

# Leftism, nihilism, and the anarchy I seek

A review essay of some current propaganda

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Read and considered, perused and recommended, liked and disliked, discussed and commented on in the following section:

*Green Anarchy* (current issue available from FE books for \$4 or free with any book order, while supplies last) Issues #16 and 17, Spring and Summer 2004 PO Box 11331, Eugene, OR 97440 collective@greenanarchy.org

*Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Aragorn!

*Momentum: Journal of Anti-Capitalist and Anti-Authoritarian Politics* #1 Summer 2004 539 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11220 momentum@riseup.net

*The Dawn: A monthly advocate for constructive anarchism* #1 July 2004, no price listed, 8 pages tabloid PO Box 24715 Oakland, CA 94623 ed@the-dawn.org

*Oystercatcher* #1 Edited by Ron Sakolsky. gtddenman@mars.ark.com Available from FE Books for \$3 (or free by request with a book or CD purchase).

In the days leading up to our final push for finishing FE 366, I stumbled across an “Open Letter to US Anarchists,” by Heather of Midwest Unrest. With Heather, I feel the frustration that an anti-capitalist insurrection hasn’t yet destroyed the government of this illegitimate nation. With Heather, I believe we should be self-conscious and self-aware of our politics and the effort they require. With Heather, I believe that “now is the time to translate our passion into eloquent action.”

But I just can’t get with her that lifestylist dumpster-divers are the root of all evil or that all “motivation and accompanying hope have fizzled.” A few too many of us may suffer from a serious case of the Seattle syndrome, using one freeze-frame from five years ago as the defining action, the catch-all barometer for bucking the system. No, the revolution will not come to sate our incurable impatience and irreverence, but the milieu that claims the anarchist moniker has more than a few accomplishments worthy of noting.

Self-publishing is not the alpha and omega of anarchist organizing, but those of us with journals and websites are busy building something; it may not be a “movement” but it’s at least a loud and ambitious rumble, “a loud and continuous uproar of many human voices,” as one of my favorite ‘zines used to put it.

I’m thankful for all the comrades consistently stuffing the FE post office box with their latest books, manifestos, novels, chapbooks, journals, sketches, photos, letters, and good ol’ ‘zines. If the continued proliferation of radical propaganda provides any temperature gauge for our goals, I would suggest, as the surrealists say, that The Forecast is Hot!

While some would say that what we do with our rage in the streets is more important than what we say on the pages of our 'zines, I believe we need both. An action ungrounded in theoretical, coherence can be as frustrating as navel-gazing, hyper-intellectual theory without the faintest hope for implementation.

There may not be much unity across the fragmented tapestry of scenes and subcultures, nodes and nests—not enough to suggest an ecumenical unity as I was naïve enough to do not too long ago—but we definitely have enough energetic suggestion, militant nuance, and revolutionary conjecture to warrant going forward. And given the frightening stakes, what else is there to do?

In the anarchist scene, we have our nihilists and niceists, our democrats and communists, our militant queens and queer moms. If we stop launching attacks on each other long enough to smell the spraypaint drying, we might discover there's something hatching and happening.

Even as some 'zines die or go on sabbatical, new ones emerge. Welcoming its first issue is *The Dawn*, a new anarcho-communist tabloid based in Oakland. While I like the piece by Prolecat that graces the front page, there's not much more beyond it than the usual activist fare: pieces on prison issues, Palestine, and imperialism. Then, to piss this reviewer off, there's the obligatory Crimethinc-bashing (which I've had enough of to last a lifetime) and entrenched anti-primitivism. The editorial statement claims to "bring anarchism to the present," but there's nothing "new" about this green-baiting denunciation: "Almost every American anarchist newspaper is infested with primitivism [no one we know-ed.]. We want nothing to do with it as it is irrelevant and genocidal."

While I'm no more ideological about my post-civilization perspective than these comrades are about their self-described "biting commentary," I do hope they lighten-up just a little for their second issue.

A bird of an entirely different feather is the home-made harbinger of heresy heralding from my friends on Denman Island, British Columbia. *The Oystercatcher* is a remarkable and magickal debut from Ron Sakolsky and his partners in crime: Sheila Nopper, Seaweed, Don LaCoss, Peter Wilson, and others. The 'zine begins with an introduction by Sheila to the bird from whom this mag takes its name. Considered by some the bonobo of the bird world, oystercatchers are peaceful pleasure-seekers, bisexual and often polyamorous.

The centerpiece essay is Sakolsky's speculative history that makes some far-flung connections between his island home and the Orkney Islands. Begun as a mayday meditation, the piece "Dancing Waves" is an intoxicating, imaginative potion that forges a unity for pagans and anarchists, a sort of defiant, literary witchcraft to defend against reactionary attacks of all kinds.

After an excerpt from Peter Wilson's "Atlantis Manifesto" and a Don LaCoss collage, I couldn't really ask for more in a 'zine. But the concluding essay "Land and Liberty" by Seaweed is an impressive surprise for me. Dancing from squats to rural subsistence and dealing with many issues I've contemplated as a member of anarchist collectives and communes for my entire adult life, Seaweed offers an inclusive, inspiring, and radical vision, a thorough statement of an anarchist politics of claiming space and spurring community.

Without doubt, I hope these Denman Islanders deliver a sequel to this stunning debut.

