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Against the Green Left

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Neal: My name's Neal. I've been involved in anarchist stuff for a long while. I was involved in Earth First!, especially around mountaintop removal and the struggle around that for a couple of years when I was living in a different town. And since then, moving here I got involved in different projects and followed the currents that seemed to make sense to engage in at the time. Really I started out with a couple of nights before the rendezvous, having the desire to reflect on why I was going. So I was actually trying to suss out personally why I was there and try and think, well, what has happened in the last seven or eight years since being involved in Earth First! stuff that has pulled me away? Because it seems like that's a valuable thing to think about, both for people who are in social movements and people who are no longer part of it, to try and think about what brings people in and what pushes them away. And so I was trying to reflect on that and it became something more like a critique of a certain model, or way of doing activism, is sort of what came out of it. Mainly coming from observations about where conflict or struggle has been sort of trending, I guess you could say, in the last few years, especially since 2008 but maybe even before then.

Panagioti: I'm Panagioti, and as folks said, I work on the Earth First! Journal collective. Specifically relating to this text; after reading it and seeing it circulate at the rendezvous in North Carolina this summer, my feelings were pretty strong and then escalated as I thought more about it. The danger of it – and not danger in that cool, exciting, “let's be dangerous” kind of way, but in the way that's counterproductive to growing a movement, and some concerns that I have in relation to this and to the history I think it stems from and the potential future of where it could go are what I hope to present tonight; in particular that I think it's misdirected in critiquing Earth First!. Although there's a lot of valuable perspectives and opinions in it, I think that there's got to be a better way to present the concepts here without degrading a movement that has a lot to offer and has a history that's minimized or sort of ignored by the text.

The debate began with a question about how to respond to the flexibility of capitalism today, with which our enemies often co-opt or outmaneuver our resistance (for instance by building nuclear power plants when coal mining is politically difficult, or vice versa). What can we actually hope to gain by fighting particular instances of ecological destruction?

Neal: First and foremost, I think that fighting specific instances of ecological devastation offers an opportunity that's not fundamentally different than any other time that we intervene in some specific manifestation of the systems we hate as anarchists. The center of gravity when we intervene in some kind of instance of either ecological destruction or exploitation or oppression is not to engage in the way that we've been taught that politics typically work, in terms of policy analysts or a quantitative approach, but the question of: how do we come out of this with stronger and deeper affinities with new people? How do we come out of this as more powerful? How do we come out of this with greater material access to resources than we had before? How do we come out of this engagement with new tactics that we hadn't thought of before?

come at a faster and faster pace. But I don't think Earth First!ers are gonna abandon biocentrism for the idea that these struggles are only worthwhile as means to an insurrectionary end.

Clara: *I'm still a little unclear about what's being proposed when we talk about affinity versus political identity. “Affinity” seems pretty vague for such a central concept to the insurrectionist critique. I mean, political identity isn't in opposition to affinity; it's a particular type of affinity, as is living in the same neighborhood or getting along as friends or whatever else. The question is how useful any particular type of affinity is as a basis for struggle, right? And I get that the critique is that political identity, i.e., calling yourself a radical or an environmentalist or an anarchist or whatever, isn't the central basis for affinity in contemporary struggles. The examples they talked about from Occupy and such makes that clear. But I'm not sure that I'm convinced that other more informal types of affinity are actually stronger or more reliable.*

that the new global context means we have to change how we orient ourselves towards eco-defense struggles and campaigns. But there's a point that seemed crucial to me that neither of them really touched on.

Thinking back to our third episode on green anarchism, it seems like the thing that sets Earth First! apart from most other environmental groups is their biocentrism—you know, seeing the defense of the wild and living beings as an end in and of itself, not a means to an end. This insurrectionary position seems incompatible with biocentrism, because it evaluates eco-defense struggles based on whether or not they open up new affinities and ruptures, instead of whether or not they successfully defend the earth. In that sense, the insurrectionary position is actually more similar to the green left's arguments that we should protect land and wildlife because it's good for the economy, or tourism, or recreation, or whatever. In all of these cases, the value isn't life for itself, but as a means to something else that's valued more highly. It matters very much whether or not you win a particular campaign if you live in the watershed of the land that's about to be hydrofracked, or for the living things in a forest threatened with clear-cutting, right? For Earth First!ers who value life for its own sake, it seems like you would reject the notion that eco campaigns are only valuable as a means to another end—even if that end is anti-capitalist revolution.

