

The New Nihilism

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It feels increasingly difficult to tell the difference between—on one hand—being old, sick, and defeated, and—on the other hand—living in a time-&-place that is itself senile, tired, and defeated. Sometimes I think it's just me—but then I find that some younger, healthier people seem to be undergoing similar sensations of ennui, despair, and impotent anger. Maybe it's not just me.

A friend of mine attributed the turn to disillusion with “everything”, including old-fashioned radical/activist positions, to disappointment over the present political regime in the US, which was somehow expected to usher in a turn away from the reactionary decades since the 1980s, or even a “progress” toward some sort of democratic socialism. Although I myself didn't share this optimism (I always assume that anyone who even *wants* to be President of the US must be a psychopathic murderer) I can see that “youth” suffered a powerful disillusionment at the utter failure of Liberalism to turn the tide against Capitalism Triumphantism. The disillusion gave rise to OCCUPY and the failure of OCCUPY led to a move toward sheer negation.

However I think this merely political analysis of the “new nothing” may be too two-dimensional to do justice to the extent to which all hope of “change” has died under Kognitive Kapital and the technopathocracy. Despite my remnant hippy flower-power sentiments I too feel this “terminal” condition (as Nietzsche called it), which I express by saying, only half-jokingly, that we have at last reached the Future, and that the truly horrible truth of the End of the World is that it doesn't end.

One big J.G. Ballard/Philip K. Dick shopping mall from now till eternity, basically.

This IS the future—how do you like it so far? Life in the Ruins: not so bad for the bourgeoisie, the loyal servants of the One Percent. Air-conditioned ruins! No Ragnarok, no Rapture, no dramatic closure: just an endless re-run of reality TV cop shows. 2012 has come and gone, and we're still in debt to some faceless bank, still chained to our screens.

Most people—in order to live at all—seem to need around themselves a penumbra of “illusion” (to quote Nietzsche again):— that the world is just rolling along as usual, some good days some bad, but in essence no different now than in 10000 BC or 1492 AD or next year. Some even need to believe in Progress, that the Future will solve all our problems, and even that life is much better for us now than for (say) people in the 5th century AD. We live longer thanx to Modern Science—of course our extra years are largely spent as “medical objects”—sick and worn out but kept ticking by Machines & Pills that spin huge profits for a few megacorporations & insurance companies. Nation of Struldbugs.

True, we're suffocating in the mire generated by our rule of sick machines under the Numisphere of Money. At least ten times as much money now exists than it would take to buy the whole world—and yet species are vanishing space itself is vanishing, icecaps melting, air and water grown toxic, culture grown toxic, landscape sacrificed to fracking and megamalls, noise-fascism, etc, etc. But Science will cure all that ills that Science has created—in the Future (in the “long run”, when we're all dead, as Lord Keynes put it); so meanwhile we'll carry on consuming the world and shitting it out as waste—because it's convenient & efficient & profitable to do so, and because *we like it*.

Well, this is all a bunch of whiney left-liberal cliches, no? Heard it before a million times. Yawn. How boring, how infantile, how useless. Even if it were all true... what can we do about it? If our Anointed Leaders can't or won't stop it, who will? God? Satan? The “People”?”

All the fashionable “solutions” to the “crisis”, from electronic democracy to revolutionary violence, from locavorism to solar- powered dingbats, from financial market regulation to the General Strike—all of them, however ridiculous or sublime, depend on one preliminary radical change—a seismic shift in human consciousness. Without such a change all the hope of reform is futile. And if such a change were somehow to occur, no “reform” would be necessary. The world would simply change. The whales would be saved. War no more. And so on.

What force could (even in theory) bring about such a shift? Religion? In 6,000 years of organized religion matters have only gotten worse. Psychedelic drugs in the reservoirs? The Mayan calendar? Nostalgia? Terror?

If catastrophic disaster is now inevitable, perhaps the “Survival- ist” scenario will ensue, and a few brave millions will create a green utopia in the smoking waste. But won't Capitalism find a way to profit even from the End of the World? Some would claim that it's doing so already. The true catastrophe may be the final apotheosis of commodity fetishism.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that this paradise of power tools and back-up alarms is all we've got & all we're going to get. Capitalism can deal with global warming—it can sell water- wings and disaster insurance. So it's all over, let's say—but we've still got television & Twitter. Childhood's End—i.e. the child as ultimate consumer, eager for the brand. Terrorism or home shopping network—take yr pick (democracy means *choice*).

