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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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“Millennial Left” continues on page 3

The idea was that a new historical moment might mean that “all bets are off,” that standing by the past wagers of the Left—whether those made in the 1930s–40s, 1960s–70s, or 1980s–90s—was not only unnecessary but might indeed be harmful. This optimism about engaging new, transformed historical tasks in a spirit of making necessary changes proved difficult to maintain.

Frusterated by Obama’s first term and especially by the Tea Party that fed into the Republican Congressional majority in the 2010 mid-term elections, 2011’s Occupy Wall Street protest was a quickly fading complaint registered before Obama’s reelection in 2012. Now, in 2017, the Millennials would be happy for Obama’s return.

Internationally, the effect of the economic crisis was demonstrated in anti-austerity protests and in the election and formation of new political parties such as SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain; it was also demonstrated in the Arab Spring protests and insurrections that toppled the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and initiated civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria (and that were put down or fizzled in Bahrain and Lebanon). The disappointments of these events contributed to the diminished expectations of the Millennials (in Iran the crisis manifested early on, around the reform Green Movement upsurge in the 2009 election, which also failed.)

In the U.S., the remnants of the Iraq anti-war movement and Occupy Wall Street protests lined up behind Bernie Sanders’s campaign for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination in 2015. Although Sanders did better than he himself expected, his campaign was never anything but a slight damper on Hillary’s inevitable candidacy. Nevertheless, Sanders served to mobilize Millennials for Hillary in the 2016 election—even if many of Sanders’s primary voters ended up pushing Trump over the top in November. Trump’s election has been all the more dismaying: How could it have happened, after more than a decade of agitation on the “Left,” in the face of massive political failures such as the War on Terror and the 2008 financial collapse and subsequent economic downturn? The Millennials thought that the only way to move on from the disappointing Obama era was up. Moreover, they regarded Obama as “progressive,” however inadequately so. This assumption of Obama’s “progressivism” is now being cemented by contrast with Trump. But that concession to Obama’s conservatism in 2008 and yet again in 2012 was already the fatal poison-pill of the Democrats that the Millennials nonetheless swallowed. Now they imagine they can transform the Democrats, aided by Trump’s defeat of Hillary, an apparent setback for the Democrats’ Right wing. But change them into what?

This dynamic since 2008—when everyone was

to serve as a ginger-group on its “Left” wing. Despite claims made today, in the past the DSA was much stronger, with many elected officials such as New York City Mayor David Dinkins and Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger. The recent apparent renaissance of the DSA does not match its historic past height. At the same time, Bernie Sanders was never a member of the DSA, considering it to be too Right-wing for his purposes.

In 2017, the DSA’s recent bubble of growth—perhaps already bursting now in internal acrimony—is a function of both reaction to Hillary’s defeat at the hands of Trump and the frustrated hopes of the Sanders campaign after eight years of disappointment under Obama. As such, the catch-all character of DSA and its refurbished marketing campaign by DSA member Bhaskar Sunkenara’s *Jacobin* magazine—Sunkenara has spoken of the “missing link” he’s trying to make up between the 1960s generation and Millennials—is the inevitable result of the failure of the Millennial Left. By uniting the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Solidarity, Socialist Alternative (SA!), and others in and around the new station of the DSA before simply liquidating into the Democrats, the Millennial Left has abandoned whatever pretenses it had to depart from the sad history of the Left since the 1960s: The ISO, Solidarity, and SA! are nothing but 1980s legacies.

The attempted reconciliation with the 1960s New Left by the Millennials that tried to thus transcend the dark years of reaction in the 1980s–90s “post-political” Generation-X era was always very tenuous and fraught. But the 1960s were not going to be re-fought. Now in the DSA, the Millennials are falling exactly back into the 1980s Gen-X mold. Trump has scared them into vintage Reagan-era activity—including stand-offs with the KKK and neo-Nazis. Set back in the 1980s, *it and Stranger Things* are happening again. The Millennials are falling victim to Gen-X nostalgia—for a time before they were even born. But this was not always so.

The founding of the new Students for a Democratic Society (new SDS) in Chicago in 2006, in response to George W. Bush’s disastrous Iraq War, was an extremely short-lived phenomenon of the failure to resuscitate Bush by John Kerry in 2004 and the miserable result of the Democrats in the 2006 mid-term Congressional elections. Despite the warning by the old veteran 1960s SDS members organized in the mentoring group, the Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS), to not repeat their own mistakes in the New Left, the new SDS fell into similar single-issue activist blind-alleys, especially around the Iraq War, and did not outlive the George W. Bush Presidency. By the time Obama was elected in 2008, the new SDS was already liquidating, its remaining rump swallowed by the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO)—in a repetition of the takeover of the old SDS by the Maoists of the Progressive Labor Party after 1968. But something of the new SDS’s spirit survived, however attenuated.

Matter emerging from disappointment with a black President, the 2016 election was set to deliver the *coup de grâce* to the Millennials’ “Leftism.” It certainly did. Between Sanders and Trump, the Millennials found themselves in 2015–16 in mature adulthood, faced with the unexpected—unprepared. They were not prepared to have the concerns of their “Leftism” become accused by BLM—indeed, Sanders and his supporters were accused by Hillary herself—of being an expression not merely of “white privilege” but of “white supremacy.” The Millennials’ “Leftism” cannot survive all these blows. Rather, a resolution to Democratic Party common sense is reconciling the Millennials to the status quo—especially via anti-Trump-ism. Their expectations have been progressively lowered over the past decade. Now, in their last, final round, they fall exhausted, buffeted by “anti-fascism” on the ropes of 2017.

A similar phenomenon manifested in the U.K. Labour Party, whose Momentum group the Millennial Left joined *en masse* to support the veteran 1960s “socialist” Jeremy Corbyn. But Brexit and Theresa May’s election did not split, but consolidated the Millennials’ adherence to Labour—as first Sanders and then Trump has done with the American Millennial Left and the Democrats. All of us must play the hand that history has dealt us. The problem is that the Millennial Left chose not to play its own hand, shying away in fear from the gamble. Instead, they fell back onto the past, trying to re-play the cards dealt to previous generations. They are inevitably suffering the same results of those past failed wagers.

The Left has been in steady decline since the 1930s. not reversed by the 1960s–70s New Left. More recently, the 1980s was a decade of the institutionalization of the Left’s liquidation into academicism and social-movement activism. A new socialist political party to which the New Left could have given rise was not built. Quite the opposite. The New Left became the institutionalization of the unpolitical.

