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An Anarchist Perspective on the Red Lotus

William Gillis

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There's a few images going around simplifying the adversaries in each season of The Legend of Korra as political or philosophical ideologies: Communism, Theocracy, Anarchism, and Fascism. Sometimes recurring irritants on the show get comparable billing and the roster expands to include capitalism and monarchy. But the first world audience is relatively comfortable with these two and so, as a consequence, is Korra. The implicit, although at this point near-explicit, moral in the show is the danger of perspectives that deviate too far from our present prejudices and norms. If these are extremist positions the average viewer starting point is taken as moderation—near some golden balance—that, if it can be narrowed down, will solve all the problems. And so we are deliberately given 'good' capitalists (Asami) and 'good' monarchs (Zuko), despite these being rather extreme ideological positions inherently underpinned by violence, because capitalism and monarchy are commonplace in the first world today. No equalist/communist, for instance, ever joins Team Avatar.

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While members of the Red Lotus are humanized to a shocking and delightful degree in season three, they are still treated as ideologically beyond the pale. Korra immediately dismisses Zaheer's arguments out of hand. And between the cartoonish looting the authors had immediately befall the Earth Kingdom and the Bismarkian strongman archetype Kuvira appears to be playing in the new season, it's quite clear Konietzko & DiMartino are defaulting on a conservative Hegelian/Fukuyamist narrative about the emergence of liberal democracy that has no capacity or desire to integrate real anarchist analysis. As such the Red Lotus aren't allowed space to exist as rational actors or to present serious arguments, their only purpose is to serve as a marker—a kind of “here be dragons” warning sign—to fence in the map of the possible. Individually somewhat sympathetic perhaps, but in a pitiable way. Insane.

Which is sad because as they're written—however inadvertently—I think there's a strong case that the Red Lotus are the best damn heroes in the entire history of the Avatar universe.

But first, some words about the context:

The central issue in the Avatar universe—and indeed in almost all fantasy universes with magic—is the innate imbalance those abilities create. These universes are designed to pull us in, to adopt their cosmology as real and get invested in answering “what if” questions and extrapolations. What happens when a firebender and an earthbender have kids? Is there Uranium in this world and could such elements be used by metal benders? One of Avatar's strengths is its respect for the audience and its efforts to create a coherent world that doesn't immediately pop under trivial analysis. But there are some fraying ends and rising tensions, especially as they've pressed deeper into extrapolation. It's not just the sheer arbitrariness of “what counts as ‘earth’ anyway?” but the utter bizarreness at times of a culture that looks much like our own while existing in a radically different cosmology and material reality.

Of course we need tropes to guide us as an audience and pulling from the array of profoundly different cultures found in anthro-

pology (like the Australian Aborigines) would be too sharply alien. But magical sentient spirits and flavored martial-telekinesis are no small detail and the impact of their existence is never fully felt in the Avatar universe. I'm not sure if we can speak substantively of ethics in relation to sentient magical creatures/spirits, there's just too many unknown unknowns, and so I'll largely avoid it in my analysis. But bending is often treated as a technology in the Avatar universe and I generally think that's most useful lens.

Unlike force sensitivity in Star Wars, bending appears to have a far more random and less hereditary occurrence. However the flavor of bending one unlocks is strictly determined by heredity, and simultaneously implied to be tied to personality and outlook. The suggestion is that if your personality doesn't match the flavor embedded in your parents lineage you're simply denied bending. Things get a little squirrely when asking whether this dynamic is intentional on the part of either the lionturtles who bestowed bending on humans, a byproduct of history playing out well beyond its original intended scope, or a consequence of deep constraints to the physics of the Avatar universe that even the spirits are subject to. Who knows. Ask too many foundational questions and our suspension of disbelief will come crumbling down. Bending is a powerful technology with a weird distribution pattern imposed externally. As such it provides a sandbox by which to examine some transhumanist issues but not others. Those who don't have bending constitute a clear-cut underclass, but there's also incredible intra-familial class mobility, something akin to the effects of meritocracy. There does seem to be some persistent cross-generational power accumulation, as virtually all the powerful families have a strong propensity for children with bending talent, but the scales have been deliberately pushed by the writers to avoid portraying a persistently distinct and powerful class and losing our sympathies.