Since the death of the Historical Movement of the Social in 1989 (last gasp of the hideous “short” XXth century that started in 1914) the only “alternative” to Capitalist Neo-Liberal totalitarianism that seems to have emerged is religious neo-fascism. I understand *why* someone would want to be a violent fundamentalist bigot—I even sympathize—but just because I feel sorry for lepers doesn't mean I want to be one.

When I attempt to retain some shreds of my former antipessimism I fantasize that History may not be over, that some sort of Populist Green Social Democracy might yet emerge to challenge the obscene smugness of “Money Interests”—something along the lines of 1970s Scandinavian monarcho-socialism—which in retrospect now looks the most humane form of the State ever to have emerged from the putrid suck-hole of Civilization. (Think of Amsterdam in its hey-day.) Of course as an anarchist I'd still have to oppose it—but at least I'd have the luxury of believing that, in such a situation, anarchy might actually stand some chance of success. Even if such a movement were to emerge, however, we can rest damn-well assured it won't happen in the USA. Or anywhere in the ghost-realm of dead Marxism, either. Maybe Scotland!

It would seem quite pointless to wait around for such a rebirth of the Social. Years ago many radicals gave up all hope of The Revolution, and the few who still adhere to it remind me of

religious fanatics. It might be soothing to lapse into such doctrinaire revolutionism, just as it might be soothing to sink into mystical religion—but for me at least both options have lost their savor. Again, I sympathize with those true believers (although not so much when they lapse into authoritarian leftism or fascism)— nevertheless, frankly, I’m too depressed to embrace their illusions.

If the End-Time scenario sketched above be considered actually true, what alternatives might exist besides suicidal despair? After much thought I’ve come up with three basic strategies.

1) Passive Escapism. Keep your head down, don’t make waves. Capitalism permits all sorts of “life-styles” (I hate that word)—just pick one & try to enjoy it. You’re even allowed to live as a dirt farmer without electricity & infernal combustion, like a sort of secular Amish refusenik. Well, maybe not. But at least you could *flirt* with such a life. “Smoke Pot, Eat Chicken, Drink Tea,” as we used to say in the 60s in the Moorish Church of America, our psychedelic cult. Hope they don’t catch you. Fit yourself into some Permitted Category such as Neo-Hippy or even Anabaptist.

2) Active Escapism. In this scenario you attempt to create the optimal conditions for the emergence of Autonomous Zones, whether temporary, periodic or even (semi)permanent. In 1984 when I first coined the term Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)

I envisioned it as a *complement* to The Revolution—although I was already, to be truthful, tired of waiting for a moment that seemed to have failed in 1968. The TAZ would give a taste or premonition of real *liberties*: in effect you would attempt to live *as if* the Revolution had already occurred, so as not to die without ever having experienced “free freedom” (as Rimbaud called it, *liberte libre*). Create your own pirate utopia.

Of course the TAZ can be as brief & simple as a really good dinner party, but the true autonomist will want to maximize the potential for longer & deeper experiences of authentic lived life. Almost inevitably this will involve *crime*, so it’s necessary to think like a criminal, not a victim. A “Johnson” as Burroughs used to say—not a “mark”. How else can one live (and live well) without Work. Work, the curse of the thinking class. Wage slavery. If you’re lucky enough to be a successful artist, you can perhaps achieve relative autonomy without breaking any obvious laws (except the laws of good taste, perhaps). Or you could inherit a million. (More than a million would be a curse.) Forget revolutionary morality—the question is, can you *afford* your taste of freedom? For most of us, crime will be not only a pleasure but a necessity. The old anarcho-Illegalists showed the way: individual expropriation. Getting caught of course spoils the whole thing—but *risk* is an aspect of self-authenticity.

One scenario I’ve imagined for active Escapism would be to move to a remote rural area along with several hundred other libertarian social-ists—enough to take over the local government (municipal or even county) and elect or control the sheriffs & judges, the parent/teacher association, volunteer fire department and even the water authority. Fund the venture with cultivation of illegal *phantastice* and carry on a discreet trade. Organize as a “Union of Egoists” for mutual benefit & ecstatic pleasures—perhaps under the guise of “communes” or even monasteries, who cares. Enjoy it as long as it lasts.

I know for a fact that this plan is being worked on in several places in America—but of course I’m not going to say *where*.

