

No Heroes Needed

an interview with Jordan Flaherty

Peter Werbe
Jordan Flaherty

2018

The *Fifth Estate* spoke with journalist and author, Jordan Flaherty, at Detroit's Source Booksellers. His latest book, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality*, examines how often people of privilege makes things worse when they try to help oppressed or marginalized communities.

It is published by AK Press, akpress.org. See also: jordanflaherty.org

Fifth Estate: Standard historical accounts fasten on great figures, usually men, as the animators of history—kings, presidents, generals.

Jordan Flaherty: We're taught the Great Man Theory of History; that Lincoln freed the slaves, that a combination of JFK, LBJ, and MLK was responsible for the gains of the civil rights movement. That's very disempowering. It teaches us that if we're not a Martin Luther King, we can't make history.

That's plain wrong. The real way change happens is by movements of people rising up. Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

FE: You write about white, heterosexual males intervening in popular struggles of marginalized peoples and taking charge. Is this a problem of some magnitude?

JF: When we see a problem, we want to go help and that's a good human instinct. The problem comes up when we go to help, especially those of us who have been brought up with privilege.

We're taught that because of our degrees or experiences that we know more than the people who are in the situation that we're seeking to help. The words of the Zapatistas are something I try to follow: "Walking, we ask questions."

When people take action, they should listen to those they are trying to help and be ready to completely change course based on feedback from community people.

FE: Every movement honors and glorifies its prominent figures, even among anarchists from Emma Goldman to the 1930s Spanish anarchist militia leader, Buenaventura Durruti.

JF: The idea isn't to have a leaderless movement, but a movement full of leaders. How are you lifting up other people to fill leadership roles? If we look at Black Lives Matter today, there are leaders who we know of, but it's a movement full of many leaders. It's not one charismatic voice. This is a conscious choice to have learned the lessons of the past. When you think of the Standing Rock resistance, there isn't a single leader whose name comes to mind.

FE: There's a distinction between leaders and leadership.

JF: Yes. Anarchists say they aren't against leadership, but oppose hierarchical models. That's a really smart critique that anarchism has brought into revolutionary thought.

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/400-spring-2018/no-heroes-needed>
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