

Why Hope?

(Critique of the Nihilist tendency in Anarchism)

John Zerzan

It's pretty fashionable, among anarchists as well, to sneer at the notion of hope, to explicitly rule out any chance of overall victory over domination and oppression. Desert (2011) sports this outlook on its cover: "In our hearts we all know the world will not be 'saved'," and repeats this statement twice more in its opening pages. Civilization will persist. It's time to give up on "unwinnable battles." In this way the misery of burn-out and disillusionment will be avoided and we'll all be a lot happier(!) The Mexican Unabomber-type group, Individualidades teniendo a lo salvaje (ITS), also firmly asserts that there'll be no winning. "We do not believe this is possible," they proclaim repeatedly.

But it is possible. Our overcoming the disease of civilization is in no way guaranteed, obviously, but clearly it is possible. I prefer what Kierkegaard said of hope: It is "the passion for the possible." More boldly, whatever became of "Demand the Impossible"? When victory is refused are we not at Game Over?

We might recall Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, which announced the apparent end of radical possibilities, the definitive triumph of consumerist unfreedom. He was delighted to have been proven wrong within weeks of the book's 1964 appearance by the beginnings of a global movement that shook the world. And as the global system now shows itself to be failing at every level, shows itself to have no answers at all, there stands every chance of qualitatively surpassing the Movement of the '60s.

But not, needless to say, if we renounce any hope of overcoming. It is well-known that health and recovery from illness is tied not to hopelessness but its opposite. Consider the Serbian Danilo Kis's last novel, *Psalm 44*, about a young family's will to survive and resist in Auschwitz, where visualizing hope is a "necessity." For us and all life, matters are grave but we are not in Auschwitz. And yet we spurn hope?

Egoism and nihilism are evidently in vogue among anarchists and I'm hoping that those who so identify are not without hope. Illusions no, hope yes. I wonder what we have to offer at large, in terms of, say, analysis and inspiration — or whether that's still being asked much.

There are egoists who seem mainly in love with their sacred Egos, where all is judged insofar as it serves the Self. Meanwhile the reigning techno-culture feeds solipsism, narcissism, and isolation the more techno-addicted are its subjects. Did Max Stirner see the natural world as having value only in relation to one's ego? How much interest does the pure egoist have in mutual aid, social struggles or the disappearance of community? I recommend Stirner's *The Ego and its Own* as an important corrective to the appeals of collectivism in its various guises, but tend to agree with Arizona anarchist Dan Todd that Diogenes and the Cynics in the West and Chuang-tzu and some of the Taoists in the East did an even better job of it centuries earlier.

Does nihilism mean that pretty much everything must go for a decent life to be possible? If so then I'm a nihilist. It's safe to say that nihilism isn't literally nothingism or one couldn't be both a nihilist and an anarchist. If it means the politics of desperation or hopelessness, no thanks. French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard put the word in a different light: "With the megalopolis, what the West realizes and diffuses

is its nihilism. It is called development.” Are there nihilists who take on such institutions and what drives them?

There’s more than anti-hope on offer, in any case. Two new books remind us of that. Enrico Manicardi’s *Free from Civilization* is the first ‘A-Z’ type anti-civ offering in any language (originally *Liberi dalla Civiltà*) and Paul Cedenec’s *The Anarchist Revelation: Being What we’re Meant to Be*, the least pessimistic book I can recall reading. It refers to German anarchist Gustav Landauer, for instance, for the idea that we “need not worry that the quantity of those answering the call will not be great enough, when the quality of its [anti-civ] content is beyond question.” It brings anarchist resistance and the spirit together in a very wide-ranging and powerful contribution.

Dire times but, as Oscar Wilde had it, “We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.”

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