

A long time ago in a revolution far, far away

Revolutionary Organizing, Lumpen, and Anarchy in Andor

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For the love of all that is holy, if you have not watched Andor, do not read this installment. It is one big hunk of spoiler and I would be so disappointed if you did that to yourself.

The latest series set in the Star Wars galaxy, Andor, has made plenty of ripples and it's not hard to see why. The acting and cinematography are solid, and the character development is beyond compelling. What's more, the series feels radical, and it makes enough obvious visual critiques to justify this feeling.

After all, the riot cop and the bureaucrat's desk both make their appearance as manifestations of imperial power. Even more radical, I think, was the reversal of a common media trope, the one that exclusively equates prisons with oppression or unfreedom through their darkness and dirtiness. Andor blows this correlation out of the water (see what I did there, Narkinians?) by giving us a prison that is bright, clean, and orderly and yet is unspeakably evil because it is a prison and prison is about control. Their portrayal of an insurrection, not just in the last episode but truly in all the episodes building up to it, is inspiring, beautiful, cruel; on a long list, if not a short list, probably one of the better portrayals of insurrection in cinema.

What are the politics of Andor? It would be obtuse to expect any representation to be meaningful in a society in which action is constantly divorced from belief. Nonetheless, we can engage in cultural criticism to take a look at what kind of fantasies the culture industry feels a need to contemplate and domesticate.

The Portrayal of Lumpen, the Non-Portrayal of Anarchists

It turns out that Tony Gilroy, *Andor*'s showrunner, read a mainstream biography of Stalin and was enthralled by tales of revolutionary bank robberies from Iosef's youth. The fact that he based Cassian Andor's character in part on Stalin, or more accurately, on this one small slice of Stalin's life, has been used to impute certain politics to the entire series.

However, Tony Gilroy is probably not a veteran socialist. If he was impressed by Stalin's youthful exploits financing the Bolsheviks, a biography of Quico Sabaté would have blown his socks off. Thousands of revolutionaries lived lives every bit as adventurous as that of young Stalin, before he became a mass murderer and chief bureaucrat for state capitalism. Dozens of them have biographies written about them. Gilroy probably came across Stalin's instead of any of these other ones because capitalist society privileges authoritarian revolutionaries over revolutionaries participating in projects that are actually emancipatory. In capitalism's universities, it is easy to find not just Marxist texts but entire departments.

So when Gilroy tries to write about revolution, much of his portrayal is not going to reflect intricate theory from any school of thought, but rather the mainstream imaginary around revolution. With this in mind, it is even more remarkable how close Gilroy's portrayal of the lumpen is to Marx's.

Who are the lumpen in *Andor*? To back up a moment and make sure we're on the same page, the *lumpenproletariat* are the poorest of the poor, the members of the proletariat who have even been denied access to the means of production, to the possibility of waged labor. Historically, many anarchist and other revolutionary currents believed that the most oppressed often had the most to offer, and at the very least deserved to be a part of the revolution; many anarchists were originally lumpen themselves or gladly fought alongside them. Marx and Engels, on the other hand, used essentialist arguments to argue that the lumpen as an entire class were fundamentally

counterrevolutionary and could not be relied on in the struggle. And these beliefs were also wrapped up in the ways Marx and Engels were actively racist and pro-colonial.

So who the hell are the lumpen in the Star Wars galaxy? To make the connection, it helps to realize that the lumpen are, in part, a racially coded category. In Marx's day, they would have included the Roma, Sinti, *gitanos*, and the orphaned migrants of global colonialism who ended up in European port cities. In the Star Wars galaxy, the characters who are most likely to be portrayed as part of the lumpen are Black humans and aliens, especially if the aliens are portrayed as rough or hostile rather than cuddly or observantly intelligent.

The protagonists of the insurrection on Ferrix are barrel-chested, hammer-wielding (white) workers—a clear callback to a Soviet imaginary—starry-eyed youths, and grandmotherly elders. One of the few Black characters to have any lines in the whole series, also a worker on Ferrix whom, if I am remembering correctly, we are never shown working, turns out to be a snitch.

The Keredians who capture Andor and Melshi after the prison break on Narkina 5 embody this same tension. Large, grotesque-looking aliens, they could be traitors or supporters of the revolution, and as they go about their marginal economic activity, hunting for fish or “squiggles,” we're led to believe they are going to turn the two fugitives in for the reward. In the end they don't, they prove to be generous, but mostly because there wasn't time in the episode for another major conflict, another escape. What is clear is that the Indigenous inhabitants of Narkina are never counted on in the planning of the rebellion, nor is it suggested that they should have been.

