

No No Future

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As another wave of street action crashes against the impassive wall of the American police state, a problem, one which has been recurring occasionally now for the last 5 years, confronts us. What do we do when the marches end, and the movement leaves the streets? How do we fill our time when the tides ebb and everyday life resumes?

Many of us, in what free time we have, spin our wheels in various activist activities and milieus, doing small-scale agitating, making art and music, writing, reading, thinking. We focus again on our terrible jobs, or, having quit them, find new ones. Some of us try to build some infrastructure that wont fail us when the next movement comes – though we know it probably wont manage to last that long. Not able to fight our enemies in the streets, we make enemies of our friends and fight each other. We fall out, we divide into tiny sects. Some of us leave the movement—what movement?!?—never to return. Some of us move to new cities. Some of us break up, some meet new partners. We show up, we come out, we transition, we support each other fiercely; we hide, we get depressed, we get anxious, we feel terribly alone, we treat each other like garbage. We spend all our money on rent and food and being bored and maybe getting high.

For those of us who believe in insurrectionary upheaval as a fundamental part of making a better world, the sudden growth, short life and long painful aftermath of the social movements of recent years forces an ugly and difficult reckoning . Unlike those employed by non-profits or the socialists who believe we're just one Working Class Organization away from victory, we who party in the streets rather than hit the streets to grow the Party can be thrown into depression, doubt and despair when those streets return to their daily commerce. Doubt can certainly be fertile ground for revolutionary creativity, but in attempting to overcome the despair we can make crucial errors.

One appealing response for many of us punks is that old affirmative negation: No Future. Fuck waiting for permission; we're fucked anyway! Might as well do it yourself and do it now – whatever it is you need or want to do. In our movements this punk negation melds with an anarchist focus on localized direct action, and leads to the blossoming of tons of projects large and small. No Future becomes a spur to action and a solution to the boredom of waiting for the next riot.

But sometimes such projects are not enough, the boredom and despair continue apace. Everything's coming too slowly, and so some of us double down. No Future takes on its own power, becomes a political slogan in and of itself. Here, the DIY anarchist localism melds with the old complicated legacy of individualist anarchism/egoism—the current which reifies individual action and experience as the only goal, meaning and point of anarchism—and the false belief held by many revolutionaries that things need to get worse before they get better, to become a particular tendency. This tendency has a wide variety of practitioners and forms: it is not a unified movement, and few people expound it exclusively. It appears in many different forms, from self-titled nihilism like that in the Hostis journal, through many diverse insurrectionary and anarchist practices, social spaces and writings. For the sake of this piece, I'll refer to this tendency as No Future Nihilism.

No Future Nihilism moves in tandem with current theoretical projects outside of ‘Anarchism’ proper. Indeed, the resurgence of the phrase may have a lot to do with the queer theory work of Lee Edelman, whose book *No Future* argues that gestures made in the name of future generations, of babies and children, is a fundamentally hetero-normative and queerphobic move, that this “reproductive-futurism” is a fundamental part of fascist thought. Meanwhile, Afro-Pessimist work sees Blackness and Anti-Blackness as ontological principles, ones which reach back beyond the history of capitalism, colonialism, White Supremacy or nation states. For many Afro-Pessimist thinkers, therefore, revolutionary transformations in society are insufficient, even impossible, to envision, as Anti-Blackness would survive any but the most world-ending catastrophes. And these catastrophes might be immanent and completely annihilating, as the academics who’ve learned to stop worrying and start loving the Anthropocene are more than happy to remind us.

Many of the people thinking and practicing around these tendencies (save, I think, the concept of the Anthropocene, which seems like another desperate move by the academy to try and talk about politics without having to refer to class, gender, or race) are doing amazing work. These projects all contain within them, however, a similar political horizon, and this horizon feeds into the No Future Nihilist argument. This argument, which defines itself most clearly in opposition to other left projects, goes something like this: we reject the socialists with their pathetic statist political horizons, but also the communists and anarchists building towards a revolution, with their fetishization of mass-movements and mass-collective action.

No Future Nihilism flowers out of the ashen soil of burnt-out movements. The movement has left the streets? Who cares! The revolution is neither closer nor further away: We riot for ourselves anyway, we go in the streets for the pleasure of being in the streets, for the beautiful way our comrades look on the barricades, for how the flames catch in their eyes and the way tear gas chokes out doubt. We destroy everything—not for a future but precisely because we don’t have one.

But in 2016, a year the Queen of England officially declared “The Year of Punk”, we have been living in that No Future for too long for its evocation to work anymore to defeat despair. In the period stretching from the Russian Revolution to the economic collapse of the seventies, the political narratives of the whole world, first, second and third alike, right and left, were shaped by competing visions of economic, political and national progress. The fascist movements were just as progress focused and future oriented as the socialist movements they coopted, cannibalized and slaughtered: Futurism inventor Fillippo Marinetti wrote speeches for Mussolini, while Hitler promised a thousand year Reich. After the war, the USSR opposed their vision to the USA’s, both projecting a glorious new world lead by their influence, with China eventually offering a third way, and various decolonization movements imagining a yet different socialist world of cooperating self-determined nations.

But the socialist promises ran aground in the collapsed social movements and failed revolutions of the long sixties, while the financial crises of the 70s seemed to put equally

paid to the capitalist vision of rising tides and lifted boats. No Future, then, became a powerful antidote, a retort to those politicians who continued to speak of progress with a corpse in their mouth. But as with all partial revolutions, rather than producing a fundamentally new world, punk merely inaugurated and named a new era of the old one.