Another possible model for individual escapists might be the *nomadic adventurer*. Given that the whole world seems to be turning into a giant parking lot or social network, I don’t know if this option remains open, but I suspect that it might. The trick would be to travel in places where tourists don’t—if such places still exist—and to involve oneself in fascinating and dangerous sit-

uations. For example if I were young and healthy I'd've gone to France to take part in the TAZ that grew around resistance to the new airport—or to Greece—or Mexico—wherever the perverse spirit of rebellion crops up. The problem here is of course funding. (Sending back statues stuffed with hash is no longer a good idea.) How to pay for yr life of adventure? Love will find a way. It doesn't matter so much if one agrees with the ideals of Tahrir Square or Zucotti Park—the point is just to *be there*.

3. Revenge. I call it *Zarathustra's Revenge* because as Nietzsche said, revenge may be second rate but it's not nothing. One might enjoy the satisfaction of terrifying the bastards for at least a few moments. Formerly I advocated "Poetic Terrorism" rather than actual violence, the idea being that art could be wielded as a weapon. Now I've rather come to doubt it. But perhaps weapons might be wielded as art. From the sledgehammer of the Luddites to the black bomb of the attentat, destruction could serve as a form of creativity, for its own sake, or for purely aesthetic reasons, without any illusions about revolution. Oscar Wilde meets the *acte gratuit*: a dandyism of despair.

What troubles me about this idea is that it seems impossible to distinguish here between the action of post-leftist anarcho-nihilists and the action of post-rightist neo-traditionalist reactionaries. For that matter, a bomb may as well be detonated by fundamentalist fanatics—what difference would it make to the victims or the "innocent bystanders"? Blowing up a nanotechnology lab—why shouldn't this be the act of a desperate monarchist as easily as that of a Nietzschean anarchist?

In a recent book by Tiqqun (*Theory of Bloom*), it was fascinating to come suddenly across the constellation of Nietzsche, Rene Guenon, Julius Evola, *et al.* as examples of a sharp and just critique of the Bloom syndrome—i.e., of progress-as-illusion. Of course the "beyond left and right" position has two sides—one approaching from the left, the other from the right. The European New Right (Alain de Benoist & his gang) are big admirers of Guy Debord, for a similar reason (his critique, not his proposals).

The post-left can now appreciate Traditionalism as a reaction against modernity just as the neo-traditionalists can appreciate Situationism. But this doesn't mean that post-anarchist anarchists are identical with post-fascism fascists!

I'm reminded of the situation in fin-de-siecle France that gave rise to the strange alliance between anarchists and monarchists; for example the *Cerce Proudhon*. This surreal conjunction came about for two reasons: a) both factions hated liberal democracy, and b) the monarchists had money. The marriage gave birth to weird progeny, such as Georges Sorel. And Mussolini famously began his career as an Individualist anarchist!

Another link between left & right could be analyzed as a kind of existentialism; once again Nietzsche is the founding parent here, I think. On the left there were thinkers like Gide or Camus. On the right, that illuminated villain Baron Julius Evola used to tell his little ultra-right groupuscules in Rome to attack the Modern World—even though the restoration of tradition was a hopeless dream—if only as an act of magical self-creation. Being trumps essence. One must cherish no attachment to mere *results*. Surely Tiqqun's advocacy of the "perfect Surrealist act" (firing a revolver at random into a crowd of "innocent by-standers") partakes of this form of *action-as-despair*. (Incidentally I have to confess that this is the sort of thing that has always—to my regret—prevented my embracing Surrealism: it's just too cruel. I don't admire de Sade, either.)

Of course, as we know, the problem with the Traditionalists is that they were never traditional enough. They looked back at a lost civilization as their "goal" (religion, mysticism, monarchism, arts-&-crafts, etc.) whereas they should have realized that the *real* tradition is the "primordial

anarchy” of the Stone Age, tribalism, hunting/gathering, animism—what I call the Neanderthal Liberation Front. Paul Goodman used the term “Neolithic Conservatism” to describe his brand of anarchism—but “Paleolithic Reaction” might be more appropriate!

The other major problem with the Traditionalist Right is that the entire emotional tone of the movement is rooted in self-repression. Here a rough Reichean analysis suffices to demonstrate that the authoritarian body reflects a damaged soul, and that only anarchy is compatible with real self-realization.

The European New Right that arose in the 90s still carries on its propaganda—and these chaps are not just vulgar nationalist chauvenist anti-semitic homophobic thugs—they’re intellectuals & artists. I think they’re *evil*, but that doesn’t mean I find them boring. Or even *wrong* on certain points. They also hate the nanotechnologists!

