

Navigating Despair

**It's okay to let the distant future be unknown if we know we are building what
we can now.**

Subversive.Thread

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The Limits of Individualism

Too often we come home demoralized by the oppression we see every day. We want to do more to fight back against the inertia that allows oppression to exist. Sometimes we are able to do more — often we're not. In this three part series we want to explore what it means to constantly come up against our capacity. We want to expand on how positioning oppression as something individuals can or should dismantle alone is a trap wielded to maintain the violence we resist. We want to identify how our willingness to make a difference in the world is used to beat us into submission by constantly refunneling our energy into hierarchies that don't deviate from the status quo but rather reinforce it. And finally, we want to share how we've navigated the sadness we've felt both inside and outside movement spaces, and share some lessons we are carrying forward.

- How can we navigate “doing what’s right” when the sheer volume of choices is more than we could ever process — emotionally, physically, financially?
- How are we to cope with feeling insignificant and small when settler colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy seem unstoppable?
- What does it mean to exist in a sea of oppression if we can only swim as far as our own bodies can take us?

Every day we see more hungry people than we can possibly feed by ourselves, more unsheltered people than we can house, and more pain and suffering than we can process. Yet we see stores full of food, buildings that could provide shelter, and thousands of people who could be building a world where we collectively support each other rather than existing as cogs in a machine that forces us to compete for our most basic needs. Most days we are left wondering “What more could we do, as individuals navigating our daily lives, to disrupt the inertia of oppression?”

In this series we want to explore how positioning oppression as something individuals can or should dismantle alone is a trap wielded to maintain the violence we resist. We want to identify how our willingness to make a difference in the world has been coerced and coached into substituting individual choice for collective action. And we want to name the different structures that co-opt our efforts at resistance for their own benefit, producing the despair so many of us are navigating. Our hope is that by sharing our experiences we can unearth the shame we feel when we cannot do enough, and reposition those feelings as a call for collective care and mutual investment.

To be clear, asking ourselves what we can do to dismantle oppression isn't a bad thing. It's foundational to our struggle. It's how we get moving, by starting with ourselves. But we have been conditioned by white settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalist individualism to believe that isolated choices can be powerful political acts when oftentimes they're not. Going vegan in itself won't end white supremacy or capitalism. Buying an electric car won't either. Donating to charity won't end poverty. Volunteering for or working at a nonprofit won't eradicate oppression — in fact, nonprofits were designed to perpetuate the status quo. And neither voting nor policy change will ever uproot the carceral state. None of these tools were meant to end oppression, and many of them were always meant to disarm and neutralize radical movements.

When we buy into the narrative that individuals and their choices are the primary drivers of systemic change, it becomes easy to agree with the conclusion that we are personally responsible for dismantling hierarchies of oppression. And that if we fail, we have ourselves to blame. But our oppressors know that individual acts of resistance cannot stop them, so they use our will to fight back against us. Like a hamster wheel built to extract and expend all our energy and resources, they isolate our actions and contain their effects by filtering them through violent hierarchies — e.g., electoral politics, the nonprofit industrial complex, the colonizers' education systems — so that our overall impact never seriously threatens the status quo.

Radical movements are never meant to get outside of the wheel, or they must always be moved into it.

If you are thinking that individual choices like adopting a plant-based diet or voting are meant to be aggregated together to affect systemic change, we remind you: Veganism and vegetarianism, at least in a Western context, are rife with classism and white supremacy. From the smug victim-blaming of affluent people about poor peoples' food choices to the working conditions that poor people of color endure globally which scaffold "conscious" consumer choices, capitalism is alive and well. Similar can be said of voting. If every person in their respective countries voted we would still live in a world built on borders delineated through the violence of white settler colonialism.

When we understand the magnitude of capitalism, white supremacy, anti-blackness, patriarchy, climate change, and other violent hierarchies, we are meant to feel demoralized. Settler colonialism's foundation rests on its ability to disconnect us from each other, from our land and our homes, from nature, and from any sense of community. Its power grows with its ability to constantly reconstruct the world to obstruct individual acts of resistance. When we are made to believe that the responsibility of destroying oppression sits on our shoulders alone, we are not meant to feel empowered, we are meant to feel so totally ill-equipped that the thought of resisting feels overwhelming and foolish.

Over time, we become disheartened and disillusioned — we burn out. And that was always the point. Whether resistance is immediately overwhelmed by the magnitude of oppression or is snuffed out over time through the bureaucracy of empire, those holding power want us to feel a greater sense of despair than any sense of resistance or interconnected struggle that can be cultivated and grown.