Michael Harrington’s (1928–89) Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), established in 1982, was his deliberate attempt in the early 1980s Reagan era to preserve what he called a “remnant of a remnant” of both the New Left and of the old Socialist Party of America that had split three ways in 1973. It was the default product of Harrington and others’ failed strategy of “realigning” the Democratic Party after the crisis of its New Deal Coalition in the 1960s. No longer seeking to transform the Democratic Party, the DSA was content

“Those who demand guarantees in advance should in general renounce revolutionary politics. The causes for the downfall of the Social Democracy and of official Communism must be sought not in Marxist theory and not in the bad qualities of those people who applied it, but in the concrete conditions of the historical process. It is not a question of counterposing abstract principles, but rather of the struggle of living social forces, with its inevitable ups and downs, with the degeneration of organizations, with the passing of entire generations into discard, and with the necessity which therefore arises of mobilizing fresh forces on a new historical stage. No one has bothered to pave in advance the road of revolutionary upsurge for the proletariat. With inevitable halts and partial retreats it is necessary to move forward on a road crisscrossed by countless obstacles and covered with the debris of the past. Those who are frightened by this had better step aside.” (“Realism versus Pessimism,” in “To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew,” 1933!)

“They had friends, they had enemies, they fought, and exactly through this they demonstrated their right to exist.” (“Art and Politics in Our Epoch,” letter of January 29, 1938)

“The more daring the pioneers show in their ideas and actions, the more bitterly they oppose themselves to established authority which rests on a conservative “mass base,” the more conventional souls, skeptics, and snobs are inclined to see in the pioneers, impatient eccentricities or “anemic splinters.” But in the last analysis it is the conventional souls, skeptics and snobs who are wrong – and life passes them by.” (“Splinters and pioneers,” in “Art and Politics in our Epoch,” letter of June 18, 1938!)

— Leon Trotsky

Discard

The Millennial Left has been subject to the triple knock-out of Obama, Sanders, and Trump. Whatever expectations it once fostered were dashed over the course of a decade of stunning reversals. In the aftermath of George W. Bush and the War on Terror, of the financial crisis and economic downturn, of Obama’s election, of the Citizens United decision and of the Republican sweep of Congress, of Occupy Wall Street and Obama’s reelection, and of Black Lives

The Millennial Left is dead

Chris Cutrone

The Platypus Review

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1 The Millennial Left is dead

Chris Cutrone

2 Not your grandfather’s anti-fascism

Challenges facing the anti-fascist movement in the age of Trump

Participants in CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective

3 Lessons of the Russian Revolution

Party substitutionism is death to a revolution

Wayne Price

4 Notes on philosophy

Herbert Marcuse

www:

Anti-fascism in the age of Trump

Mark Kazanski, Bernard Sampson, Gloria Rubac, Gus Breslauer

Lessons of the Russian Revolution

Wayne Price

The following is based on my notes for the April 8, 2017, convention of the Platypus Affiliated Society, for a panel on the meaning of the 1917 Russian Revolution for today (the original closing plenary entitled: 1917-2017). I did not give the presentation due to a thunderstorm and flight cancellation. An earlier version of this write-up appeared at www.Anarkismo.net.

REVOLUTIONARIES STUDY REVOLUTIONS. Many lessons might be learned from looking at the 1917 Russian Revolution and its aftermath. It began with such promise, bringing hope of a world without war, oppression, capitalism, imperialism, and states. How did it result in Stalinist mass murder and state capitalism, and finally to collapse back into traditional capitalism? Possibly the most important lesson of the Russian Revolution is the difference between capitalist revolutions and working-class revolutions. By “capitalist revolutions,” I mean the upheavals that replaced medieval-feudal societies with bourgeois-democratic societies, including the English Revolution of Cromwell, the American Revolution, the Great French Revolution, and the mostly failed 1848 European Revolutions. By “working-class revolutions,” I mean mass rebellions—in which the working class plays a major role in alliance with other exploited and oppressed sections of society—to replace capitalism with the beginning of some sort of cooperative, non-profit, system.

Today, many people on the Left, including Marxists and anarchists, have given up the goal of working-class revolution. Yet, working-class revolution was the central concept of the Marxism of Marx and Engels, as it was, also, central for the historical mainstream of socialist-anarchism: from Bakunin to Kropotkin. This is an anarchist-communists, and anarchist-syndicalists.

Depending on the definition we use, the working class—proletarians—are either a large minority or the big majority of the population of all industrialized countries and many of the “Third World” nations. As such, they overlap with all other oppressed sectors of the people, including women, LGBT people, people of color, immigrants, youth, oppressed nations, and people with disabilities; not to mention those threatened by global warming. Because of their role in the process of capitalist production, workers—potentially—have a special strategic power. As workers, they have their hands on the means of production, distribution, transportation, communication, consumption, and services. If they wanted to, they could stop society from working by shutting it down. And they could, if they would, restart the economy on a new, radically democratic, cooperative, and ecological basis: namely, anti-authoritarian socialism.

Both capitalist and workers’ revolutions are uprisings of the mass of people against the old ruling class and its state. But what a capitalist revolution did was to replace the old masters with a new ruling class—the aristocracy with the bourgeoisie. The majority of people

did get some benefits. After all, it is better to live under a bourgeois democracy than an unlimited monarchy. But, the main function of the capitalist revolution was to replace one set of rulers with another. This means that the ideology of the leaders of the revolution was always a falsehood. Bourgeois revolutionaries could not tell the peasants and artisans that they were only changing rulers. A minority would still be powerful and wealthy while all others would labor for them. Subjectively, the revolutionary leaders may or may not have believed that they were bringing “liberty, equality, fraternity” and the “rights of man” to the people, or “inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” What mattered is what they actually did.

In contrast, the workers’ revolution must be based on the consciousness of the people, on an awareness of what they are really doing. The big majority of the people—the workers, their families and dependents, peasants [still a big group around the world], and women, as well as people of oppressed races, nations, and religions, etc.—will rise up and make a revolution in their interests, under their own control. Working-class revolutionaries must tell the truth. Even at times when it is unpopular to do so, they must say what is.

Differences between capitalist and workers’ revolutions

At the core of capitalism is the market. Commodities are produced in order to exchange for money and other commodities on the market. This includes the commodity of human labor-power, the ability of the workers to work for a period of time, which they sell for wages or salaries. This is an unusual commodity since it produces more wealth than it costs the capitalist to buy in hiring it; which is to say it creates the basis of profit. Despite the growth of semi-monopolies and government intervention, the market is not really controlled by anyone, including the capitalist class. In its essence, it runs on its own, ultimately obeying only “the laws” of supply and demand, of what Adam Smith called the “invisible hand,” or what Marx called “the law of value.”