Clara: But I think the critique is that single-issue campaigns, whether or not they win their goals, aren't succeeding at catalyzing the kinds of broader revolts that actually have the potential to topple capitalism—and isn't anti-capitalist revolution that halts the ecocidal economy the only way to actually defend the earth in the long term?

Alanis: Well, yeah, I think so, and I think both of the debaters would agree. But that's a question of the best strategy towards the goal of defending the environment, separate from the question I'm trying to raise of whether defending any particular piece of it is a means to that broader end or an end in and of itself. Either way, we gotta re-think our strategy for eco-defense, when rebellion and recuperation

We've been taught that if we stop mountaintop removal on this site, that's a victory. And that drives us forward; it gives us a sense of urgency, and that can propel us to do positive and even courageous things. But it's also important to be able to step back and say, "Wait a second, they just mined the other mountain instead." It does push us to reevaluate how we judge success. I think what I'm proposing in a sense is that we try to start evaluating success when we intervene in a social struggle in a different way: less quantitatively, oriented towards how many petition signatures did you get, how many votes did you get, did you ban this thing or that other thing, are the cages two feet by one foot wider now, et cetera; and more in the direction of a qualitative sense of, did we come out of that more powerful than we went into it?

I think this becomes even more urgent on the ecological front when we look at the ways that ecological devastation is trending now, which is less and less towards things like, we're trying to save this specific acre of forest, or we're trying to free these 100 mink, and more and more towards giant totalizing things like climate change, peak oil, massive droughts and water shortages, disasters like Sandy and Katrina. Those kinds of instances of ecological devastation really aren't instances at all, they're hugely difficult to grasp patterns that the traditional methodology that we've inherited from animal rights and forest defense work that Earth First! still largely operates on and has inherited doesn't deal with well. A forest defense campaign, thinking about a problem in the way that a forest defense campaign or a nonviolent civil disobedience campaigns orient you, doesn't approach Hurricane Sandy very well. It doesn't approach climate change very well, because there's not a single target, or a set of single targets. There's just one massive social system. And so that forces us to reevaluate not only the way we do campaigns, but also how we evaluate success. We're less oriented toward specific victories in the short term and more oriented towards opening up spaces of general revolt, because that's really all that's left to us.

Panagioti: I do think that there are some things here. I want to elaborate on why I initially said that it was misdirected and dangerous (not in a good way). And that's because I think that the view is a little bit, it's too abstract, which I think has been admitted. And also, for sounding larger and broader, to me it actually reflects a less long-term perspective or view on our participation in social struggles. And I say that because I've been organizing under an anarchist model and essentially, under different banners or slogans or whatever, but for the past 15 or 16 years, and it's been enough time to actually see actual successes and victories on the smaller scale that have rippling effects and help evolve a sense of strategy. For example, you know, the growth of an anti-coal movement being popularized and mainstreamed in my opinion, as opposed to promoting nuclear energy, that gave an opportunity for organizing against green technology and green capitalism, because the back end of things were covered. As far as the trajectory of capitalism is concerned, the old methods were already under attack by a broader mainstream presence, leaving space for us to start attacking the other end: biotechnology, solar and wind at the industrial scale, all these things... fracking and other forms of extraction that are relatively new and under scrutiny that I think strategically it would be more important for us to look at how we tackle those things. You know, maybe setting aside some of the puritanical aspects of anarchist theory and ideology, and instead embracing some of the broader and practical elements of, you know, breaking up power in a practical and real way. Like, if energy companies are the most powerful companies on the planet, really powerful sources of force on this planet, more so than governments or other areas of social struggle, then it makes sense to attack them and fight them and use the tools that are available and real for us—which at this point in this country primarily is affinity-group-based direct action, along with smaller cells of underground sabotage. And I know maybe that's kind of a cliché formula, and the text we're talking about references that a little bit. But it's the tools that are present here. And

I'm not oriented towards this immediate policy issue; I'm oriented towards something else.

Panagioti: I might bother with the petition campaign, likely because I know the people who are initiating it or hoping to see it succeed in some way. In this recent victory against a nuke plant in Levy County, a rural county in North Florida, a beautiful place with more freshwater springs than anywhere in the world, it's like worth checking out. And people there really didn't want a fucking nuclear power plant to be built in the state forest in their backyard. And in the end, you know, the victory was mostly credited to the NGOs who hired attorneys to defeat it. But we were present with our little kind of small-scale action camp and some level of presence to express solidarity and support in a rural community that's probably never going to come to the city to participate in an insurrection. But it felt valuable and meaningful.