Our despair then is an understandable response to the magnitude of oppression we experience every day. But it is also a call to action to build movements that are greater and more resilient than our individual selves.

They Don't Empower, They Devour

"To me the important thing is not to offer any hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader's mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned. The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary." — Ursula K. Le Guin

In Part One of “Navigating Despair” we focused on naming the trap of individualism and how, as a vehicle used to replicate oppression, it produces chronic burnout and despair. In Part Two we set out to share some of our experiences while organizing within hierarchies that reproduce the oppression we hoped to fight and how those experiences have reshaped our approach to movement work. In Part Three we will share some lessons we’ve learned when navigating despair and how we hope to build by investing our time, energy, and material resources in what we believe are the types of world-making that are best positioned to bring joy to ourselves and those we love.

- What does it mean to dangle the dream of liberation over people if that dream is always moved further into the future?
- What power does this give so called “leaders” and institutions over us if we consistently and predictably agree to follow?
- How could that power be used to manipulate us into doing the very things that keep us from getting free, that keep us from dreaming up new ways of pursuing and realizing liberation?

Before we engaged in autonomous organizing, some of us organized in elections. But when we grew to understand the corruption, unaccountability, and political opportunism of the electoral process, we grew disgusted with it. We felt power must be situated closer to people engaged in struggle, so we sought out grassroots organizing. Instead, we found leftist vanguards who were only interested in our liberation insofar as it served their ambitions to capture state or colonial power for themselves. We felt how disempowering it is to be directed by the vanguard’s “leadership” on when, how, and who we were to organize with, and at what pace. We realized this wasn’t the liberation we were fighting for either — it wasn’t liberation at all but rather a trade for a different management class just as willing to exploit us as the old.

At the same time, many of us worked in nonprofits that, at face value, purported to be working to “end the cycle of poverty.” Yet direct service staff like us were paid poverty-level wages while “founders” and administrators were paid far more; our passion for equity and justice was leveraged to coerce and guilt-trip us into giving more of ourselves than what was sustainable; and we were set up with unreasonable expectations for what an individual could accomplish from the start.

In each of these instances — elections, vanguards, and nonprofits — we kept coming back to the same questions: What was similar about these organizational models? And why did we feel so disempowered, tired, and sad while navigating them?

The politician, the vanguard, and the non-profit all seek to house the struggle within their own vision for the future. The logic goes: if a house must have an owner, then a movement must have a leader. Of course, in building their future we are often asked to be the fodder “for the cause.” After many years, we began to see the most common and visible forms of organizing operate as top-down models obsessed with reaching scale (spreading to as many people as possible). But when scale becomes the central point of organizing, it also asks us to neglect our own needs and capacity, and to enforce hierarchies that separate ourselves from other people engaged in struggle.

We found ourselves chronically tired and sad because no matter what we did, it would never be enough to reach the scale we were told we needed. We would burn out because we weren't organizing in a way that included our own needs. And ultimately, *we weren't organizing for our own liberation, or the liberation of anybody we knew and loved*. We were sacrificing ourselves on the behalf of the mythic and monolithic "masses," someone else's strict definition of revolution, some leader's idea of the "real work" which always managed to deprioritize our own needs or silence our asks for support. For us, this needed to change.

But before we could change how we wanted to organize, we had to change how we thought about the future. We had to learn to be open to possibilities that weren't pre-drawn by the carceral state, the nonprofit industrial complex, or the colonial imagination. We had to interrogate our own politics around scale and revolution. We had to problematize what it meant to organize outside hierarchy and to center all of the ways in which we, and everyone we love, have endured so much pain.

We recognize now that the separation between ourselves and the people who we are working to uplift is arbitrary, if not nonexistent. We were (and are) people in struggle. We were (and are) living in housing and healthcare precarity. We were (and are) who we are fighting to liberate because we were (and are) the oppressed.

Notes for the Journey

"I'm a strong believer that either your politics is liberating and that gives you joy, or there's something wrong with them. I've gone through phases of "sad politics" myself and I've learned to identify the mistakes that generate it. It has many sources. But one factor is the tendency to exaggerate the importance of what we can do by ourselves, so that we always feel guilty for not accomplishing enough." — Silvia Federici

It feels fitting to post Part Three of "Navigating Despair" today as some of us have taken time to create space from wage-labor and unpaid work. Yet, as we travel this week, the work of processing our burnout, our sadness, and our anxiety is still itself work. In Part Three we wanted to share some lessons we've learned in helping make the space in-between the sprints we find ourselves compelled to run a little more possible — and, we hope, a step closer to something that feels a little more sustainable.