The job of a capitalist revolution is to clear the way for the free play of the market. It is to get rid of feudal regulations, aristocratic limitations, slavery, serfdom, guild rules, and monarchical licenses. The revolution establishes a new state, which works to set up the basic conditions of capitalism: an accumulation of wealth, available to be capital, and a “free” population of propertyless workers (as opposed to serfs or urban artisans), needing to sell their labor to the capitalists in order to live. The state may intervene in the capitalist economy to a greater or lesser extent, but it does so in order to keep production for the market going.

So long as it does this, the exact nature of the capitalist state may vary enormously. It could be a relatively democratic republican state with universal

suffrage for all adults. It could be a military junta or a police state. It could be a totalitarian fascist regime. The capitalist class may have excessively direct influence, as in a capitalist democracy, or very little, as in various dictatorships. In general, the capitalists prefer to run their own businesses and let someone else manage the state; even in a capitalist democracy, they mostly hire professional politicians to run the government. But as long as the state maintains capitalist production and the market, the system remains capitalist and the state remains a capitalist state. A revolution that establishes such a state, in any of its possible forms, is a capitalist revolution.

In contrast, the modern working class is a collective, cooperative, force. Workers do not “own” three feet of factory assembly line, nor their own cubicle in an office, nor five square feet of an auto body shop. In this they are unlike stock-owning capitalists, slave-owning lords, or even land-owning peasants. The individual workers own nothing of the means of production. They must work together to produce (distribute, etc.) goods, not only with their immediate fellow workers but also with workers in other workplaces who make the material that goes into their own products, and who distribute the produced goods. Unless the workers collectively and democratically manage the economy together, they can not be truly said to manage the economy or any other part of society. If they do not run industry together, then they continue to be on the bottom taking orders from someone else—some boss—still exploited, dispossessed, and oppressed.

This means that some other social force can not manage society for the workers. This is unlike capitalism, where all sorts of groupings may manage the state and society for the capitalist class. No one else can substitute for the working class if they are to be free. In particular, this means that no layer of state bureaucrats can stand in for the workers. Contrary to the Trotskyists, there can be no such thing as a bureaucratic-ruled “degenerated” or “deformed workers’ state.”

Anarchists and Marxists define the state as a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine, with layers of specialized armed people, professional politicians and bureaucrats, which stands above the rest of society and dominates it. It would be impossible for the mass of workers and the formerly oppressed to self-govern through such a social mechanism. The existence of a state means the domination over the working class, which would still be at the bottom of society taking orders. It would mean the rule of some minority class, whether or not this class claimed to substitute itself for the workers. Establishing a new “revolutionary” state would only re-create the conditions for capital-labor relations. Therefore there can be no such thing as a “workers’ state.”

The lack of a state does not mean the absence of social coordination, planning, or self-defense. The people could organize themselves through federations of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and militia units of the armed people, so long as necessary. This would not be a state above society; it would be the self-organization of the working people. When everyone, or at least all the formerly exploited, governs, then there is no government.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and after

The “October Revolution” is often mistakenly called the “Bolshevik Revolution.” Actually, it was organized by a united front of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party, Left Social Revolutionaries (pro-peasant populists), and anarchists. When the new soviet power was established, it had a coalition government of Bolsheviks—re-named the Communist Party—and Left SRs with support in the soviets from the anarchists. The Communists had almost no base among the peasants, the vast majority of the population.

The history of the early Soviet Union is one of the Communists antagonizing the other left socialist parties and groups, driving them out of the government and the soviets by outlawing and arresting them, and shooting their members. This began before the Civil War and foreign invasion, and continued after it. Meanwhile, there had been opposition caucuses within the Communists, composed of revolutionaries who had believed in the democratic-libertarian promises of Lenin. Such groupings were driven out of the one legal party and banned. By 1921, the Russian state had become a one-party police state. This was under the rule of Lenin and Trotsky after the Civil War had been won.¹

It was not substitutionist for Lenin and his co-thinkers to form a political party or for other socialists to form a revolutionary organization with those who agreed with them. Such an organization could have served to develop theory and program. It could have fought to spread its ideas and strategies among the workers and others. There is an historical trend of anarchists who have advocated such organizing, including Bakunin, Malatesta, Makho, and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica-ists. This is a revolutionary minority seeking to win over the majority. It is not counter-posed to the self-organization of the working class and oppressed. It is a crucial part of that self-organization.

What was substitutionist was the idea that the revolutionary party could stand in for the working class, that it could run the state in the interests of the workers and peasants, even against the opposition of the people. From the beginning of the revolution, the Bolsheviks held that only they knew how to lead the revolution and that the solution was for them to get state power. Even though, for most of their history, the Bolsheviks, like the Mensheviks, had falsely held that the Russian revolution would stay within the limits of a bourgeois revolution.

Once the October Revolution had occurred, the Communists set up a new government, uncontrolled by the soviets. They gerrymandered, postponed votes, and used other political tactics to keep themselves in power. They might have formed a united front with other parties, which supported the soviets including the Left SRs, Left Mensheviks, and anarchists. Instead, they pushed the other left parties out of power and out of the soviets. They set up an uncontrolled secret police with the power to arrest and shoot opponents. They killed off the factory committees and staffed the unions, running industry through appointed managers. They set up a centralized state planning agency to manage the economy, which never worked well.

This was done under Lenin and Trotsky, setting the framework for Stalin’s totalitarian rule. Of course, there were objective problems, including the aftermath of a

“Russian Revolution” continues on page 4

Notes on philosophy

Herbert Marcuse

The following short article was originally published in the Brandeis University Yearbook for 1963. Marcuse taught at Brandeis as Professor of Politics and Philosophy from 1958 to 1965. During those years he wrote and published his most famous work, One-Dimensional Man (1964), which, though largely forgotten today, served as a major touchstone for the New Left. Marcuse, together with a handful of other professors, wrote his essay in response to a general solicitation by the yearbook committee. The Platypus Review wishes to thank a member of that yearbook committee, Michael Kaplan, Professor of Architecture Emeritus at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for calling our attention to this short piece. It is republished here with the permission of the Literary Estate of Herbert Marcuse, Peter Marcuse, Executor, whose permission is required for any further publication.