And I think it's important to figure out how to navigate the relationship between our feelings of urgency and what's actually really happening around us. Because sometimes they intersect and sometimes they're too far off to be useful, and I think that just comes with trying it. You know, sticking around for a couple decades and trying to see where it goes, where the things that you put effort into, where they result in ten years down the road. And you know, I understand feeling urgent and nervous about waiting that long, but... you do what you can, what seems to make sense to you in the moment, and a couple years down the line, you get to look at it and see what the results were and try something new. And if you haven't thought about sticking around for the next couple decades in this circle of people in the anarchist struggle, I hope that you'll leave here, more than anything else we talked about, that you'll leave here thinking about that. OK, I'm going to stick around for the rest of my life in this and see how it goes.

Clara: *Well, what did you think, Alanis?*

Alanis: *Hm... I think they both made solid points, and didn't actually seem to be disagreeing most of the time. And certainly I agree*

a lot with Occupy. But I still think to an extent for whatever reason in ecological circles, there's still a fairly strong relationship with a lot of groups like RAN, even to an extent with Sierra Club, Greenpeace, etcetera. And there is this tendency where, especially if you look at the spectrum on which these groups operate, Earth First! really does look like a more radical version of them.

I'm not proposing that we don't have a strong ecological anarchist resistance movement. I'm proposing that any strong anarchist movement of any kind, but particularly a strong ecological anarchist movement, has to set as its goal breaking out of the limitations of what has been defined as activism. And if that doesn't happen, we start to fail. We start to ghettoize, we start to specialize, in particular. What we do becomes more and more specialized: you need 15 different kinds of special roles to pull off an action. You got your police liaison, you got your legal liaison... I think we should ask the question, how does that kind of protest look different than the kinds of moments that we have found exciting as anarchists?

The point is not to say, "well, if the only place we can start and begin from is activism, fuck it, I'm not gonna begin, I'm not doing anything." That's not what I'm proposing. I'm saying, if that's where we have to start from, fine, but let's be intentional about that being a model we're trying to break out of. And let's be conscious of why we're trying to break out of that model; let's include an analysis and critique, a self-critique of the model and how it keeps us where we are.

As long as we remain constrained in this campaign model, we are letting the way we do our anarchism, our rebellion, be defined by the state, which will forever keep it constrained. And so the goal has to be to consciously get out of that even though we start in that place. And that's not just an abstract observation; that actually concretely changes the kinds of things we choose to do and why we choose to do them, right? So I might not bother with a campaign that I know will end with a petition drive, even if it will win, right? Because it won't get to the points that I want to get to. Because

I don't think that limits us from participating in movements that spring up like Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring and that current era of movement that's happening around the world. I think, on the contrary, that gives us experience, it gives us an opportunity to deepen trust and courage and skill and relationships in a way that allows struggle to be more valuable, more threatening to our opponents. The examples I want to reference are: the nuclear renaissance that was being heralded five years ago as a response to the coal backlash is now also crumbling, in part because of public pressure and in part because the whole economy is crumbling. I think it's worth giving ourselves some credit where it's due, and not just in that realm of energy, anti-energy extraction work, but also local campaigns. Like where I live, animal rights folks have been fighting this vivisection laboratory called Primate Products using the SHAC sort of model which I think a lot of people have said "Oh, it's passe," or "There's federal legislation, it's too dangerous, we can't do it." And they just shut down the primary facility they've been fighting, even though everyone's been saying that that's an old model, and they're scared to use it. So I think there's something to that. It's energizing and motivating and inspiring to move forward when we actually succeed in the things that we're doing.

Neal: The first and foremost lesson or thing that I've seen from maybe looking at the last few years in the, on an international scale but also on a national scale in terms of what's happening with social struggle, rebellion of an ecological, social, class, race, whatever nature is that it's becoming increasingly clear that a gradualist mode of attacking issues or problems no longer seems even remotely relevant to me. That's sort of a shift... the traditional way we think about those things, or we're taught to is that as the active radical minority, you sort of engage with issues that lots of people are concerned about, and you push it and people kind of agree with you and you can get more radical and you gradually have more people and then eventually you have a whole lot of people, and then you

storm the Bastille. But that's not really how things have been playing out. I don't know if people have noticed, but out of nowhere, Turkey explodes. Out of nowhere, Brazil explodes. You know, Occupy feels like it comes out of nowhere. And of course we know from being closer to those things that there's actually all sorts of relationships—organizational, individual, personal, political—that result in those kinds of sparks suddenly catching fire. And some of that is exactly the kind of stuff that Earth First! would be doing or that any of the rest of us would be doing. But the lesson that I learned from is that things tend to go from zero to sixty really, really, really, really fast. And what tends to get left behind in those moments is the narrowed, the unnecessarily narrow range of how we think about how we intervene as activists. All of a sudden, the “Well we sometimes do sabotage, and we do aboveground nonviolent direct action becomes irrelevant overnight, in terms of the tactical and social options available to us.