These lessons are guidelines — not rules. They may speak to you. They may not. We have never wanted to make proclamations about what will work in all movement spaces for all movement builders. As autonomists and anarchists, that immediately introduces hierarchy into organizing our spaces. It goes against everything we've fought to build, and everything we believe. So read these. Share them. We hope you find resonance in them.

- What does it mean to create boundaries that respect our existence as individuals engaged in collective struggle?
- How do we balance the work of resistance in a way that leaves room for a liveable life?
- Who is the peoples' revolution for if we are not also the people we're fighting for?

When people learn about our politics as autonomists, we are often asked "So what do we do?" Sometimes this question is asked in bad faith by people who know that it's impossible to give a

complete answer. They are often coming from a place that has already mapped out success or failure based on how well our answer aligns with how they think change should happen. They are already firmly attached to one future, not the possibility of liberation through many.

In other situations, we know that this question comes from a place of despair: What more can we give when we've already sacrificed so much?

We want to avoid prescribing any simple solutions when it comes to resistance: We aren't leaders, nor are we oracles of the future. What we can offer here are the lessons we've learned so far.

1. It's okay to let the distant future be unknown if we know we are building what we can now.

There are no one-size-fits-all "solutions" for the future which do not foreclose on the possibility of liberation by shackling it to hierarchy. We have to challenge ourselves to think about the future as a way of aspiring toward possibilities rather than feeling attached to the "successes" or failures of systems and institutions that we didn't create and that don't seek our liberation. For us, we began to ask "What if pockets of the future already exist alongside the present? What if people have been organizing autonomously already? Could we connect with them? Is there a history of autonomous organizing? What if our future depends less on something distant and more on how well we are cultivating what exists in the margins where we live?"

2. It's okay to say no to the types of organizing that drain our capacity to organize around what brings us joy.

All capitalist institutions are inherently ableist. By extension, organizing spaces that haven't divested from a capitalist work ethic make sustainable organizing impossible. They set expectations that produce burnout and replicate the same exploitation they say they want to destroy. If we begin to see ourselves not as disposable objects to be used up in the struggle for liberation but as people worthy of liberation too, then it becomes rational to say no to the types of organizing that constantly ask us to martyr ourselves. All liberatory struggles are struggles for life, joy, and connection — not despair and not death.

3. It's okay to listen to our bodies, to make space to be sad, to grieve, and to heal.

Our bodies hold the collective wisdom of our ancestors. We can begin disrupting the ableism of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy by listening to them. When we are feeling alienated, our bodies are telling us that building community is vital to our individual and collective survival. When we are burned out, our bodies are telling us that there is more work to do than can we possibly do alone. And when we want to give up, our bodies are communicating a need to rest that doubles as a reminder that we need communities in struggle that can step up when we need to step back and heal.

4. It's okay to make boundaries that respect our limited capacity as individuals.

No matter what we do, there will usually be more than one right choice to make — and as individuals we cannot make them all. One person didn't create the oppression we are fighting, so we shouldn't expect an individual to end it either. When we expect too much

from ourselves or our small communities of resistance, we replicate the oppressor's world for them by replicating the ableism that fuels it. If we feel small or alone, it is not a testament to our inability to make a difference as individuals — it is a testament to the need for community and connection, to build the places where we can realize our full potential as communities in struggle together.

5. **It's okay to prioritize building with the people you've built affinity with and who understand your needs.**

We've been told that it's our task as radicals to "radicalize the people" too — without much regard for our own mental health and capacity. But there are no truly safe spaces in a world of hierarchy and domination. The large majority of our time is navigating, interacting with, and finding small ways to push back against people with harmful perspectives. Family, co-workers, people on the street — most of these people have perspectives that are opposed to ours, that are hurting us. But we're forced to engage with many of these people because the alternative is to be punished, to lose our livelihood, to be outed and targeted. We're always already doing the work because we have no choice.

How does creating boundaries not make sense for our safety and sanity? What's wrong with being very intentional and deliberate with the people we actually want to build with — who want to build with us, who honor our time and our full selves? What's wrong with building between people who actually bring meaning to our lives and who spending time with is generative rather than depleting?

These are the people who have shown us that mutual compassion is the most sustainable form of resistance, and that we do not need to "convince the masses" or sacrifice ourselves to create substantive change.

In what we build with each other we are demonstrating that a better world is not only possible, it's happening.

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