

Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences

Aragorn!

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Introduction to Consequences

This is the second in a series of pamphlets that draw connections between the tradition of the political nihilist tendency of 19th century Czarist Russia and current anarchist thought.

As Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century (the first pamphlet in the series) begged the question of what relevance nihilism has to anarchy it could be argued that these essays beg the opposite question. What does anarchy have to offer nihilism?

That the range of anarchists includes the clowns from protest alley, micrometer-toting specialists of oppression-identification, and Marxists who wear black flags isn't a condemnation of anarchist ideas but is a significant reason for pause. In that pause we have to challenge our assumptions about anarchy. What do we really share with others in the big-tent (or should it be called a circus tent) of anarchism?

These essays are increasingly specific. Perhaps this will give more people a toe-hold so that they scale their own heights. At the end of these essays there is a specific invitation.

There have been several opportunities for me to speak on nihilism over the past two years. What has been surprising in that time hasn't been the apparent antagonism but the quiet interest and excitement. It is still unclear how this interest is going to materialize into a discrete practice, but I won't be alone in answering that question.

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Chapter 1: Consequences — On revolutionary despair

A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered.

Arkady

1. There is not a liberating vision for humanity. Every so-called revolutionary at best fails and at worst establishes yet another fiefdom. The rhetoric of liberation makes for great bedtime stories, keeps starry-eyed dreamers warm at night, and should be seen for exactly what it is. Charlatans either believe that they speak for the oppressed and that the weight of their opinion is greater because they summon the power of representation, or that they are the first ones to come up with the ideas that they have.
2. The idea of a singular, recursive, or iterative approach to positive social change works better in a classroom than in lived experience. The kind of social science that results from these explorations resembles a secular monotheism. As an organization of society, or a modeling of the transformation of society, apocalypse has a long track record and it is entirely reactionary. This is to say that whether called an insurrection, a revolution, a singularity, or a collapse, a similar thing is intended: more of the same.
3. Is the quiet misery of daily life preferable to a reactionary rupture? The lesson of the German Revolution (1918–1919) is the lesson of historical Anarchism: glorious failure. Whether it is France, Spain, Germany, or Russia the story of social revolution has not been one of triumph. Instead, and at best, it has been a set of stories about moments worth living.
4. How many lives are we willing to sacrifice for our moment? Shall we stack them for barricades? Fill the trenches with them after the tanks roll in? Use their blood to write the history books that tell of our glorious time?
5. Nechayev did not tell us how to be good people. His concept of an army, or even a secret society, of revolutionary supermen is laughable, but perhaps the reason for laughter isn't immediately clear. Lenin was clear how much the Catechism influenced his thought. It was The Prince for the revolutionary set. The Catechism provides a moral roadmap, an action plan that has demonstrable results. List your human targets in order of their crimes, harden yourself, and eliminate these targets in order. The greatest criminals are the first eliminated.
6. Psychology has made the role of superman an embarrassing one. The social milieu of radicalism only allows room for sensitive inhuman success stories. Broken people are highly favored as long as they are broken along the lines of survival and politeness. The Nechayevs of today fade out of

sight after no greater crimes than petty larceny and broken hearts. The Machiavellis implement simple strategies to make sure the supermen stay occupied with irrelevancies.

7. Revolutionary strategy is a failure from the perspective of providing a mechanism to get from here to there. This is not to say that there is not the possibility of wide social transformation but that to the extent that it follows the lead of the glorious losers (anarchists), Nechys, or Micheals of the past it will fail in succeeding either on its own terms or on the terms of being a liberated social change.
8. This is not to say that we are free or satisfied. We are at an impasse. This impasse is one part frustration at the rhetoric of transition available to us (without words it is hard to understand where one is or where others are), another part anger at the grinding death of a denatured daily life and another part ennui at the futility of our social or political power. Without the ability to control our own life, political action, and social relationships, our vivid imagination lay fallow. There is nothing to eat here but a gray paste that keeps us alive. But for what?
9. This problem extends to the west generally. We understand that past formulations are out of date. We lack for new ones.
10. New efforts are being made but they are orthogonal to the approach of the humanist West. They are, to put it gently, more severe than the values and theory of modernity allow for. They are, ultimately, goal-less. These are actions that are interpreted by others but move so rapidly as to be entirely chased by the mullahs, fatwas, and analysts. These new efforts are the language of the disenfranchised humanity. There is no hope. There are only casualties.
11. The suicide bomber is the muse of our time. They do not inspire us to sing of freedom, justice, and dignity but of consequence.

