—and there is an oppressed, the people of Palestine. Without glossing over or offering apologetics for war crimes, it matters to me to keep our attention on the issue of Israel's terrible war against the civilians they keep imprisoned.

I'll post the piece about ethics and violence sometime, because I'm proud of it, but I'll only post it when I think it can be of more use.

Instead, here's a piece called "In Defense of Hope." This piece was first published in April 2020, when, famously, nothing of note was happening to the world, and I have edited it to be a bit more current. It was published on my blog, which is currently offline, and I just thought this might be a nice time to bring it back into the world.

Let's talk about hope, for a moment, because sometimes hope feels like the only thing that matters. It's easy to let it slip away from us.

The world is changing. It's always changing, but thanks to climate change and the ongoing pandemic it's changing dramatically and quickly right now. The old status quo is dying, despite how often our leaders try to convince us otherwise.

I hope the new status quo will be better. I hope it will be built of resilient, interwoven communities. I hope it will be kinder. I hope the horrors of capitalism that have been laid bare will live on only in history books. I hope the horrors of policing and judicial solutions to crisis stay plain for everyone to see and become dark historical footnotes. I hope we remember mutual aid. I hope that in the new status quo that we remember we can just... take care of each other.

That's what I hope. I think it's a long shot, but I think it's possible. I'll work my hardest to make it happen, and I hope you will too. If I didn't think it were possible, if I didn't have hope, I don't know what I would do.

For awhile, when I was coming up in politics, it was in vogue to talk shit on hope. There were roughly two lines of reasoning against hope. First was this idea that “hope” was inherently passive. That hope was about thinking that someone or something else would save you, that hope was about abandoning your agency and relying on something external—like hoping that “the masses” would have a revolution, or that the election would turn out how you want, or that scientists would cure any given disease.

Fundamentally, this critique of hope advocated that we take more active control over our lives. It was to remind us that “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Since it’s true that no one is coming to save us, since we actually have to solve problems ourselves, I’m sympathetic to this critique.

The other argument against hope came from a more nihilistic position. The idea was that trying to create a better world was not necessary in order to fight against the horrors of the existent one. By letting go of hope, by accepting that we are doomed no matter which path we choose, we can finally be free. We might not win, but fuck it, we’ll go down swinging because it’s a better way to live, a better way to die.

Both these arguments appealed to me more at a time when the storm of rising fascism and rising temperatures weren’t so immediately present, when still sat on the horizon. I don’t want to paint a rosy picture of the world at the beginning of this century, because it has always been full of horrors, but I think it’s reasonable to say that for myself and for most of the people likely to read this, things are worse now. Nationalism is more entrenched in more countries. Climate change is no longer on the horizon, it is here. And of course, there’s the ongoing pandemic. Sometimes, three years in, it slips from our minds, but never for long.

The world is worse, now, than it was twenty years ago. What do I turn to? I turn to hope.

The opposite of “hope” is not “seizing my own agency” or “grim determination.” The opposite of hope is despair. Despair, at a time like this, will literally kill us. Our mental and physical health are under attack right now, and morale is half that battle. We need hope.

The first argument against hope is simply a semantic one. Writers and theorists need to define terms in order to get their point across. They either latch onto and redefine existing terminology or they make up new terms. I think conflating what could be understood as “passive hope” with “hope” more broadly was likely a mistake.

One might say “if you’re hungry, you don’t hope you get food. You get off your ass and find food.” I’d argue that getting off your ass to find food is, still, an action predicated on hope. If I am hungry, I am hoping that when I search for food, I will succeed. If I had no hope of success, I would not get off my ass to find food. I would despair. If I am taking control of my life as best I am able, I hope I will succeed. This is an active form of hope.

Yet I’m not going to come out swinging too hard against passive hope, either. As much as I believe that we need to develop our sense of agency as individuals, we still live within communities and broader society. There are some things that I am, more or less, passively hoping will happen. I hope we discover more effective ways to fight covid and long covid. I hope that fewer people die than might in any given disaster. I hope we find new tools with which to fight climate change. I hope the people I love survive to the natural end of their lives. I don’t have agency in most of those things, or if I do it’s a negligible amount. I wear masks to minimize my own risk and minimize my risk of spreading covid to others. I advocate preparedness and for ways of mitigating the worst effects of disaster. I try to bolster people’s spirits when I can, whether through the work I produce or just talking to loved ones.