THE ACADEMIC ESTABLISHMENT CAN BETRAY its

trust in many ways; one of them is the teaching of irrelevant modes of thought not geared to understanding that which is really going on. The goal of teaching and learning has been set by the Western tradition: it is no longer (if it ever was) free choice; we have to work with the historical heritage which has shaped our thought and action, theory and practice. Our intellectual tradition, our historical situation demand that we learn how to think before we can recognize the facts and learn what to do with them. We think and learn in order to understand what is and what happens. The apparently harmless truism is in fact full of harm; it contains a host of presuppositions and prejudices. Here are some of them: (1) Our world is such that it has to be *understood* so that we can live in it: It is not immediately *lived* in accord with our needs; it is rather opposed to us, objectionable: object to a subject. In this basic experience originates:

(2) the distinction [and the conflict] between that which is (immediately given) and that which can be and *ought* to be if man is to protect and enjoy his life in the struggle with man and nature: distinction between essence and appearance, idea and reality, the potential and the actual.

(3) This distinction, and the “ought” implied in it, is not established by a command of any religion, metaphysics, etc.; it is rather a constant element in everyday experience which becomes articulated in thought. All thought originates in the question: Is the life that I and the others live what it can be? Is it in accord with our real possibilities and those of nature? And this question implies that there is something wrong and false with our world: “wrong” and “false” not merely from a private, subjective, but from a general, objective position.

(4) However, this experience is normally repressed, and the critical judgments arising from it are being reduced to the inferior status of personal matter, preference, value judgments. Such repressive reduction operates most effectively in man’s apprehension of his needs, aspirations in his society, and of their chances and limits. Transgression beyond the established social universe of discourse, behavior, and hope is discriminated against. The mind is rendered adjustable, realistic, “empirical” by purging it from transcending ideas and intentions; they are tolerated and even promoted in poetry, art, religion, but they are “unscientific”: They do not correspond to the realities as defined by the established social universe.

(11) Critical theory undoes the repressions and restrictions imposed upon experience by the Establishment, thus it achieves a concreteness from which conformist empirical thought shirks away. In concentrating entirely on the investigation of particular conditions in isolation from the historical whole that shapes all particular conditions, empirical analysis succumbs to the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.

(12) Overcoming this fallacy of spurious concreteness requires transgression beyond the given facts and their given situation. The transgression is not into a dimension of fantasy and illusion, but into the historical reality which reveals the full meaning and function of the given facts. In terms of the spurious concreteness of the Establishment, such transgression appears as abstract speculation, unscientific and perhaps even subversive occupation. But this ability to abstract from the given in order to arrive at the real, this refusal to submit to the totalitarian dictum of the established facts (which is the dictum and factum of those who establish the facts) is the prerequisite for liberation. IP

Russian Revolution, continued from page 3

world war, a revolution, and a civil war in a poor, peasant-majority country. But Lenin and Trotsky did not say that these were temporary measures due to exceptional unfavorable circumstances. Instead, they declared that one-party rule was a principle of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Even most of the oppositions developing within the Communist Party agreed with the principle of one-party dictatorship. This included Trotsky’s Left Opposition, which continued to uphold the Communist Party dictatorship until the mid-thirties, by which time the Russian Trotskyists were smashed. Believing that only they knew the Truth , as they interpreted Marxism, they felt justified—even if they lay to stay in power and ban all other parties. If they let themselves be voted out of office by the Russian workers and peasants or even form a united-front government with other left parties, the counter-revolution was sure to conquer. It did conquer by acting through the Communist dictatorship. Stalin killed vast numbers of Communists, workers and peasants; and destroyed all the gains of the revolution. Substitutionism was a failure.

Substitutionism creates state capitalism

By the thirties, all remnants of workers’ power had been eliminated from Soviet Russia. The state had a structure essentially the same as in Nazi Germany. The bureaucracy ruled uncontested. The economy was almost entirely nationalized. The working class and peasants were beaten down, oppressed and exploited—as were women, intellectuals, and non-Russian nationalities. What was this society? Trotsky and most critical Communists continued

Anti-fascism, cont. from page 2

and they wore it proudly as a badge, some historians today argue that the Jacobins weren’t terrorists on the grounds that they were a state entity with legitimate power. In the centuries since, governments of every point on the statist political spectrum have murdered untold millions without being accused of terrorism. This shows the extent to which the discourse of terrorism serves to give the state carte blanche while delegitimizing all who stand against its power.

Rather than falling back on statist discourse to make our case against white supremacist violence and murder, we should criticize them in terms that foreground our own values: freedom, egalitarianism, and solidarity. White supremacist violence is oppressive, murderous, and aimed at achieving totalitarian control. Let’s invest these descriptors with as much weight as the label “terrorism” currently possesses.

There is no good authoritarianism

The far-right rally in Berkeley on August 27 was promoted under the slogan, “No to Marxism in America.” As with the far-right “March against Sharia,” there is no danger of the United States coming under a Marxist government any time soon. Like all totalitarians, fascists desperately need enemies even more oppressive than themselves to point to in order to convince people to join their ranks. There is an ominous symmetry between groups like ISIS and Western fascists, some of whom openly fantasize about a “White Sharia.” This explains their obsession with authoritarian Marxism.

In fact, the fiercest opposition to contemporary fascist organizing has not come from authoritarian Marxists, but from anarchists who oppose state power itself. This is inconvenient for many fascists in the US, who still seek to present themselves as enemies of “big government” in order to appeal to U.S. libertarians and traditional conservatives.

If fascists are eager to paint all their domestic opponents with the broad brush of Marxism, we should not hasten to assist them. Yes, authoritarian Marxists have historically played a role in the fight against fascism, but they have hardly played it honorably. They began by betraying and undermining other social movements as early as 1871. If Stalin hadn’t sabotaged anti-fascist participants in the Spanish Civil War and other movements around Europe and then concluded a pact with Hitler, the Second World War would have unfolded much differently, and it might not have taken decades afterwards for grassroots liberation movements to recover.

Both fascism and authoritarian Marxism—which is to say, statist Marxism—are experiencing a resurgence today. Much of this is taking place among people who grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, who are too young to have grandparents who lived through the Second World War. For many in the United States, totalitarianism is abstract, something to joke about on the internet. Some people on the Left see the hammer and sickle the way many right-wingers see the swastika: as a provocative meme rather than a blood-drenched symbol of oppression. Yet Stalin, too, carried out ethnic cleansing, as have many other authoritarian Marxist regimes.

One cannot consistently oppose fascism without opposing all forms of authoritarian government. This is not to say that rank-and-file members of authoritarian communist organizations can never be comrades in this struggle. Many of them are sincere people with the best of intentions—and clearly we need all the comrades we can get when we are facing down Nazis with guns. The point is that anti-fascists should oppose the leadership of authoritarian Marxist parties for many of the same reasons that we oppose fascists and other authoritarians. If you care about a member of an organization like the Bolshevik Party, you can express that care by making sure that his organization never comes to power—for if history is any guide, he will be the next up against the wall after you.