That said it's hard to avoid the plain reality that when some people have the capacity to move boulders with their minds and others are stuck as baseline humans it creates a sharp and problematic

power dynamic. Unlike *The Last Airbender* where we followed a band of rebels thrown together by chance and sleeping in the mud at the periphery of things, *The Legend of Korra* follows those already at the center of world power and privilege. The closest comparison to this shift from more conventionally appealing underdog narratives is the *Star Wars* prequels and both they and *Korra* sometimes come across contrived and unsettling as a result. Despite, or *because* it takes place in a more modern era, *Korra* is a much more conservative show than the *Last Airbender* and *Korra* a much more reactionary lead than Aang. This is frequently frustrating but it's also profoundly interesting. The writers are unquestionably breaking new ground. Throughout both *Airbender* and *Korra* they've been casually progressive in hugely impactful ways (Suki's characterization alone was stunning on a number of fronts). And the richness of an often unsympathetically stubborn, reactionary and naive but just as often sympathetic, dynamic and human lead female superhero is frankly just exciting to watch. DiMartino and Konietzko have a colossal platform and they're clearly motivated by a love of creating and pushing into new realms. (Note: Such love was, I'd argue, also apparent in George Lucas' work on Episode I. It's admirable but not a panacea is what I'm saying.) I can find *The Legend of Korra* a delightful work that should be produced, while also disagreeing with choices in story and being intensely leery of its reactionary themes and morals.

The division between benders and non-benders is as intensely unethical as any provision of immense technological capacity to an exclusive few. It may ultimately be a product of inert cosmic rules or happenstance in the *Avatar* universe, but that doesn't make it less ethically pertinent. Human biology itself is clearly ethically suboptimal. We get needlessly sick, sometimes we're just randomly born with horrid limitations, roughly half of us get to have / are saddled with uteri and half not at all, by default we have very little agency in all manner of intensely impactful things like whether or not babies suddenly grow in the aforementioned uteri. Some of

all possible paths and then setting off on the difficult but most consequential qualifies as heroism.

In the rapidly complicating world of the modern *Avatarverse* it's not clear that having an *Avatar* is even *useful*. Given the severe power imbalance of the *Avatar*'s abilities there's a tendency, even an obligation, to utilize it in sweeping ways, but as the world becomes more and more complex so do the unintended ramifications. A broad base of committed proactive individuals can step up and tackle these ramifications and can act more locally with more nuance and awareness. The Red Lotus offered the beginnings of such a movement, so does Tenzin's reorganized *Airbenders*. *Korra* does not.

We will probably end season 4 on some kind of redeeming note wherein the writers present their thesis regarding the *Avatar*'s continued importance. But maybe not. While on an individual level *Korra* is a decent human being who certainly doesn't "deserve" to die, if the *Avatar* cycle goes out, if Vaatu and Ravaa disappear from everyday interference, I suspect the world would be a much better place. Whatever challenges *Korra* faces this season, whatever new overpowered enemies or challenges, I think we should ask ourselves, could the Red Lotus or other hardscrabble volunteer heroes without her wealth, unparalleled magic, and social status have taken care of them? How might they have gone about tackling or heading them off from the start?

be irresponsible in the extreme to have innocents lying around in the Air Temple.

Killing Korra feels a bit left-field but I can understand feeling it a strategic necessity.

We never get to see the future the Red Lotus envisions after the Avatar cycle is finished because our heroes are taken out and Korra rescued by other, less enlightened, heroes to grow and mature in season 4, and I doubt the writers know anything about anarchism in our world. But if we take the characters at their word I'd say they exhibit far more noble traits than Team Avatar. It's easy to respond to threats that show up right in front of you, much harder to tackle the truly big threats, the persistent injustices and horrors that fade into the background. To stir up conflicts otherwise suppressed. To seek out fights you don't have to.

Despite her combative attitude, throughout the first three seasons Korra is more or less constantly being thrust into conflicts she didn't start and also can't hope to avoid. Her companions stick with her out of general camaraderie and a read of the immediate stakes. Korra is a reactive figure rather than a proactive one, and this makes her a stunted sort of hero. Someone who *survives* challenges rather than seeks them out.