This is the Marxist portrayal of the *lumpenproletariat*. They are not to be relied on. They might support the revolution, but their loyalties are self-interested and change from one day to the next. Gilroy probably did not specifically identify these and other characters as lumpen and decide to portray them in an orthodox way so as to make his show more useful to budding socialist revolutionaries. He probably just fell into these unexamined patriarchal and white supremacist stereotypes in the same way that ole Karl did when he wrote them into Marxism 1.0 (since I'm going full tilt against Groucho in this piece, I feel compelled to mention that Marxism became much more interesting once African and Afro-Caribbean revolutionaries got their hands on it, though I would still argue that in retrospect it proved inadequate as a revolutionary tool, showing up in the ways newly independent Marxist-inspired states reproduced colonial and patriarchal dynamics against their own marginalized and Indigenous subjects, while also jump-starting capitalism under a new management structure).

It becomes increasingly significant that Saw Gerrera's is the only rebel faction to prominently include non-human species, and that he himself is a Black human who has lines, who is depicted as complex. Saw and his fighters are the most anarchistic of all the rebels, and it is no coincidence that they do not get a fair portrayal. After all, they are lumpen beyond a doubt: unreliable, dirty, prone to violence, and at the same time beholden to obscure principles we are never invited to understand.

It is a rule that is as close to inviolable as cultural rules can be: the Spectacle cannot portray anarchy, cannot portray a real and present revolution. Hollywood loves a rebel because its job is also to recuperate that which is subversive. So, movies that are celebrated as radical in fact demonstrate an acute reactionary streak, from *Fight Club* to *Black Panther*. That said, in *Andor* Nemik's manifesto does give us a small yet delicious taste of Alfredo Bonanno and the insurrectionary view of action. It's just that it happens to leave out any of the social analysis that could help viewers ponder, *what sort of societies deserve to be destroyed besides this obviously fascist Empire on my TV screen?*

(And is it a coincidence that Nemik's name is rather similar to Nestor Makhno, who doesn't look too dissimilar from Alex Lawther when he's wearing that hat?)

This hard limit around the truths they cannot portray struck me the hardest during the prison break on Narkina 5. The prisoners, facing oblivion, have banded together to rise up and break out. It couldn't have happened without some key preparations by Cassian Andor, and Kino Loy's experience and mettle as a work gang leader also provide a forceful motivation, but the rest of the prisoners are not mere pawns or drones. The break-out would never have worked without their initiative, bravery, and participation. And this is true to everything we know and everything we have seen from insurrections and rebellions. They are truly collective affairs in which people gain a supra-individual intelligence and consciousness.

The writers acknowledge this when they state the following in an interview:

Willimon: When you think of the rallying cry of "One way out," you can think of that in a very literal sense – you can only go up and out, and dive into the lake. But if you think on a bigger level—all of these guys are chanting this together—you're seeing [that the] only one way out of the oppression, and the Empire, is collectively working together. With risk and sacrifice. Some of us are going to die, some of us aren't going to make it. But our only way out is together, en masse, with collective courage. That's the bigger launcher for the rebellion.

And yet, in the prison break, we see people trampling each other, and in perhaps the most heartbreaking moment of the season, Kino Loy gets left behind because he cannot swim. Panicking crowds certainly trample people all the time, but this rarely happens in moments of collective rebellion because of the broader consciousness that people quickly develop. (Readers of experience, please note the learning process, slower for some than for others, that folks need to go through before they know not to throw rocks when their friends are standing close to the cops, nor to push dumpsters without checking first that there's no one on the other side of it; furthermore, please accept that being slow to learn these lessons is qualitatively different from entering into a panic and trampling others underfoot or pushing them off a precipice because they're in your way).

The writers, clearly, have never experienced anything remotely similar to the rebellion they're scripting, and they fall into capitalist assumptions even as they are grasping towards the idea of collectivity. I understand that it was the right decision to have Kino die, from a writer's perspective, but his death was far too simple. In that moment, Kino had hundreds of comrades who would have helped him swim to shore. Portraying the escaping prisoners as a thoughtless herd, right at the moment they are reclaiming their agency, was for me the most poignant reminder that we can never find true anarchy on a screen.

Complexity as the Stage for Revolution

The greatest strength of *Andor* as a story, and the strength that also makes the series the most interesting to contemplate from a revolutionary standpoint, is the complexity of its characters. Luthen Rael, the citizen of the Imperial capital Coruscant who fronts as an antiques dealer and coordinates the different factions of the nascent Rebellion, is a prime example. A Blanqui figure for whom the ends justify the means, he will do whatever it takes for his cause to triumph, such

as sacrificing an entire band of fighters when he learns they are walking into a trap in order to protect his source; or blackmailing a highly placed Imperial mole who wants to walk away from his dangerous position now that he is a father; or deciding to kill Cassian Andor simply because he needs to tie up loose ends and isn't sure whether Cassian can be trusted.