We must make it clear to the general public that we do not intend to impose a new dictatorship, but to open and preserve spaces of freedom. There is no statist solution for tyranny.

Martyrdom

Unfortunately, Heather Heyer is not the first person to be taken from us by fascist violence, and she will not

be the last. In addition to being wary of the discourse of terrorism and the tendency to militarize our struggles, we should be wary of the discourse of martyrdom and the tendency to celebrate death in battle. We need to find ways to remember people above all for who they were, for what their lives gave to the world, not for how they died or what their deaths meant to the struggle. We should not begin to regard ourselves or each other as playing pieces to be exchanged for strategic gains.

We live in a society in which aging and death are concealed from public view. If this struggle continues to intensify, more and more of us will be forced to learn what it is like to spend hard weeks in the hospital, to meet at funerals as well as outside jails and courtrooms. We should approach this as another opportunity to come to know ourselves better, to discover what is beautiful and worthwhile in life—the things for which we are fighting in the first place. We should not subordinate ourselves to the struggle, but recognize it as one of the ways that life pours forth abundantly within us.

Cutting to the roots

The vast majority of the anti-fascist struggle does not take place in street confrontations. It takes place in how we raise our children; it takes place in the hard conversations at workplaces and family dinners; it takes place in how we relate to our neighbors, how we understand togetherness and belonging. To triumph, we have to make it possible for people of all genders and ethnicities and religions to work together to survive the ordeals of capitalism. We have to create movements that can offer everybody more than the fascists ever could.

Ultimately, a thoroughgoing anti-fascist movement shouldn’t focus on targeting fascist groups that are so marginal that they stick out from the rest of the political spectrum, but take on the infrastructure through which any authoritarian program will be enacted. That is to say, it should focus on the state itself. This means blocking deportations and evictions, supporting targeted communities against police violence and legal repression, organizing against the prison-industrial complex, delegitimizing the police and military, rejecting unquestioning obedience to the law, undermining deference to all forms of institutional authority, and building grassroots, community-based networks that can provide directly for our needs.

If we simply fight defensive battles, the fascists will eventually gain the initiative. We should take the experiences of fighting together that we share in anti-fascist struggle and use those as points of departure to work together to solve all of the problems that capitalism and hierarchy create in our communities. This is the way to take the offensive and move on to confronting the fundamental sources of oppression.

Some believe that life will go back to normal soon enough, and fascism and anti-fascism will once more be things of the past. But we fear that we have yet to see how far these conflicts will go. We have to invest ourselves in confronting them head on. The only way out is through. IP

Millennial Left, continued from page 1

or rejuvenation of “social democracy” is actually its collapse. Neoliberalism achieves ultimate victory in being rendered redundant.

Like Nixon’s election in 1968, Trump’s victory in 2016 was precisely the result of the failures of the Democrats. The 1960s New Left was stunned that after many years protesting and organizing, seeking to pressure the Democrats from the Left, they were not the beneficiaries of the collapse of LBJ. Like Reagan’s election in 1980, Trump’s election is being met with shock and incredulity, which serves to eliminate all differences back into the Democratic Party, to “fight the Right.” Antifa exacerbates this.

From anti-neoliberals the Millennial Left is becoming neoliberalism’s last defenders against Trump—just as the New Left went from attacking the repressive administrative state under LBJ in the 1960s to defending it from neoliberal transformation by Reagan in the 1980s. History moves on, leaving the “Left” in its wake, now as before. Problems are resolved in the most conservative way possible, such as with gay marriage under Obama: Does equality in conventional bourgeois marriage meet the diverse multiplicity of needs for intimacy and kinship? What about the Millennials’ evident preferences for sex without relationships, for polyamory, or for asexuality? The Millennials act as if Politically Correct multiculturalism and queer transgenderism were invented yesterday—as if the world was tailor-made to their “sensitivity training”—but their education is already obsolete. This is the frightening reality that is dawning on them now.

Signature issues that seem to “change everything” (Naomi Klein), such as economic “shock therapy,” crusading neoconservatism, and climate change, are sideswiped—ushered off the stage and out of the limelight. New problems loom on the horizon, while the Millennials’ heads spin from the whiplash.

Ferdinand Lassalle wrote to Marx (December 12, 1851) that, “Hegel used to say in his old age that directly before the emergence of something qualitatively new, the old state of affairs gathers itself up into its original, purely general, essence, into its simple totality, transcending and absorbing back into itself all those marked differences and peculiarities which it evinced when it was still viable.” We see this now with the last gasps of the old identity politics flowing out of the 1960s New Left that facilitated neoliberalism, which are raised to the most absurd heights of fever pitch before finally breaking and dissipating. Trump following Obama as the last phenomenon of identity politics is not some restoration of “straight white patriarchy” but the final liquidation of its criterion. The lunatic fringe racists make their last showing before achieving their utter irrelevance, however belatedly. Many issues of long standing flare up as dying embers, awaiting their

spectacular flashes before vanishing.

Trump has made all the political divisions of the past generation redundant—inconsequential. This is what everyone, Left, Right and Center, protests against: being left in the dust. Good riddance.

Whatever disorder the Trump Administration in its first term might evince—like Reagan and Thatcher’s first terms, there’s much heat but little light—it compares well to the disarray among the Democrats, and, perhaps more significantly, to that in the mainstream, established Republican Party. This political disorder, already the case since 2008, was the Millennials’ opportunity. But first with Sanders, and now under Trump, they are taking the opportunity to restore the Democrats; they may even prefer established Republicans to Trump. The Millennials are thus playing a conservative role.

Trump

Trump’s election—especially after Sanders’s surprise good showing in the Democratic primaries—indicates a crisis of mainstream politics that fosters the imagination of alternatives. But it also generates illusions. If the 2006 collapse of neoconservative fantasies of democratizing the Middle East through crisis and Great Recession did not serve to open new political possibilities, then the current disorder will also not be so propitious. At least not for the “Left.”

The opportunity is being taken by Trump to adjust mainstream politics into a post-neoliberal order. But mostly Trump is—avowedly—a figure of muddling-through, not sweeping change. The shock experienced by the complacency of the political status quo should not be confused for a genuine crisis. Just because there’s a smoke doesn’t mean there’s a fire. There are many resources for recuperating Republican Party- and Democratic Party-organized politics. As disorganized as the Parties may be now, the Millennial “Left” is completely unorganized politically. It is entirely dependent upon the existing Democrat-aligned organizations such as minority community NGOs and labor unions. Now the Millennials are left adjudicating which of these Democrats they want to follow.