Chapter 2: Nihilism and Science

There is the history of nihilism that idealized natural sciences as a single solution to the question of material existence without God and another that would critique science upon empirical, ideological, and ethical grounds.

“A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet,”

Bazarov

The history of nihilism is of a moment in time. Russia in the 1860s was a suffocating place. The majority of the population were serfs breaking under their new freedom (to make payments to their former lords by decree of the Czar in exchange for working their land) or choking under the superstition and conservatism of the Orthodox Church. Russia was also at a crossroads: having proven itself among the great empires of Europe after the defeat of Napoleon it also found itself an intellectual backwater. Very little of the democratic unrest that had affected the Continent had consequence in Russia. Even Czar Alexander II's dramatic move of freeing the serfs was more motivated by his romantic sensibility after having read Turgenev's "A Sportsman's Sketches" than an urge to transform Russian society.

As a consequence of this environment historic nihilism embraced positions that we could largely understand as reactionary rather than as intentional. (This is something that is endemic to revolutionary traditions and, arguably, should be included in their definition.) Given how short the life span of the historic nihilist period was (spanning both the foundational and revolutionary period) it is hard to imagine what the consequence of a rigorous universal skepticism would have been if it had had the time to develop and transform. What would a group of people with nothing to lose have been capable of?

If philosophy is the practice of tilling the earth then it is no wonder that most thinkers spend their time wandering overturned soil searching for lost seeds and replanting. If nihilism was the political philosophy of skepticism in a time when society was framed by the Orthodox Church and Czarist regime it's no wonder that it left very little room for tradition. If the Church represented spiritualism, superstition and sentimentality then a philosophy for the modern time would have to reject all of these things. If the Czar represented the ossified autocratic bigotry of a monarchy then freedom would have to be the progressive, democratic republicanism of France. This is the limitation of parochial skepticism.

How is inquiry limited?

The history of science is a semantic journey through eras. Science was once concerned with the formation of the world along with how we should live in it and was indistinguishable from Philosophy. The terms were synonymous. Later there was fragmentation: understanding the world through

experimentation and sense perception (empiricism) became a discipline distinct from understanding the world through reasoning (Rationalism). This dialectic was resolved in the scientific world by Newton's combining of the axiomatic proof with the mechanical discipline of physical observation resulting in the system of verifiable prediction that largely remains intact.

Science became a codified and bureaucratic process that involved the relationship between the practitioners of science, financiers of science, and an increasing number of Scientific Societies (post-16th century). The role of a Scientist became distinct from that of one who sought knowledge about the natural world. A Scientist was one who both went through training that framed the scope of their inquiry but, to succeed, because adroit at the political machinations of court, papal, and eventually secular society.

There were discontents to this normalization of inquiry. Alchemists blended understandings of multiple theoretical and spiritual traditions in the pursuit of solutions to speculatively enormous problems (transmutation, age, disease). The heterodoxy that alchemists relied upon was eliminated by the emphasis on quantitative experimentation, and reproducible results.

Technology, in the form of the Industrial Revolution, as an organization of social life insulated homogeneity by delivering results. Technology is best understood as a separate but related field of inquiry from Science with a field of vision further narrowed by the motivation of creating applications. The mass production of technology has never been the result of any other force than the desires of power. In terms of the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century this looked like the transformation of the social life of England into one of an urban population dominated by factories. It also involved the extraction of resources across half the globe (India being a generous source of capital for industrial England) into the control of very few.

In the name of efficiency the product is the goal not the process of discovery and examination.

What is the limitation of specialization? Questions are no longer the pursuit of technicians or philosophers, answers are. Solutions to human problems are framed in material terms along entirely different lines than the cause. Corrective lenses do not cure bad eyesight, or stop one from watching television or staring at a computer screen, but allow one to continue exactly the pursuits that eyesight is good for. This kind of leveling exemplifies the motivation of specialization. If the structure of daily life forces certain kind of behavior (for instance the ability to see books and screens) then the kind of characteristics that could develop by people without sight are left undiscovered. As daily life constrains our options further we are forced into narrower and narrow tunnels. Eventually we find that we have chosen one thing, at the cost of every other thing, and in the name of survival.

What form should our skepticism take?

There is an active conversation among radicals and greens that begs response. The classic presentation would be a dichotomy between the allegation that technology is neutral on the one hand and that it embeds an essential 'negative' value on the other. Clearly technology is neutral only to the extent that you assume the values of the present order. If those values are not assumed then technology is not any different than history, philosophy, or science. They are the weapons that power use to fragment and control the population. One cannot understand our society without having a working, theoretical, and practical knowledge of technology and as a result most will choose to. The value of understanding our society is up for debate though.