Don't get me wrong, I love Korra, Asami, Bolin, Mako, Jinora, et al. there's all kinds of feels there, but Korra is not one for thinking things through. Before the end of her conflict with the Red Lotus she remained on some level a petulant brat who was used to having things handed to her and she consistently approached world issues the same way. I sincerely hope she matures further in season 4 and I even hold out a slim glimmer of hope that the writers' annoying notion of democracy as the "balanced" synthesis of freedom and tyranny will lead to some sort of conclusion where she tackles her heartbreaking PTSD and unleashes the imprisoned Zaheer in some way against Kuvira. But Korra has not been a particularly conscious agent in her world. And I'm not sure that simply powering through problems rather than preemptively thinking through

us can perform amazing feats of physical prowess without all that much work and others can't no matter how hard we train. And what's with these non-reconfigurable genitals? Human bodies are decidedly not open source. Thankfully in our world the statistical baseline isn't as bad as it could be and deviation from it is relatively marginal, allowing us a lot of *choice* in what talents we develop and how we augment ourselves. But it's easy to grasp how material realities can be judged for their ethical optimality.

When someone has a physical or cognitive capacity that others do not the resulting social relationship can feedback through numerous means of loose pressures or explicit exploitation and domination into less and less real freedoms for those without. There are basically two ways to respond, either stripping this person of their advanced capacities and/or reigning them in to some arbitrary baseline, OR by changing cultural norms and working diligently to better leak those advanced capacities out to everyone. The first approach, in which the tallest flowers are cut down and sent off to wilt in Siberia has some kneejerk proponents among state communists and primitivists. But it must be admitted that the latter isn't always easy. And sometimes it isn't practically possible to detangle power obtained through oppression from individual capacity obtained independently.

The first season of The Legend of Korra was dominated by these concerns in an Equalist revolution that sought to remove bending ability from everyone. Per an unwritten but near absolute rule in American media, if a character advocates revolution that individual *must* fall somewhere between irrational bloodthirsty monster and manipulative power-hungry hypocrite. The Legend of Korra barely deviated when it came to the Equalists. But interestingly, by shedding light however glancingly on this disparity of power in the Avatar world, the writers ended up actually annoying a lot of politically moderate critics with their failure to sincerely grapple with the underlying tension. Simply slapping a popularly elected presidency on the United Republic wasn't enough to placate view-

ers and I take that to be reflective of quite positive currents in our society.

Now the Equalist approach was I think clearly unethical, a prime example of cutting everyone down to size rather than lifting anyone up; paying attention only to relative power relations and disregarding objective degrees of physical freedom. The closest example of people advocating such today in our real world would be the primitivists who think having seven billion people die in a cataclysm and the scant survivors lose all technological capacity would be worth it because the risks of inequality from people having more—or merely *different*—degrees of material freedom outweigh the benefit of any such freedoms. I am, to say the least, not a fan.

...But at the same time relative inequality is certainly not of *zero* concern and it is arguably possible for the risks to everyone's freedom to outweigh the exceptional freedom provided to a single person.

As viewers we usually take it for granted that the Avatar is a force for good in her universe. But it's not always clear that this is the case. Past avatars have made mistakes of great consequence. Of course unlike the world leaders/warlords that have periodically risen to do great horrors, the Avatar's core strength can be seen as purely technological or physical rather than political, and most of her most damaging mistakes in various lives have been prompted by the existence of stark political power. Roku's failure to overthrow Sozin because of their friendship is the big one we all notice. But Kyoshi's creation of the Dai Li to help preserve "peace" (albeit an inherently oppressive and violent kind of peace) in the Earth Kingdom was a more proactive horror.

Of course one can read both as merely an issue of acting timidly within the constraint of external political context. And in a more charitable lens the Avatar can be seen as the only permanently free person her world; the only person unboundable by governments and laws and often openly acknowledged as such. Further,

vacuums" and catastrophes empirically tend to see individuals and communities come together in spontaneously emergent cooperation and mutual aid—not frothy-mouthed everyone-against-everyone opportunism. But *even* so, had the Red Lotus survived to continue to assist the people in overthrowing would-be rulers, it would clearly have been a bandaid worth ripping off.