Punk's No Future rejection of the progressive narrative appeared at the same moment that that progressive narrative was collapsing anyway. A version of No Future would be preached and practiced by punk's greatest arch-nemesis, Maggie Thatcher, who said There Is No Alternative as she smashed the miners and the social safety net. Eight years later, an obscure political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, would become a household name by declaring the collapse of the USSR and the global ascendancy of liberal capitalist democracy The End of History. Part of the power of No Future was, of course, how well it reflected the world it confronted back at itself.

No Future's corollary—do it yourself and do it now—has meanwhile been fully coopted by a Long Tail economy that sees little formal distinction between corporate and indie, between “punk” and “hipster”, a new economy that recognizes potential economic value whether it emerges in the punk basement or the Midtown studio. Under neoliberalism, just as crucial social services are “privatized” and “decentralized”, so are more and more aspects of management, promotion and resource gathering. Which is to say, they become the responsibility of the worker/artist/musician/writer rather than their employer. Under this expansive decentralized mode, artists work quite hard not to express themselves and please their friends (though they might do so) but to produce and harvest tiny bits of value. DIY is no longer a declaration of the artist's independence from the broader economy but rather a crucial aspect of her total absorption into it.

No Future is similarly in line with the ideology of capital today: ignoring the future in the name of current profits. Silicon Valley tycoons hire Buddhist consultants to help them live purely in the present, while ExxonMobil sees in the collapse of the North Pole ice sheet easier and faster oil transport routes from the North Sea to the USA. No Future is no longer an affirmative negation, it is a negative affirmation.

And to affirm this world is to never be able to destroy it. That's why, at its absolute worst, No Future Nihilism can take the form of cultish eco-apocalypse revanchism and transphobic anarcho-primitivism. But even when No Future Nihilism is spoken and acted on by actual comrades, they fall into the same trap as a crew very much at odds to their politics in all other respects.

This crew is that brand of dreary socialist, mostly economists and social scientists but very occasionally organizers, who love to explain that the revolution can't win without a clear, orderly vision of the future. These socialists seem to spend more time scolding anarchists, communists, insurrectos or whatever for this vision's absence than they do actually attempting to imagine or build it. Nevertheless, the fact is, if only someone would envision it properly, it would lead us all to the glorious rev.

Of course, when they do attempt to imagine it themselves, it usually sounds an awful lot like Sweden, but with “full employment”, less racist nationalism and more “democracy”, a social-democratic state run by a working class Communist Party. Never mind that again and again across the 20th century nation-states, even those run by revolutionaries, proved to be intractably reactionary forms of social organization, stifling revolutionary possibilities both when improving and when attacking the living conditions of their citizens. Nor the fact that, as the 20th century has turned into the 21st, the nation has been shown to be relatively powerless in the face of global capital, whether capital takes the form of a CIA coup, an IMF readjustment, a WTO free-trade deal or an ECB bail-out.

This political imaginary couldn't be more different from the riotous anti-everything immediacy of No Future Nihilism. But, though the thinking done by our No Future Nihilists is vastly more interesting and more helpful—not to mention sexier and better written—than that done by the statist scolds and Party prophets, their philosophy has a similar faith in the continuation of particular forms of the old world.

Where our socialists see the nation and state as the tools of a potentially different society, our nihilists see collapse and decay as the only certainty, and so struggle can only be built within and against the collapse and decay. Both positions are similarly overconfident in their vision of the future. The revolution is much more likely to come out of the riots and unrest that face collapse and crisis than out of some unified communist party at the helm of a flourishing social democracy. But the nihilists don't believe it's coming at all, rather that there is only the organization and action of ourselves in resistance, survival and solidarity within the ongoing collapse. No justice, just us.

Maybe. But perhaps such an answer speaks to nothing so much as the despair of those who've felt movements collapse in and around themselves. In such despair, we begin to believe that the movement was the goal in the first place: that ecstasy and power that we felt in the streets was the thing, not merely a sign of its immanence. We'd give anything to be in the streets with our friends again: maybe that's all there is. It would certainly be better than this.

Instead, perhaps we might recognize that despair for what it is: the possibility that, in our lifetimes we won't see this new world. The despair of growing older into this same world, of not being our youngest, bravest, strongest selves in a new revolutionary earth. I am intimately familiar with such despair, as I imagine, in the face of rising fascism, ecological collapse, white-supremacist retrenchment and continual economic crises, many of you are. But such despair is just the fear and pain produced by the crushing weight of this world, the knowledge that, without the revolution, well, we'll never get out of this world alive.

This fear must be reckoned with. But it is not the basis for a politics of liberation, and, over the long term, No Future Nihilism, like any politics of despair, will slowly evolve into an accommodation with this world as it is.

Stay strong comrades. Love each other, treat each other as best you can, do what pieces of agitation, creativity and care, large and small, you are capable of. The revolution is the combination of insurrection and communization, and we can point ourselves toward both in the short term, pushing, fighting, creating where we can. Filling this miserable world with what beautiful, joyous energy we think might destroy it, someday. It probably wont. But all revolutions seem impossible, until afterwards, when they seem inevitable. If history is any guide, the future is unknowable. Which might just mean it exists.

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