If, following the nihilists of the 1860's, we were to advocate for a parochial skepticism then it would be enough to revolt against rent, usury, asphalt, bureaucrats and their henchmen, etc, etc. If we were to respond even further in kind it would be against the excessive aspects of our society that most resemble Czarist Russia. Our response would look like the opposite of the moral majoritarians and large government fetishists. Instead of valorizing natural science it is possible that this line of thought would lead to an ascetic ethical system along the lines of anarchists that eschew digital technology for analog. This far, and no further! would be their motto.

Skepticism ascends!

Assuming that parochialism is a limitation, which is probably true in the light of the failure of revolutionary movements of the counter-culture, then what is next for contrarians. What would a universal skepticism look like as a method of inquiry, social form, and practice? Would the nihilist practice of today look more like the obsessive scientist of Fathers and Sons or the paranoid murderer of Crime and Punishment.

If a political nihilism is a specific rejection of the world as-it-is it still make priorities. Nihilism still has a legacy. The reason that the positive program of a Nihilism today wouldn't include a DIY naturalist science isn't just because of the implication of science having changed over the past 150 years but because the very notion of a positive program has changed in the eye of radicals. Any evaluation of a nihilist program has to take into account exactly how tentative it would be. A universal skepticism runs into similar problems that a universal positivism does, who exactly does the universalizing?

We will begin, with this limitation in mind, an evaluation of three specific approaches that both overlap and are contained within a nihilist perspective: Critique as practice, Avocation of the Deed, and Negation — as rhetoric, practice, and form.

Rhetorical negation is not the existential navel-gazing that appears indistinguishable from ennui. It is the position that political engagement with the present order is inconsequential but that articulating that political position is not. The writings of Tristan Tzara exemplify this position.

The practice of negation may very well be an artifact of the denatured intellectual environment of North America but represents the active non-activism that confuses participation in political projects without tying them to political (and politicized) social movements as an 'armchair' activity. This is a practice without strategy, possibly done for its own reward. The activities of many anarchist reading groups qualify for the position.

Formal negation is likely the most widely held political nihilist position. It is the practice of not submitting to the aggression of the dominant order by avoiding it. The sentiment that one does not attend political protests because they do not enjoy the presence of the police or do not vote because every choice on a ballot is shit are examples of this position.

The thread that runs through all of the negation approaches is the stance of non-participation as political practice. This lends itself to the criticism of nihilism as solipsism which serves as a nice counter-point to the criticism of leftists as rhetorically self-sacrificing moralists.

Avocation of the Deed would be the most stereotypical nihilist political position. Many would-be-nihilists use the claim of strategic avocation as a shield to discuss their desires. Knocking over electrical towers and phone lines are their own reward, linking them to The Generalized Struggle for Human Emancipation™ is window dressing. The question of sensational actions, of horrific deeds, remains a central question for radicals of all stripes.

The legacy of Propaganda by the Deed is evaluated incorrectly. On the one hand the vast majority of PbtD actions were not violent actions against capitalists, leaders, and bureaucrats but the practice of daily life. On the other there is an argument that if the revolutionary struggle was doomed to failure, due to lack of preparation and a thousand other reasons, that going out shooting (which PbtD could safely be described as) was a valid exit strategy. What were the alternatives? Life as an exile chasing every hint of Revolution like the Communards? Chasing every summit hoping for another Seattle?

Today's avocation differs from PbtD by placing the emphasis on the deed rather than the history or public relations consequence. This may entail giving up a certain kind of power, since others become the managers of your message, as in the case of suicide bombers but the clarity of the deed speaks louder than any politician's message.

The practice of Critique entails using a suite of empirical and intellectual tools to evaluate the behavior and actions of others. It is a practice that does not stand alone but leans on others and in that way is the most social nihilist practice. The idea that nothing should stand: belief, value, or paradigm and no positive program installed in their place is at the core of the nihilist project.

Conclusion

Nihilism in the 21st century differs from that of the 19th on one important question. Rather than being a reactionary political practice resulting from a specific political context (Czarist Russia) it now draws its inspiration from an understanding of the philosophical trajectory of 20th century, the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th, and a sober understanding of exactly how little these well-springs offer one who would resist.

In hindsight natural science was the liberating response to a society dominated by mystical reverence for leader and God. In the absence of a simple response to today's similar and extended problems an anarchist nihilism offers a category, a frame of reference, rather than the pat answer political discourse tends to favor. Nihilists will not become black-clad boy scouts, summit hoppers, or politicize thriving off of the detritus of an excessive society. There will not be a comfort for those of us whose rejection of this society includes its opposition.