Most significant in this moment are the diminished expectations that carry over from the Obama years into the Trump Presidency. Indeed, there has been a steady decline since the early 2000s. Whatever pains at adjustment to the grim “new normal” have been registered in protest, from the Tea Party revolt on the Right to Occupy Wall Street on the Left, the political aspirations now are far lower.

What is clear is that ever since the 1960s New Left there has been a consistent lowering of horizons for

social and political change. The “Left” has played catch-up with changes beyond its control. Indeed, this has been the case ever since the 1930s, when the Left fell in behind FDR’s New Deal reforms, which were expanded internationally after WWII under global U.S. leadership, including via the social-democratic and labor parties of Western Europe. What needs to be borne in mind is how incredible the political logic ever since then has been. How could it be possible to reverse this?

Harry S. Truman called his Republican challenger in 1948, New York governor Thomas Dewey, a “fascist” for opposing the New Deal. The Communist Party agreed with this assessment. They offered Henry Wallace as the better “anti-fascist.” Subsequently, the old Communists were not (as they liked to tell themselves) defeated by McCarthyite repression, but rather by the Democrats’ reforms, which made them redundant. The New Left was not defeated by either Nixon or Reagan; rather, Nixon and Reagan showed the New Left’s irrelevance. McGovern swept up its pieces. Right-wing McGovernites—the Clintons—took over.

The Millennial Left was not defeated by Bush, Obama, Hillary, or Trump. No. They have consistently defeated themselves. They failed to ever even *become* themselves as something distinctly new and different, but instead continued the same old 1980s *modus operandi* inherited from the failure of the 1960s New Left. Trump has rendered them finally irrelevant. That they are now winding up in the 1980s-vintage DSA as the “big tent”—that is, the *swamp*—of activists and academics on the “Left” fringe of the Democratic Party moving Right is the logical result. They will scramble to elect Democrats in 2018 and to unseat Trump in 2020. Likely they will fail at both, as the Democrats as well as the Republicans must adapt to changing circumstances, however in opposition to Trump—but with Trump the Republicans at least have a head start on making the necessary adjustments. Nonetheless the Millennial Leftists are ending up as Democrats. They’ve given up the ghost of the Left—whose memory haunted them from the beginning.

The Millennial Left is dead. IP

Further reading:

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1 Leon Trotsky, “To Build Communist Parties and an International Army, 1933,” available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330715.htm>>.

2 Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch,” *Partisan Review* (June 1938), available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>>.

1 Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist & Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007). This summary of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War is extremely condensed and controversial, for more information please see my book, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist & Marxist Perspectives*.

Not your grandfather’s anti-fascism

Challenges facing the anti-fascist movement in the age of Trump

Participants in CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective



Photo of street confrontation the August 27th in Berkeley, California, on August 27, 2017.

An earlier version of this article is available with full links and citations at cwc.im/antifascism.

FOLLOWING THE CLASHES IN CHARLOTTESVILLE on August 12th, and massive anti-fascist demonstrations afterwards in Durham, Boston, the Bay Area, and elsewhere, the struggle against fascism has arrived in the consciousness of the general public. Tens of thousands of people are realizing that the fight against fascism did not end in 1945. Today, as increasingly authoritarian governments collude with ascendant fascist movements all around the world, this battle is more pressing than ever.

It is worth taking a moment to review what anarchists and anti-fascists have accomplished since Donald Trump was elected. Despite harassment and attacks from fascists and law enforcement, what was initially a few hundred people without financial resources has grown into the foundation for a massive social movement.

After the election, while liberals were immobilized by shock, anarchists immediately went on the offensive in order to destabilize the Trump regime before it could normalize a new level of tyranny. By acting decisively to disrupt the inauguration and helping to shut down airports in response to the Muslim ban, anarchists showed that there could be no business or politics as usual under Trump. This created fractures within the halls of power. If not for these immediate, massive expressions of defiance, judges might not have dared to block the Muslim ban, or White House employees to leak information.

Anarchists also acted immediately to shut down fascist recruiting. On the day of Trump’s inauguration, an anarchist was shot while protesting a speech by far-right troll Milo Yiannopoulos in Seattle; two weeks later, anarchists shut down Milo’s event in Berkeley. On April 15, fascists rampaged through Berkeley, recording video footage of themselves beating people to use for recruiting purposes. Fascist momentum reached a peak on the weekend of August 12th when the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia brought out nearly one thousand neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and other white supremacists. Outnumbered and outgunned, anarchists and other anti-fascists nonetheless forced the city to shut down the rally. In retaliation, participants murdered protester Heather Heyer and injured dozens more. In response, tens of thousands around the US turned out to subsequent anti-fascist demonstrations, tearing down Confederate statues and shutting down far-right rallies in San Francisco, Berkeley, and elsewhere.

Imagine if the “Unite the Right” rally had taken place without resistance and a thousand white supremacists had been able to march around Charlottesville unopposed. In that scenario, emboldened fascists could have presented themselves as a legitimate part of the political spectrum, while preparing the way for more murders like the ones in Charleston and Portland. In that case, the government with Trump at the helm would have been able to present itself as the only possible solution to fascist violence, and the general public would have been forced to seek assistance from the very authorities that are already implementing most of the white supremacist agenda. Fortunately, long before Charlottesville, anarchists and other anti-fascists were doing the thankless work of monitoring fascists and mobilizing against them.

Now that the struggle against fascism has arrived on a massive scale, it’s time to come to grips with the limitations the movement faces. Every victory generates new challenges. Let’s explore the obstacles that the anti-fascist movement will have to overcome to succeed in creating a world free of authoritarianism.

The swinging pendulum of polarization

U.S. society has been splintering and polarizing for years now, since the recession of 2008, if not before. The movement against police and white supremacy that burst onto the national stage in Ferguson in 2014 as Black Lives Matter generated a far-right backlash, which inspired a resurgence of anti-fascist organizing. In response, fascists gave angry liberals and anti-fascists a central place in their strategy, seeking to provoke them into reactive behavior that could be used to further mobilize the right-wing base. Milo Yiannopoulos used this strategy until it blew up in his face in February, when a black bloc of hundreds shut

down his event in Berkeley.