So what I'm proposing is not, like, let's not do those things. But let's recognize the field of possible opportunity about how to possibly engage is drastically broader than that, and that those kinds of things aren't going to get us where we want to go. If you acknowledge that, you go further.

The discussion went on to examine the relationship between ecological struggles and broader social upheavals, including the distinctive contributions made by Earth First! perspectives and tactics.

Neal: Understanding the limitations of capitalism from an ecological point of view is one example of how eco-defense can contribute to broader social upheaval. Another example: presenting a sharp and pointed critique of the green left. I think Earth First! does a really good job, and just generally green anarchism over the last 12 years, 15 years, has done a good job of criticizing green technology, especially in the last five years, as that's become more—you know, the green light bulb thing is everywhere, etcetera, etcetera. But the green left, in terms of these organizations, has become more of a sticking point in my conversations with folks, because on

needed \$500 million of public money to move forward. Which left us basically hanging out with people in the fucking Tea Party, or like fiscal conservative circles. And most of the people I hang out with were not up for going to those meetings of Young Republicans and Tea Party people. I did. It mostly sucked, and I feel like I got to call people out and kind of expose them for their rhetoric being hollow. But then I'd occasionally find someone who was in the back of the room who would say “My god, they test on animals, that's disgusting!” Or would be critical about the corporate welfare element.

In 2003 when we were organizing for some semblance of a direct-action confrontation with the FTAA, we also went to the weird AFL-CIO luncheons and stuff, so we could find out who there was on board for being in a mass march so we could be present in the streets as well. So you know, yeah, I think we should break from the left. But the organized right isn't that interesting, or something a lot of people want to be part of. So yeah, hopefully we transcend those categories when we step into the realm of actually doing shit, you have to find people where they're at. And it takes more than who's hanging out in the break room at your job, you know?

Neal: I was sort of searching for a concrete example of this affinity concept versus identity, and then Panagioti sort of like—that's exactly what I'm talking about, really. It's less a relationship with this institution or these groups between other groups, between other activist groups, and more of, well, it sucks doing the hard work of going to this meeting. But you don't go to engage with the AFL-CIO boss. You go to have a conversation with different people, and say, there's these three or four people who we have some affinity with and at least they're gonna tell us what their bosses are up to, etcetera. And that's really sort of what I'm suggesting.

And that's not a new suggestion; that's not something that anarchists aren't doing. Anarchists already do that all the time when we try and engage on a community level, locally or regionally, we find ourselves having to play that awkward game. That happened

themselves an anarchist. Don't care. What I care about is when I'm in a situation that calls for—and I want to intervene in a certain way, do they want to do the same things? Do we have something, some kind of basis for affinity? And that can come from a lot of unpredictable places that are totally outside the world of politics as we tend to have taught ourselves to think about it.

So that sort of gets at the difference between the campaign model and the model of neighbors forming fight crews that defend immigrants [against] the Golden Dawn, right? It gets at some of the differences between actually the land campaign and the gold mining campaign. But more to our point here, it relies on a really sharp critique that we need to have of the environmental left. I also think from an ecological perspective that it's really important to understand the green left, because it's the left that's gonna sell out the next major social revolution in this country. You know, if the worker's left was the left that sold out the social revolution in the last century, it's going to be the green left that does it this time.

If you shift from being worried about what somebody's political identity is with reference to specific policies towards an issue of "Oh, can I act with this person? Do we have some kind of affinity?" If you shift from one to the other, you end up somewhere in the middle, because there's always going to be people with whom you share both political identity and affinity. But the real issue is affinity, not whether on paper, are we both environmentalists? OK, cool, I'm just a more radical version of them. No, we're something fundamentally different! And so affirming that means a real strong break with the left. I think that has to happen.

Panagioti: All right. Strong break with the left. So we were fighting this campaign against Scripps, this biotech company who wanted to clear forests for building giant facilities. And their next proposal came up, and all the people who had compromised on the first victory were like, we can't touch this one—we basically told them anywhere but here. So it was just us who were left, and then the random wingnuts who also opposed Scripps because they

the one hand there's this anarchist critique of recuperation. There should be an anarchist critique of recuperation. More specifically, how does an environmentalist group that pressures the government to ban a specific form of dirty energy actually function to help extend capitalism's life span? Does that make sense?