Chapter 3: Now is the time (and yet we wait)!

We are necessarily impatient. We can't stand paying rent one more month. Being forced from cradle to toilet to classroom to cubicle to grave makes us boring. We hate ourselves and our condition even more.

But what to do? We are not so naïve as to believe the leftist line about 'revolutionary' groups like the Weatherman. We don't accept that the problem with their strategy was a lack of mass base. We see their problem as lack of ambition.

Not only can you not bring down the castle walls by running full speed into them but it may be that this world has become sophisticated enough to no longer need castles or even physical presence to a large degree. This is the problem with most critiques of postmodernity. They assume that the postmodern would be a device used by the dispossessed in our arsenal against this world. This is not the case. What is the case is that the postmodern (and its accompanying condition) is yet another tool in the arsenal of this order. Postmodernism is the terrain upon which this order's current travels can be mapped. This can particularly be seen in discussions of virtuality, identity, and the politics of deconstruction (as relevant tenure track pursuit and little else).

The first premise of postmodernism is that there are no 'meta' narratives. There is no single history or anthropology or system that enables us to know the real. While this is great news if you're sick of the blowhard Marxist and Republican orators of the workers' or entrepreneurs' Coming Emancipation, it also leaves us very alone. On the one hand we now have a language to understand that every truth coming out of the mouth of our leaders, teachers, and specialists is suspect but on the other we are no longer presented with a Golden Brick Road towards the world of our desires.

The group who is best prepared to take advantage of this information is not the group with nothing to lose but the group with the most resources to bring to bear. If we are no longer interested in combining ourselves with others into shapes that can be placed on the board of politics and business, then those who do can have the board to themselves. They understand that the postmodern condition keeps us apart. Alone. They have trained us to believe in nothing *and* to accept the conditions of this world as universal.

The second premise builds on the first. If history is no longer a 'true' story (in the grand epic sense that Western Civilization classes or Marxists speak of), then progress is no longer that story extended into the future. If progress is no longer assumed on the world stage it may be that it wasn't the right mechanism (or meta-narrative) to understand the material world, humans' role in it, or much of anything at all. Where does that leave evolution? Isn't evolution just an idealist-materialist 'proof' of progress in biological systems?

If we abandon progressive notions then we should, it would stand to reason (sic), abandon inclinations toward democratic institution building (as a partial step towards what we want), including participation in humanizing such institutions. Instead we are informed by the specialists of knowledge, if we don't accept the progress modality, that we are at 'the end of history' where the present conditions are universal, fixed, and unconditional. This is another example of those who control ideology planting their value system onto the space burnt out by the postmodern controlled fire.

Another premise of postmodernism is that culture is the means of social transformation in a media rich world. This is mostly a rhetorical device alluding to something obvious (if you accept the premise). If the world is indeed media rich, cybernetic, illusory, and entirely without mooring on the foundations of the 19th century, including 19th century prejudices about labor and progress, then engaging with it must be in this new vocabulary. If you do not accept this, if you recognize it as a tragic mis-reading of Debord, most of the consequences of thinking of culture-as—transformative-lever can be seen as based on a faulty premise.

This is how postmodernism works. It takes a premise, let's say that "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord) and turn it around "Representation is everything directly lived" and you have a clear argument for non-engagement. Why bother living in time and space? If life is merely representation then media is living on a greater scale than would be otherwise possible.

I recently attended a speech where one of the questions asked of the presenter, who was arguing against representation generally, went along these lines. "I am a computer graphics student and I have spent long days precisely measuring and evaluating a blade of grass with the goal of reproducing the form within the computer environment. How can you say that my work, both in the observing and the reproducing, is wrong?" This is a classic example of accepting the premise and basing, in this case, an entire career and life path on it. If we live in a media environment then oh, what a time savings that I myself do not have to go to a field to experience something called field. Instead I can download the Field Experience volume 1 and know field. Who are you to tell me differently? Do you have ownership of the concept of field that you would lord over me?

The point being made here is simply this: abandonment of understanding the mechanisms of control disarms us. In the case of postmodernism, confusing a set of academics with the actual power brokers who enact their ideas is a paralyzing problem.

What's next then? If there are no castle walls because domination has found a way to succeed without necessarily materializing, then our project no longer looks like a siege. If virtualization has become part and parcel of the dominance matrix then single points of attack are no longer effective. There is no letter bomb large enough.