Because of the inequity of access to bending technology there simply are very few people capable of taking on the Dai Li (again, an order established by the Avatar).

The situation in Republic City is similar, although approaching the levels of economic injustice and effective murder most viewers today are likely tolerant of. I'm team Korrasami all the way, but let's be clear: Asami is a capitalist whose empire is predicated on close collaboration with state violence. Yes, the ridiculous scale of Future Industries was built on war machines, but as automobile producers it was also built on infrastructure subsidies secured by taxation and eminent domain. The size of Asami's empire is a direct result of the injustices that underpin the Republic.

It's on this landscape that Zaheer, Ghazan, Ming-Hua, and P'Li decided they had to act. And the choices they make are consistently admirable. They show amazing restraint when obliged to fight people who are not their adversaries, leaving defeated people alive again and again. They repeatedly fight cops and prison guards with murderous force, but often choose minimal-damage approaches on the whole rather than risking innocents. Towards the end Zaheer thinks on his feet and condemns his comrade Aiwai to being lost in the spirit world rather than risk letting Korra interrogate him, which is cruel but efficient and arguably necessary given the stakes. But the biggest supposed atrocity they commit is a fake. The Red Lotus doesn't actually risk any of the people they capture in their last-ditch attempt to lure in Korra besides Tenzin. The trap with Ming-Hua and Ghazan is designed to hold up or permanently stop Korra's allies from rescuing her and as such it would

sive thing and doesn't end up suppressing everyone else through externalities. My preference is to see everyone eventually elevated to her level, or at least provided the choice of developing such talents.

In asking whether that's possible within the Avatarverse we press up against the limits of what can be reliably said here because of the mystery of the spirits. It could be that for some random magic reason only Raava and Vaatu can grant the kind of abilities the Avatar possesses. And not say our pekingese friend.

That said the spirits themselves provide an extra incentive to keep the Avatar around. Why are humans mortal (in some sense) but spirits not? Is there some kind of divine authority in the Avatarverse who has imposed the limitations on humanity? Are the Li-on-turtles acting in passive charity or are they instrumental in the way the world evolved before the Avatar? It's one thing to level the playing field between humans, it may well turn out that the Avatar is presently the only thing levelling the playing field between humans and spirits.

But dropping the spiritual context, whatever our ideal scenario, drastic social change is clearly needed in Korra's era and social change is always hard. It's harder still when the institutions you mean to overthrow have made themselves near impregnable.

Korra and the generally liberal audience readily recognize the need to depose the Earth Queen and smash the social stratification of Ba Sing Se. Poverty and tyranny are not passive injustices, they are a pressing and continual injustice inflicted on a scale to put virtually every other horror we've seen to shame. Every day that the monarchy and Ba Sing Se's walls remain is the murder of dozens if not hundreds of people from the various pains of poverty alone. *Not* overthrowing the Earth Queen and the Dai Li is ethically inexcusable in the extreme.

That the Earth Kingdom immediately fell to cartoonish anomie complete with raging fires is not entirely realistic—in practice, despite widespread media narratives to the contrary, “power

the Avatar cycle was launched by a boy who stole firebending and attempted a violent revolution against his city's ruling family.

...But it's hard to argue there's any one single nature to the Avatar throughout all of her incarnations. Despite talk of “balance” and “peace” those are notoriously nebulous and unclear concepts, and in the few incarnations we've seen the Avatar has applied them in vastly different ways. The emergent order of life is itself often chaotic when looked at under a certain resolution, while stringent “order” of the trains-running-on-time sort is often underpinned by horrific violence. All the Avatar as a figure or worldwide institution *clearly* represents is unparalleled technological power in the hands of one person. Ostensibly with hazy ‘good’ intentions, yes, and that counts for something, but it's not clear how much.

Which is all to say that while I enthusiastically support the Red Lotus's desire to overthrow the world's governments and plant the seeds for a freer world to flourish, I'm conflicted about Zaheer's plan to kill the Avatar permanently.