The other stuff? Medical breakthroughs? Hurricanes that people survive? That's what I hope happens. It's a passive hope.

I'm okay with that.

Hoping that those things will happen can bolster my own sense of agency. If I am part of a team, I hope that my teammates are able to accomplish their tasks, because it takes all of us together to succeed. I am counting on, hoping for, the rest of my team's success so that my own actions matter.

As for the other critique of hope, the nihilist approach, the grim determination approach... there are use cases for that. Sometimes anger will suffice where hope has failed. Yet, let's say I am hungry, and I have no hope of finding food. I will not go out and forage anyway, out of grim determination. I will despair. A better use case for this grim determination approach might be, let's say, an impossible fight against an all-powerful enemy. By abandoning any hope of victory or even survival, I'm less likely to anxiously minimize every risk I take. I'm less likely to let fear destroy my ability to live. I'm more likely to act freely and make the best of the time I have. There's beauty, there's poetry, in the freedom one can find in hopelessness. Yet I've found even my grim determination works best when I feel as though I have a chance.

I imagine this as a board game, or a strategy game, against a player who is incalculably better equipped and experienced. Despair, alone, would lead me to forfeit. Anger, alone, might lead me to play unintelligently and simply lash out, trying to hurt my enemy as much as possible in a move destined to end the game early with my defeat.

I live my best life when I play to win, whether or not I succeed.

I assume I will not die as I intend to: really fucking old, having lived most of my life in an anarchist society, surrounded by friends and family. That's still my goal. That's what I'm fighting for. I live my best life by working towards that goal as though it were possible. Because it *is* possible. It's just not likely. Give me a sliver of hope with my grim determination.

Without hope, to be honest I'd probably just get drunk and play video games, not live some wild and beautiful and short life of revolutionary crime.

Emma Goldman, one of my heroes in this world, was in her late 60s before she spent several years living in revolutionary Catalonia. After nearly a lifetime of struggle and disappointment, she had, for a moment, the chance to see her dream alive. May I manage the same.

We're *not* playing against an opponent who is incalculably better equipped and experienced. We're far, far more powerful than we give ourselves credit for and our opponent's position, which seemed so unassailable only a few years ago, is clearly weaker than he has led us to believe. There are more of us than we'd ever imagined, and more are joining us every day.

Lately I've been taking stock of what gives me hope, and I refer back to my list whenever something happens in the world that strips hope away from me. I recommend this. Your list might not look like mine, and that's fine. In times like these, there are people who are going to step forward claiming to have all the answers, or even know all the questions to ask. Those people are either lying or wrong, and either way they're trying to sell you something. Make your own list. Have your own goals.

During the first month of the pandemic, I found hope in the mutual aid networks that were suddenly everywhere. I found hope in the prison riots in Italy. I found hope in how for a brief moment, centrists or even capitalists abandoned the profit motive in order to feed people, house people, and keep as many people safe as they could. I found hope in the rent strikers and the mortgage strikers. I found hope in the engineers who broke patent law to create life-saving equipment. I found hope in the science fiction magazine in China that sent me n95 masks to distribute when there were none to be found in the US.

I found hope most of all in the uprising of 2020, which pushed this system closer to breaking than any leftist movement of my life ever managed.

These days, I find hope in how many former centrists I know, in how many former liberals I've met understand that the problems are systemic and the solutions will come from the grassroots. I find hope in the anarchists I've met who've done the work to get over themselves and learn that revolution will never come from a club that's only for the cool kids. I find hope in the meteoric rise of the labor movement. I find hope in the people who defend drag events and abortion clinics and the networks that are already transporting people in need to states where their healthcare isn't a crime. I find hope in the resistance fighters across the world who refuse to be destroyed by this or that imperial power, and I find hope in the people who aren't afraid to support them in those struggles.

I also find hope every time I watch my dog come bounding up the hill through the grass. Or maybe that's another emotion I feel, and I just want to write about my dog because he makes me happy.

Basically, I find hope in everyone who is doing what they do best—whether through criminal or legal means—to refuse the new and somehow even worse status quo.

It's happening everywhere. I never thought I'd live to see the day when so much of the world comes together to try to save each other.

So... it's us. I find hope in us.

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