Various fascist and fascist-friendly organizers also used this approach, baiting leftists and anti-fascists with a series of “free speech” rallies in Berkeley, Portland, and elsewhere around the country that won the nascent fascist movement notoriety and momentum. This movement appeared fully formed for the first time in Charlottesville—but the shockwaves of that debut drew more people into the movement against fascism, changing the balance of power once again. The “free speech” rallies scheduled afterwards in Boston and the Bay Area were total washouts for the fascists.

In each of these cases, when the pendulum of polarization swung to one side, the opposing side was able to use that victory to draw more sympathizers into action. So long as this pattern persists, every anti-fascist victory will produce an even greater threat from the far-right and the government. To break out of the pattern, anti-fascists have to strike blows in ways that don’t enable fascists to cash in on the resulting fear, or find a way to draw in large swathes of the population more rapidly than their competition on the right. This demands outflanking hostile media narratives, debunking popular misconceptions about anti-fascist self-defense, resisting the tendency to consolidate anti-fascist organizing around a specific network or identity, and other tasks we will explore below.

Corporate media back the fascists

One of the most obvious obstacles facing anti-fascists is the hostility of the corporate media. The *Washington Post* titled their coverage of the August 27th demonstration, “Black-clad antifa members attack peaceful right-wing demonstrators in Berkeley.”¹ It isn’t surprising when Fox News publishes barefaced propaganda,² but it is more unsettling to see supposedly liberal outlets parroting fascist talking points.

The image at the top of the *Washington Post* article showed a right-wing demonstrator apparently being shoved by an anti-fascist with a shield. [Three weeks later, the *Wall Street Journal* used the same photo to illustrate their article “How Antifa Violence Has Split the Left.”³] Yet several videos show the same far-right demonstrator pepper-spraying people at random immediately before the photo was taken.⁴ If you look closely, the attacker is wearing a shirt that celebrates Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet for murdering dissidents by dropping them out of helicopters. The *Washington Post* chose a photo in which the assailant’s right hand is not visible, so readers would not see the pepper spray he holds in it.

When the *Washington Post* portrays such fascists as “peaceful,” suggesting that they are victims even as they attack people and glorify mass murder, this gives them legitimacy, securing space for them to recruit and to promote and organize further attacks. Why would liberal media outlets do this? It appears that media outlets across the spectrum had decided in advance to report the anti-fascist demonstration in Berkeley as an expression of violent excess. As it turned out, the demonstration was largely peaceful; even the worst clashes were considerably less violent than the fighting on April 15th. Despite this, corporate media outlets that had ignored April 15th altogether devoted considerable space to a few isolated incidents in which anti-fascists scuffled with fascists or other Trump supporters.

Clearly, their intention was to impose a limit on the amount of popular legitimacy anti-fascists would be permitted to accrue after the events in Charlottesville. Heather Heyer’s murder had taken corporate media by surprise, interrupting their conventional narratives and proving that the threat anti-fascists had supposedly been blowing out of proportion was all too real. For two weeks, anti-fascists received positive coverage as various members of the clergy came forward to praise their actions in Charlottesville and Trump’s refusal to explicitly condemn white supremacists outraged even liberal commentators. Corporate editors used the events in Berkeley as an opportunity to regain control of the discourse, reimposing their old stereotypes as if Heather had never been killed.

This should put an end to any illusions that corporate media could side with anti-fascists. Outlets like the *Washington Post* aspire to position themselves against both Trump and his adversaries in the streets—to occupy what some call “the extreme center.” They are gambling that the current polarization of society is temporary, that they can be the beneficiaries of

disillusionment with both sides.

Anti-fascists have to strategize about how to legitimize our efforts to the general public without the benefit of positive media coverage. This is no easy task. At the minimum, it will demand our own grassroots media, at the same time that this media is under systematic assault from right-wing trolls and the government itself.

The Myth of Symmetry

The allegation that fascists and anti-fascists are equally bad was advanced most famously by Donald Trump himself in his response to the events in Charlottesville. He suggested that the problem was an “egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” refusing to say a word about the fascists who murdered Heather Heyer.

This tells us a great deal about the vested interests of those who describe fascists and anti-fascists as symmetrical.

Anti-fascists fight for freedom and equality, building grassroots networks to defend targeted groups against violence and state oppression. Fascists want an autocratic state to enforce hierarchies through murderous violence. To equate the two with each other because they both take action in the streets is a way to reserve legitimacy for the state alone—which is itself an autocratic position. It means celebrating the legalism of passive spectators over the heroes who fought the rise of dictatorships in Italy, Germany, Spain, Chile, Greece, and a hundred other nations. It means congratulating those who keep their hands clean while their neighbors are rounded up and imprisoned, deported, or killed.

We have to become adept at spelling out the ethical differences between fascism and anti-fascism and justifying all the forms of direct action that can be effective in this struggle. Self-defense is not the same as coercive aggression. Even when fascists and anti-fascists utilize similar tactics, fascists are trying to impose the control of a self-professed elite, while anti-fascists aim to open spaces of freedom in which all people can coexist peacefully on their own terms. We need allies from many different walks of life who can help us make this case to the public at large.

Unfortunately, we can’t count on everyone on the Left to assist. In “How ‘Antifa’ Mirrors the ‘Alt-Right,’”⁵ the same Chris Hedges who assisted the state in dividing and repressing the Occupy movement reappeared to perform the same function in relation to the movements against fascism and the Trump administration.

The irony of a war journalist perennially accusing others of being driven by a lust for adrenaline should not be lost on anyone. But the true irony here is that Hedges purports to be warning against precisely the problem that he himself is creating. “By brawling in the streets,” Hedges alleges, “antifa allows the corporate state... to use the false argument of moral equivalency to criminalize the work of all anti-capitalists.” Actually, it is Hedges who is equipping the state to do this, by attributing “the same lust for violence” to anti-fascists that he believes motivates fascists. He could just as easily use his soapbox to debunk this moral equivalency, but he lacks the moral courage—he simply cannot resist performing the same kind of “self-advertisement for moral purity” that he accuses others of.

In 2012, when the authorities needed a narrative with which to isolate the ungovernable elements of the Occupy movement, Hedges provided that narrative, and the FBI subsequently parroted it verbatim in their efforts to justify a series of entrapment cases. Now Hedges is providing Trump’s government exactly the same service, equipping them to describe “antifa” as a terrorist organization as many on the far right have long demanded. The mayor of Berkeley, too, has called for “antifa” to be designated as a gang. Imagine if everyone who opposes the rise of fascism is classified as a gang member or a terrorist!