Also making a splash this summer with a first issue is *Momentum: Journal of Anti-Capitalist and Anti-Authoritarian Politics*. With impressive, well-written, and problematic essays on the election from Wayne Price, Chris Crass, Cindy Milstein, Graciela Monteagudo, and others, this new journal of "intra-movement dialogue" presents varying shades from the anarchy as democracy, anarchism as leftist populism wing of the anti-authoritarian milieu. While smarter and more balanced than anything from the platformist camp, this remains some very serious and sober work indeed. Apathetic abstainers beware: "Many have concluded that it is no longer possible to 'never mind the ballots,' even if we want to." Or, as Chris Crass puts it: "Our politics of non-engagement in so many crucial struggles involving the state, electoral politics among them, have in the end done more to de-legitimize anarchists than to de-legitimize the power of the state." Ouch—that doesn't leave much wiggle room for the stay-at-home revolutionary on election day! Thankfully, Wayne Price slices and dices the dire and dutiful perspective of Crass and others, refusing to endorse politics as parties at all.

I don't mind if my friends vote as long as it's not for Bush, but I don't trust the seriousness of some of these rants, which implies that all well-meaning anarchists will eventually end up bureaucrats on some neighborhood-council. At least liberals are willing to let specialists do the grunt-work of governing so we can download music and drink wine, but these would be anti-authoritarian politicians scare me with all their talk of "democratizing the social struggle," "structural reform in the electoral realm," and "municipal campaigns." Self-government is like self-

employment: in the latter, you are always at work, and in the former, you are always a politician. If these obviously decent radicals are as serious as they seem about a “new politics,” perhaps they should investigate the hedonist-insurrectionist thread that seeks not new power relations but new social relations that are rhizomatic and horizontal.

Well the generalist, anti-capitalist, social-ecologist perspective of *Momentum* is a far cry from the other coast where an eco-nihilism is wrecking the ideology of utopia with a clear and present negation of the negation.

The revival in anarcho-nihilism might be appreciated by the non-nihilist anarchists much like Valerie Solanas’s virulently anti-male *SCUM Manifesto* could be appreciated by non-insecure, anti-patriarchal men. Personally, I look at Aragorn’s embrace of nihilism like I do the Church of Euthanasia’s “Save the Planet, Kill Yourself” stylized statements. That is, I can enjoy your theory, but frankly, I am not interested in your practice.

I wouldn’t necessarily suggest that a nihilist movement exists in North America (nihilists probably abhor the notion of a movement anyways), but the nihilist idea has been getting some serious play as a powerfully provocative intellectual strain proposed by the anarchist writer Aragorn! in the pages of *Green Anarchy* and distilled in his pamphlet *Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

The thesis of the new nihilism goes something like this: “What nihilism provides then is an alternative to the alternative that does not embed an idealist image of the new world it would create. It is not an Idealist project. Nihilism is the political philosophy that begins with the negation of this world. What exists beyond those gates has yet to be written.”

In my day-to-day life as an activist and academic, parent and participant in my community, I probably have a lot in common with the comrades at Momentum and in other like-minded projects. I wish to cut the cloth of my praxis in the real world at the same time I seek a new world within the shell of the old. But I do not trust what I perceive as the vanguardist, leftist, political machinations of would-be leaders for the leaderless. This is not a problem with Aragorn’s provocative position. I imagine this nihilism might be really useful for the activist-types burdened by lack of personal time, weighed down by a heavy load of moralistic and guilt-ridden selflessness.

But beyond a quasi-adolescent and hyper-intellectual way to one-up the hippy elders, nihilism doesn’t appear that sustainable to me. When the nihilist rejects utopia, I can’t really get with that. The green riot of anarcho-nihilism is my friend when it forges a new intellectual space to talk about desire and destruction, perhaps encouraging the reckless courage required to reverse history. But as an all-encompassing antidote to progressive leftism, I see it contributing to burnout, interpersonal chaos, and more prisoners-of-war. Because at root, nihilism is selfish without self-awareness, amoral to the point of being an idea just as plausible for endorsing capitalist apologies for nuclear Armageddon. It’s a worthwhile challenge, one I have considered and rejected. I remain utopian, still dreaming of an anarchy that is not Aragorn!’s anarchy.

Being an ecumenical anarchist at heart, I like what I read in the milieu, even when I disagree with it. It’s not my anarchy if I cannot argue with you about what that means, but it’s also not my anarchy if we cannot occasionally leave the in-fighting behind.

The anarchy I seek is in all these ‘zines and none of them. It is: An anarchy purer than the watered-down anarchy-lite that equates itself with direct democracy and embraces civic responsibility; an anarchy deeper than the deep ecology of the anti-civilization saboteurs; an anarchy more communal than the tired syndicalism of the urban centers; an anarchy tighter and more intimate than the organizationalist platformism of the anarcho-communist federations; an anarchy organized horizontally through the chosen families and solidarity clusters of trusted comrades; an anarchy unafraid of animism and manifest, earth-based spiritualism; and an anarchy queerer and more genderful, more multi-colored, loving, and inclusive, more dynamically peaceful yet courageously waging war against all war.

(The ideas suggested and implied here will be explored in much more depth in the new issue of *Black Sun*, available for \$5 from the Barn).

# fifth Estate

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