We're never sure if we can trust Luthen because we realize that at any moment he might decide to kill one of the characters we care about, and yet the more we get to know him the more we realize how strong and sincere his convictions are, and how much risk he subjects himself to. When the mole, Lonni Jung, suggests Luthen is simply playing with other people's lives without sacrificing anything himself, he is reacting to the same perception that viewers will have, that everything rolls off him, that he is pulling strings without suffering for the cause. Yet both Lonni and the viewers can see that his response is sincere: in fact he has no life outside of the cause because he has already sacrificed everything. He has passed out the other side of suffering.

The rising ISB agent Dedra Meero is Luthen's mirror image in a way. From the very beginning we know her motivations are the worst possible: she wants power for herself and she wants to increase the ruthless efficiency of an evil Empire. She is a conscious and willing agent of oppression. And yet, we can see that she has good ideas and a part of us wants her to succeed as she battles to keep those ideas from being squelched by a thoughtless bureaucracy or an arrogant competitor. Nevermind that her ideas concern how to trap and destroy the very rebels we are rooting for.

This complexity is useful because on the one hand, it can remind us that no matter how cruel or thoughtless or selfish they allow themselves to be, those who make the machinery of oppression run are people, and keeping that contradiction in mind rather than ignoring it or deciding it irrelevant can keep us from entering into the simplistic moral calculus that guides Luthen Rael's actions as he subtracts losses from gains in pursuit of an ideal that, consequently, becomes more and more abstract.

In our present circumstances, however, a figure like Meero can be even more useful if she reminds us how easy it is to sympathize with monsters when we individualize their personal struggles and ignore the larger systems they are complicit in. Thus, when people who consider themselves feminists or antiracists champion figures like Madeleine Albright or Barack Obama even though they were both mass murderers advancing the interests of an exploitative, white supremacist, and ecocidal system, they are being as myopic and ridiculous as someone stanning Dedra Meero just because she had a hard day at work.

Given what we've asserted about the Spectacle, it is no surprise that one character who is not allowed much complexity is Saw Gerrera. The stereotype of a radical, he is participating in a broad and contradictory coalition fighting against the most oppressive and powerful system any of them have ever faced, and his concerns and criticisms are portrayed as purism and paranoia.

When Gerrera initially refuses to work with Anto Kreeger's rebel faction, the standard viewer is given nothing but a glimpse of some obscurantist radical who must be a purist, spouting out labels like "neo-Republican" and "separatist." Hardcore Star Wars fans with their nose in the weeds can catch a trace of something more meaningful here, though. Far from being a purist, Saw is referencing factions of the early Rebellion who are fighting for human supremacy, for corporate dictatorship, for elitist religious cults, or some other harmful ideology. He has good reason not to consider them allies, and is grappling with the reality that if you are willing to do anything to defeat an enemy, you will become as bad or worse than that enemy.

If the enemy is not one particular emperor, but the logic of Empire itself, with its components of absolute power and total obedience, then he cannot simply seek to increase the Rebellion's power in order to triumph, even as he has to acknowledge tactical considerations to win any particular battle. Whereas Luthen will take on any ally who is expedient and then stab them in the back when they become a threat or when the gains outweigh the losses, much the way Lenin and Stalin did, Gerrera has to engage in much more difficult decisions.

The option he proposes to navigate the contradictions of such a coalition mirrors one of the most effective frameworks worked out in human history for decentralized rebellions: solidarity with autonomy. But Luthen steps in, and the plot is never allowed to develop in Gerrera's chosen direction.

Hollywood loves a rebel. But the rebels they portray all conspire to reinforce the stability of the existing system, the world that viewers wake up into when they leave the theater or turn off the TV. These include martyrs who sacrifice themselves in battles against outsiders for some abstract idea of freedom, like *Braveheart*; tough guy antiheroes who break the rules and uphold a standard, individualistic masculinity in doing so, like *Maverick* or *Dirty Harry*; outgunned underdogs who triumph against racialized or inhuman Others, like John and Sarah Connor or the military heroes of *Independence Day*; they also include Machiavellian rebels who become as evil, or worse, than what they're fighting against, as in *The Hunger Games*. In *Andor*, Luthen Rael is halfway to becoming that kind of authoritarian rebel, though more likely than not he'll remain anchored to a space of contradiction that allows him to play an active foil to Cassian's own moral development.

Rebels in the Spectacle have a very broad range, but one part of that range is noticeably absent. It is the kind of rebel who helps us answer the question, how do we realistically and effectively take on all that is wrong with this world without destroying ourselves? How do we defeat absolute power without wielding an even greater and more absolutist power?

Such questions are alien to storytelling in our society. The dreams capitalism dedicates so many resources to producing are something we are meant to wake up from, something outside of life rather than something reflective of and braided into it. This latter form of dreaming though, one that is present and accessible to us as we go through the tribulations of our actual lives, is far closer to the original spirit of storytelling.

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