Hedges needs to understand that it is not anti-fascists gaining ground that brings about fascist attacks and government crackdowns. If anti-fascists were not gaining power in the streets, fascists would still be taking advantage of the despair and resentment of poor whites, and the government would still be developing more means of repression—there would simply be no social movement to protect us from them. It is fundamentally paranoid, disempowering, and ahistorical to understand these developments as the result of anti-fascist activity. On the contrary, we have to build the capacity to act effectively in the streets before the fascists outstrip us and the government is able to centralize enough power to establish tyranny once and for all.

When fascists rose to power in Europe in the 1930s, passive and legalistic protests were powerless to stop them. Fascists were able to take over in Italy and Germany in part as a result of their adversaries’ respect for the law and desire to appear respectable. By contrast, in Spain, where anarchists constituted a large proportion of the organized working class, it took four years for fascists to prevail. This time around, we need grassroots networks that can counter fascists on the streets and prevent state institutions from implementing the fascist agenda by any means necessary.

All that said, we also need to avoid offering our enemies, on the Left and Right, alike the opportunity to present us as a mirror image of our fascist adversaries. Let’s talk about how to do so.

Antifa identity and insularity

It has been very useful for people in the U.S. to learn from anti-fascist movements elsewhere around the world. Yet the uncritical wholesale introduction of European models has created problems, chief of which is the containment of the struggle against fascism within a discrete identity, “antifa.” It has been a tremendous boon to the far right that they can describe anti-fascists without having to spell out the entire word “fascist.” This helps them to avoid the question of why anyone would oppose resisting fascism.

In German, such abbreviations are common: National socialist becomes Nazi, anti-fascist becomes antifa. But in English, especially to those unfamiliar with the history of German anti-fascist struggles, the word antifa can appear alien and off-putting. At its worst, the German antifa movement has tended towards subcultural insularity, foregrounding an image of an anti-fascist movement comprised of young people with similar taste in music and clothes. This is the last thing we need in the U.S., locked in a massive struggle

with fascists and the government itself—a struggle we can only hope to win if ever-wider segments of the population are drawn to our side of the barricades.

Identity is fundamentally about distinguishing oneself from others. Anti-fascism, however, is for everybody. We should be careful not to insulate it within a particular demographic with a specific dress code and lingo, limiting our outreach to those familiar with the same rhetoric or reference points as ourselves. This is paramount because the far right are scrambling to depict antifa as a monolithic, hostile, alien organization. Our task is not just to build a network of groups, but to create anti-fascist momentum that can spread contagiously throughout society at large, along with the critiques and tactics necessary for this fight. Specific antifa groups and the cultural cache of “antifa” itself can be useful for that purpose, as can black-bloc tactics, but only if we evaluate them as tools for achieving particular objectives rather than expressions of identity or belonging.

The tendency to militarize

As the conflict between fascists and anti-fascists intensifies, we’re seeing more and more guns in the streets. Some people who were in Charlottesville reported that it was good that there were guns on both sides: it discouraged fascists from escalating physical conflicts past a certain point. Others report that most of the anti-fascists openly bearing arms were located some distance from the clashes. Some people who were in Ferguson at the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement say that without the threat of gunfire from the locals, the police would never have permitted the demonstrations to happen at all. Others who experienced the trauma of having their loved ones shot down in front of them counsel that the consequences of bringing guns into street conflict are weightier than most people can imagine.

Participants in the Syrian revolution report that for the first several months, the revolt created an open space of debate and possibility in which many people of different walks of life participated. Later, after the conflict escalated, power among the rebels accrued in the hands of religious fundamentalists, as they were the only ones who were able to consistently acquire military supplies—and from that point on, the horizon of liberation and transformation was closed.

Revolt usually spreads most rapidly before the lines of social conflict are definitively drawn, when it is not yet clear how far the changes will go or who will go over to the rebels’ side of the barricades. Once distinct sides have emerged, everyone tends to entrench themselves in fixed positions, quarantining the contagion of rebellion. Those who understand themselves as engaged in a civil war often hurry to draw these lines themselves, polarizing rather than transforming society. In strategizing for revolution, on the other hand, we pit ourselves against structural forms of power and oppression rather than against other human beings, and seek to draw as many people as possible into the struggle against them.

Sometimes, escalation is inescapable, even if it shuts the door to future possibilities. In any case, it is better to prepare for escalated conflict in advance than to be suddenly caught flatfooted. At the same time, if our goal is revolution rather than civil war, we should not hurry the process of escalation—we should drag it out as long as we can. Most of the social changes we want to see cannot be brought about by guns.

Likewise, we should not imagine that coercive force can solve everything, nor permit fascists and state repression to put us so on edge that we see enemies everywhere we look and begin to attack people when it is not strategic. In the words of an elder anti-fascist veteran from Germany, fascist violence aims to exterminate, while anti-fascist violence aims to educate—the goal is not to destroy the opponent, but to prevent him from doing harm while demonstrating a better way to relate to others. We should not hurry to put fascist martyrs in the ground next to Heather Heyer. We must never risk coming across as bullies. It must always be clear that we are here to protect the public at large, not to participate in gang warfare or assert our own authority. When we are compelled to use coercive force, we must make sure that the ways we do so don’t centralize power or legitimacy within our own movement. Those who are capable of exerting the most physical force against fascists must not be misunderstood to be the best anti-fascists.

The language of terrorism

In the wake of Heather Heyer’s murder, signs appeared at vigils reading, “White Supremacy is Terrorism.” While it is understandable that people wish to condemn her murder in the strongest possible terms, it is dangerous to use the language of terrorism to do so.

The framework of terrorism is constructed by the state to define who has the right to employ violence and who doesn’t. When we denounce white supremacists as terrorists, we mimic the verbiage of Senator Cory Gardner, chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and Paul Ryan, Republican Speaker of the House.

The label “terrorist” is used to designate those who are beyond the state’s control and cannot be brought into political alignment with the state. This explains why Heather’s murderer has not been charged with terrorism, while over the past decade and a half many anarchists who never so much as scratched someone have received terrorism charges.

Using the rhetoric of the state reinforces narratives that the authorities will ultimately use against us. This is dangerous to our movements and constitutes a betrayal of comrades engaged in struggles parallel to ours. Palestinians are labeled terrorists to delegitimize their struggle against the Israeli state. Like the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front, the YPG and YPJ in Rojava have been labeled terrorists. The language and ideology of the “war on terror” were introduced into US political discourse in order to prepare the ground for the catastrophic occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The word terrorism comes to us from the Jacobin government’s brutal rule of France in the 1790s—the term was invented to describe their “reign of terror” during which thousands were executed, a prototype for countless subsequent dictatorships that drowned genuinely revolutionary upheavals in rivers of blood. Even though the word was coined for the Jacobins