What the Avatar most resembles is picking a single random person on the planet and giving them a nuclear arsenal. ...A person who those in power can usually identify and assert some influence over from a young age. Indeed a lot of Korra's tendency towards reactionary privilege clearly stems from essentially being brought up by and hanging with the rulers of the world, or at best the ruling classes.

(Incidentally as someone who actually was homeless as a kid, christ it'd be nice to see Mako and Bolin written to actually express more realistic class tension and outsidership re the magical richies who've taken them in like it's no big deal.)

Granted, the Avatarverse is in some sense a pretty artificial liberal utopia in which major world leaders (Korra's dad Tontaq, Suyin, Zuko and his daughter presumably) are known to somehow be pretty decent people. But we really have no clue as to their policies. Are they artificially immiserating millions and promoting oppressive oligarchies through misguided trade regimes? Inten-

tions mean little when structural power often has immensely negative externalities. I'd argue that after the dissolution of the council Tenzin doesn't count as one of these "world leaders" and frankly the Air Nation is pretty damn anarchist already. However it must be said for those wringing their hands at the notion of violent means, that despite their plans to abolish all the world's governments the only people the Red Lotus explicitly mentioned targetting for assassination are the Republic President and the Earth Queen. The Red Lotus were at various points in a position to murder Tenzin, Tonraq, Zuko, Suyin, Desna and Eska, and they chose not to. I'm not sure if that gets the Firelord off the hook (and remember we've seen how bad that position of power can get), but it does say something about rational prioritization. The Republic President is self-serving, the Earth Queen was a complete tyrant and the White Lotus is a extralegal international conspiracy deeply embedded in every power structure and completely unaccountable to the people.

I think we can all agree that stealing Korra (the world's biggest nuclear arsenal, remember) away from her conservative world-leader parents and mentors so she could be raised as an anarchist at least for a little while would have been the best outcome. Whatever claim of familial affinity might have ethical pertinence, the good of an avatar aligned against oppression rather than on the side of the status quo would have clearly outweighed it. But once our noble heroes were thrown in prison that avenue was up.

Korra grew up into a complex and realistically many-faceted young adult, and the writers deserve credit for challenging viewers with a lead that repeatedly took starkly unsympathetic actions for the first two seasons. (Although again so does Lucas for challenging viewers in 1999 with a WTO stand-in pleading points of procedure before space-congress; doesn't mean it necessarily makes for good viewing.)

Sadly there seems to be some hedging even within Zaheer's statements, "True freedom can only be achieved when oppressive

governments are thrown down." Of course he could have used the redundancy of "oppressive governments" just to be more clear before Korra, but it's telling how corrupted she is by her proximity to political power that she recoils from even this anodyne statement.

Now one could argue it's not clear if Zaheer's affinity group could have taken down all the world's governments with Korra on the loose. I mean I'd very much like it to be the case that the ease by which they literally *set fire to the prisons, tore down the borders* and committed sexy sexy *regicide* could likewise be applied to all the other institutions of oppression while continuing to outwit a bullheaded teenage girl and her posse, and my inclination as an observer is to say they totally could've. And left Korra to bottom-line the conflict resolution and small warlord cleanup in their wake. But who's to say Korra wouldn't have used the chaos to instill her own reign over the world, create worse regimes, or just generally get in the way of the emergence of more organic social forms? She is pretty entitled and prone to control freak tantrums. When you tear down a social order you have a responsibility to secure it from new would-be politicians/bandits/warlords.

The Red Lotus would have made easy work with Kuvira and her bandit lords, but with Korra in the way their odds decline drastically.

It may be that my inclination to ignore Korra and the more peaceful presumably "benevolent" leaders like her dad and Zuko is a result of problematic timidity on my part. Zaheer rolled hard on a future free of the Avatar, doing the work to free the world that virtually no one else besides his small group could attempt, and it's easy to cry and express remorse that he didn't bypass that fight to clean up some more pressing tyrannies and potentially reemerging power structures first, but as an audience we're blinded by our closeness to and compassion for Korra as a person.

Yet I'm ultimately for the responsible proliferation of greater personal capacity and thus on idealistic terms I'm pro the Avatar's existence, so long as that kind of immense capacity isn't made an exclu-