

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchist Ethics In The Collapse

Peter Gelderloos

July 21 2022

Peter Gelderloos
Anarchist Ethics In The Collapse
July 21 2022

<https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1550032383889797120.html>
Re-printed and annotated in Return Fire vol.6 chap.8 (winter 2024-2025). To read the articles referenced throughout this text in [square brackets], PDFs of Return Fire and related publications can be read, downloaded and printed by visiting returnfire.noblogs.org or emailing returnfire@riseup.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

The fundamental idea of anarchist ethics is that means and ends are inseparable. But it goes beyond ethics. The idea that ends can justify the means is simplistic. It is a case of confusing the categories we use to parse reality with reality itself. The conditions always contain the methods that brought them about. Furthermore, there are no ends. Every day, history keeps moving along, and the methods we use to shape society become locked into, a part of, the society we create and recreate.

This is one reason most anarchists favor collective self-defense and attacking oppressive institutions, but are against the violence of prison. Prison means controlling a defeated enemy. We want to remove the ability of a cop or politician to control, not to control people for what they've done in the past. That's why we attack the powerful and their mercenaries but we would never establish gulags. Anarchist revolutions reflect the attempt to walk this line. But what happens to these ethics in a civilizational collapse?

Every decade, the effects of ecocidal capitalism are killing more people than were murdered in the worst atrocities of the 20th cen-

tury. There's a reasonable probability that we are headed to a collapse. Looking at human history, that would mean 10-50% of the entire population dying, and the upper classes either being massacred or in their entirety, or leading people in the extermination of some scapegoat group. Or first the latter, then the former.

I want to stress that collapse is not certain, and those who claim it is are intellectually dishonest and, usually, politically problematic. Nonetheless, there's a decent chance that a few decades from now there'll be revenge-crazed bands of trauma-survivors hunting down Elon Musk's [*ed. – see 'Let's Destroy Everything That is Called Tesla!'*] offspring across the four corners of the earth as remaining billionaires deploy murderbots to defend their luxurious survival compounds and in that extreme but feasible outcome, revolutionary currents may have some influence, but no control, over outcomes. So what does that mean for us?

Class society needs to be abolished, but killing a lot of people, even very bad people, does not particularly prepare those who do the killing to create a free society motivated to heal the planet after centuries, millennia, of suffering and oppression.

First off, we need to always organize for the best possible outcomes (convincing people to abandon their leaders and providing tools to self-organize society with a minimum of bloodshed) or we foreclose those outcomes. But we also need to prepare for the worst, or we will end up against the wall, succumbing to starvation, etc. However, encouraging hatred of the wealthy and powerful is necessary, strategic, and true in both the best and worst scenarios. People will continue to give dominant institutions another chance unless they feel contempt for everyone associated with those institutions. Furthermore, revenge can be an important part of a healing process.

However, no process of healing collective and intergenerational traumas can be based entirely or primarily on revenge or even on acts of self-defense. Reconciliation is just as important – giving a chance for those who did harm or those who stood by to make

amends and come back into the fold [*ed. – see 'Between Punishment & Vengeance'*] – and even more important is decentering the people and institutions who were oppressive, and recentering the healthy relationships we are creating and our feelings of safety and satisfaction within those relationships.

That leads me to what may seem like a paradoxical conclusion: it is a mistake to view the mercenaries and powerholders of the dominant institutions as human. Pressuring your deadbeat dad to go to therapy might change things for the better in your abusive family. Getting millionaires to go to therapy will not mitigate one iota of the suffering capitalism causes. That's because the mercenaries and powerholders of the dominant institutions are organic interfaces to eternally inhuman institutions, and as long as those institutions exist, their interfaces will not act like humans [*ed. – see Riots & Eagles*]. All of us know, our jobs dehumanize us and in one way or another, we live for the weekends. But for those with the power to shape, advance, or protect those institutions, it's another story. They've given their lives over to the machine. The key is not to honor their humanity (or leaving aside the anthropocentrism [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg11*], their beauty as living beings), but to honor our own. I could give a goddamn for the life of a cop, but I don't want to see what it would do to my friends, going around getting rid of everybody who works as a cop.

So as things continue to get ugly and uglier, as we more frantically try to point out that there is another way to live, a healthy way, a loving way, with whatever comes I think the key is this: to ask ourselves, could I live with myself after this? If I take this harm out of the world, even though this harm also has a name, a face, a story, will I still be able to create joy and beauty in my community? Would we be enriched or endangered by allowing this walking harm among us, knowing their story, giving them another chance? They can't be the protagonists anymore, we need to be. And we deserve the best future possible. Fostering reconciliation, cultivating love, these are fundamental parts of a free world. But

they can only come about when we are not in constant danger and degradation.

Sorry for the dark thoughts. All the death, human and other, while those responsible for it or those who make allowance for it continue to be celebrated and listened to, it's weighing on me. Oh my god did someone just read this as a critique of *violence* [ed. – see *the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.4; 'Violence, Non-Violence, Diversity of Tactics'*]?? I give up... Now in favor of executing everyone who thinks in binaries.