That critique of the green left can be done by people who are outside of green anarchist circles, but it's done better by people in green anarchist circles, because they have an understanding, a historical relationship with some of those organizations. That gets again into the question of, who do we have relationships with as anarchists who care about the earth, right?

Third thing I'd say, sharing skills and popularizing forms of struggle that encourage a relationship to the land is something that specifically ecological revolutionaries can contribute that's uniquely their own. And also, it's not just about relationships with other anarchists or other people who want to struggle, but specifically with the land. And there are all kinds of really awesome land occupations that I think have broken through the limitations of activism, and in the process really encouraged a relationship with the land. ZAD is a really good example, and some of the free states in North America are good examples.

Fourth, I would say the various tactical skills and concepts that the eco-defense folks, ecological revolutionaries have, are particularly useful not just for the more narrow kinds of campaigns that are currently going on, but actually for all kinds of struggles that we haven't even thought of yet. Like, all the different reasons and ways you could build a blockade apply to a million other scenarios that have an ecological bent, but maybe don't fall within what we think of as eco-defense.

Panagioti: I feel fortunate to have been present at the tail end of the previous climax when Earth First! organizing essentially facilitated some of the WTO protests in Seattle by using blockages in the street to escalate a general protest into a more rebellion-style demonstration. I organize with the Everglades Earth First! group

in Florida, and in general I'm in touch with a lot of the Earth First! organizing on the east coast, but I know this happened on the west coast as well, where Earth First! groups were offering a lot of the trainings and organizing the direct action component. Our Earth First! group started the direct action working group at the Occupy Palm Beach group where I live at, and did really interesting shit. I mean, nothing that's like, would get anywhere close to the word "insurrection" or "rebellion," but for the context were pushing the envelope. And I would like to see more of that happening. And if there's a different avenue or vehicle to do it, then great. But I think that Earth First! has a lot of tools and resources to move forward with that.

They reflected on social and environmental struggles in Greece, which is known internationally as a hub for insurrectionary upheavals rather than campaign-based struggles.

Panagioti: The current realm that a lot of Greek anarchists are organizing in is this anti-gold mining campaign model that's like—maybe it's kind of ironic, but it's one of the most exciting and interesting things happening in Greece, in part in light of the fact that some of the primary squats were evicted that were home bases of insurrection in Greece over the past couple of years. And just in general I think after like three years of straight rebellion with little to show for it, other than the intervention that's obviously really inspiring, and great photographs with the dog in front of the burning cops and stuff. I mean: people are like, "Fuck, man!" kind of bummed out. You know? And I think that the anti-gold mining campaign is this weird refreshing thing that's happening there. Maybe because in the past, that style of campaign organizing hadn't quite happened as much or hadn't—although they'd been fighting gold mining for years, I think that I saw a different and new energy happening there that I thought was in some ways a lesson or worth thinking about.

Neal: When I think about Greece I don't get that excited about a gold mining campaign. In the last few years what's exciting about

anarchists in Greece is that they've built up a social force that's maybe the only social force in Greece strong enough to overthrow the state—which is what we wanna do as anarchists, right? And would make the issue of a gold company somewhat moot. That being said...

Incidentally, if you're looking for examples of how to break out of the mold, or never enter into ecological struggle in the mold of activism and still want to look at ecological struggles in Greece, I suggest looking at the neighborhoods that destroyed all of the highways going into their city so that they couldn't build a landfill. It's really crazy and interesting. It would probably be more difficult here, but it's an interesting alternative.

Panagioti: The anti-landfill campaign, you mean?

Neal: Yes, it was a campaign. But...

Panagioti: But it was insurrectionary too, and I think that's what we're getting at.

Neal: Exactly. That's what we're getting at.

They went on to discuss the distinction between political identity versus affinity as the basis for our shared struggle, while criticizing institutional green leftist groups. The conversation concluded with further reflections on the limitations of the campaign model and the importance of a long view for understanding the value of our interventions over time.

Neal: What I would propose, if it seems like a functional model, is shifting from what I would call a politics of identity or political identity to a politics of affinity. The questions change, right? So the question of, are they an environmentalist? What do they think about fracking or what do they think about the gold mine or what do they think about this, that, or the other starts to shift into something more like, do they wanna see the same things I wanna see? Do they have some of the same desires I have? Am I able to be friends with them? I don't give a shit whether someone calls themselves an environmentalist. I don't care what bumper stickers are on their car, I don't care how they vote, I don't care even if they call