The simple answer is that we have to be patient. We have to have an engaged patience that is incomprehensible to the lethargy of the revolutionary left. Our role should not be to lay in wait for some mark to come stumbling along because that is never going to happen. Instead we must have total engagement in the social and political processes around us. Nothing should escape our attention. This could look like, and is not limited to, attending church (especially politically active churches), going to shareholder meetings, attending city council, toasters, Elks lodges, civic organizations and even leftist meetings. The idea is not that our efforts should be particularly supportive or even destructive to these groups (although pushing the boundary in both directions should be part of the process) but to understand how it is that modern acculturated civil society works. What does a social group look like and how does it react to the kind of stimulus that can be brought to bear? If you play the game how easy is it to integrate into an organizational form? To what extent do these forms accrue power, negligence and momentum? We need more information.

Chapter 4: When all Dictionaries are burned, will we start over?

Active Nihilism

As foretold by Raul Vaneigem in *Revolution of Everyday Life*, “There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition.” The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. An active nihilist finds energy, a will to act, in the hopelessness of the conforming, rigid, asphyxiation of our society. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than in the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it.

Terror

The primary modality of class society, whether it is by violence, hunger, or the threat of the elements. If every object, person, and moment is for sale, if there is nothing outside, then there is abject terror. When living is a contemptible act, it is terror. What is the opposite of this?

Nihilist Anarchism

We are not drifts of snow moving through reality. Things have happened. Choices have been made. These choices can be evaluated, not from a timeless doctrine but from a human scale. By this human scale the size, the scope, of the choices made is beyond comprehension. This being the case, and as the desire of conscious bodies is to understand, a frame of reference to begin to impact the world can be based on one of two options. Either shrink the world that you desire to understand and touch or assert yourself onto a world gone mad in such a way as to transform scale. Institutions, ideologies, systems, schools, family, capital, government and revolutionary movements have all developed beyond the body. Nihilist anarchism isn't concerned with a social revolution that adds a new chapter to an old history but the ending of history altogether. If not revolutionaries then possibly epochanaries, for the transformation of society without a positive program.

Philosophical Nihilism

The answer to the existential question about what is knowable is, nothing.

Passive Nihilism

If the future is unknowable we are confronted with a choice. When all we know is terror many stop making choices. People break. If you have ever been confronted by the alarm clock and just shut it off and pulled the cover over your head you know passive nihilism. The pain of resisting, of being the false opposition, or the purged, justifies a thousand no's. A million. The passive nihilist no longer has hope that their participation is necessary for the world to keep spinning.

Life

Is a terrorized body living?

Power

Hyphenated power doesn't avoid the problem that power raises but tries to shift it somewhere else. We can, do, and will continue to hurt, dominate, and manipulate one another. We are creatures of power. To the extent that we do take responsibility for this it looks like shame. This confuses power with Christianity.

Hope

This coin has two sides that can't be separated: expectation and desire.

Existential Nihilism

An existential nihilist remains at an impasse regarding a variety of core issues. If we cannot know anything then how can we make choices? When Nietzsche talked of nihilism this is what he was referring to. The trajectory of Western thought leads to unknowable questions and paralysis.

Strategic Nihilism

Revolutionary programs deserve the snickers that they get. The idea that yet another manifesto (YAM) or mission statement or action plan is going to make the tired activism of a new generation smells less of the death it wraps around its neck is ludicrous. Strategic nihilism argues for a new approach to social transformation that resembles the burning of a field rather than building the new world within the shell of the old or one last push by the working class to seize the means of production. An approach that concerns itself with exactly what the forms of social control are and their suppression falls far astray from models of recruitment, education, progress, or the crossed fingers that the next riot will be the Big one.

Positive Program

Shorthand for a positive program for social change, a positive program is one that confuses desire with reality and extends that confusion into the future. In the case of radicals this usually takes the form of stating programs along the lines of "ATR there will be no hunger" at worst and "The abolishment of class society will result in relations without limit" at its best. A positive program is an idealist legacy that forms the core of most revolutionary thought.

Causality

The belief that one event following another necessitates their relationship is erroneous, as posited by Hume. If causality cannot be assumed, or even accepted if argued, the efficacy of most political forms is limited, particularly as a way to transform the world.

ATR

After the Revolution

Revolution

The limited desire to change the world as modeled by the French Revolution. The Good News: Heads will roll. The Bad: The Bureaucrats win in the end.

Body

A body can be an individual. It can be a group of individuals. It can be a cultural or social unit. It can also be understood as a philosophical unit, a black box that accepts input from the world and responds in kind. It is not known but knowing.

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