Although I attempted to set off a few bombs back in the 1960s (against the war in Vietnam) I’m glad, on the whole, that they failed to detonate (technology was never my metier). It saves me from wondering if I would’ve experienced “moral qualms”. Instead I chose the path of the propagandist and remained an activist in anarchist media from 1984 to about 2004. I collaborated with the Autonomedia publishing collective, the IWW, the John Henry Mack- ay Society (Left Stirnerites) and the old NYC Libertarian Book Club (founded by comrades of Emma Goldman, some of whom I knew, & who are now all dead). I had a radio show on WBAI (Pacifica) for 18 years. I lectured all over Europe and East Europe in the 90s. I had a very nice time, thank you. But anarchism seems even farther off now than it looked in 1984, or indeed in 1958, when I first became an anarchist by reading George Harriman’s *Krazy Kat*. Well, being an existentialist means you never have to say you’re sorry.

In the last few years in anarchist circles there’s appeared a trend “back” to Stirner/Nietzsche Individualism—because after all, who can take revolutionary anarcho- communism or syndicalism seriously anymore? Since I’ve adhered to this Individualist position for decades (although tempered by admiration for Charles Fourier and certain “spiritual anarchists” like Gustave Landauer) I naturally find this trend agreeable.

“Green anarchists” & AntiCivilization Neo-primitivists seem (some of them) to be moving toward a new pole of attraction, *nihilism*. Perhaps neo-nihilism would serve as a better label, since this tendency is not simply replicating the nihilism of the Russian *narodniks* or the French attentatists of circa 1890 to 1912, however much the new nihilists look to the old ones as precursors. I share their *critique*—in fact I think I’ve been mirroring it to a large extent in this essay: creative despair, let’s call it. What I do not understand however is their *proposal*—if any. “What is to be done?” was originally a nihilist slogan, after all, before Lenin appropriated it. I presume that my option #1, passive escape, would not suit the agenda. As for Active Escapism, to use the suffix “ism” implies some form not only of ideology but also some *action*. What is the logical outcome of this train of thought?

As an animist I experience the world (outside Civilization) as essentially sentient. The death of God means the rebirth of the *gods*, as Nietzsche implied in his last “mad” letters from Turin— the resurrection of the great god PAN—chaos, Eros, Gaia, & Old Night, as Hesiod put it—Ontological anarchy, Desire, Life itself, & the Darkness of revolt & negation—all seem to me as real as they need to be.

I still adhere to a certain kind of spiritual anarchism—but only as heresy and paganism, not as orthodoxy and monotheism. I have great respect for Dorothy Day—her writing influenced me in the 60s—and Ivan Illich, whom I knew personally—but in the end I cannot deal with the cognitive

dissonance between anarchism and the Pope! Nevertheless I can believe in the *re-paganaziation of monotheism*. I hold to this pagan tradition because I sense the universe as alive, not as “dead matter.” As a life-long psychedelicist I have always thought that matter & spirit are identical, and that this fact alone legitimizes what Theory calls “desire”.

From this p.o.v. the phrase “revolution of everyday life” still seems to have some validity—if only in terms of the second proposal, Active Escapism or the TAZ. As for the third possibility—*Zarathustra’s Revenge*—this seems like a possible path for the new nihilism, at least from a philosophical perspective. But since I am unable personally to advocate it, I leave the question open.

But here—I think—is the point at which I both meet with & diverge from the new nihilism. I too seem to believe that Predatory Capitalism has won and that no revolution is possible in the classical sense of that term. But somehow I can’t bring myself to be “against everything.” Within the Temporary Autonomous Zone there still seems to persist the possibility of “authentic life,” if only for a moment— and if this position amounts to mere Escapism, then let us become Houdini. The new surge of interest in Individualism is obviously a response to the Death of the Social. But does the new nihilism imply the death even of the individual and the “union of egoists” or Nietzschean free spirits? On my good days, I like to think not.

No matter which of the three paths one takes (or others I can’t yet imagine) it seems to me that the essential thing is not to collapse into mere apathy. Depression we may have to accept, impotent rage we may have to accept, revolutionary pessimism we may have to accept. But as e.e. cummings (anarchist poet) said, there is some shit we will not take, lest we simply become the enemy by default. Can’t go on, must go on. Cultivate rosebuds, even selfish pleasures, as long as a few birds & flowers still remain. Even love may not be impossible...

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