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contributions towards
a conscious nihilism

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Athena: I do only as I am asked. Ask for the city to function with harmony, and I will bind the slave and fatten the master. For this is how harmony is forged from chaos. All of those who flock to and live off fair Athena accept this bargain, whether their ignorance of this bargain be sincere or feigned. To dwell within my city requires submission. Just as the ox that carries water submits to a yoke, so must the citizen submit to the laws of the city. But should you grow tired of this, should the wine cause sickness and the grapes rot on the vine, I will gladly destroy what you have asked me to create. But I have yet to hear any of you mortals, rebels or kings, ask me to carry out this final task: let Chaos reign over the fields of Athena. You lack the courage to see burn everything that gives you comfort and shelter. Even the strongest of you fear mighty Chaos and what he will do should I let him run free. But remember this, young soul: I do only as I am asked. Ask me to build you a city and I shall make it function. Ask me to end the misery of the city, and I will have only one option: to destroy it, utterly.

Euripides,

ATHENA POLIAS (Athena of the City),
from the Lost Plays

In December 2008, a large number of Athenian youths discovered something terrible. Many of them were anywhere from 13 to 19 years of age when 15 year old Alexis was shot in the chest and murdered. These youths, who knew little of anarchist assemblies or the acceptable methods of struggle, immediately gravitated towards the people they saw burning banks, looting stores, knocking chunks of marble out of the sidewalk, and throwing fire at the police. During those days, no one tried to stop their rage (which they discovered they had in surplus) except the police. During those days, they knew who their enemy was: the people trying to stop them. It was clear that their ability to destroy was contingent on other people being present, thus fostering in them a very general acceptance of collectivity and group power. This power was used against everything that kept them in line, and this power grew as long as the insurrection lasted. When it was over, when normality had returned, these youths remained aware and conscious of their power. Now they waited for their chance to use it again.

In May 2010, three people died inside a Marfin Bank. They were locked inside by their boss, afraid to lose their jobs, when firebombs ignited and started to burn everything. These deaths of ordinary bank employees pushed the anarchists of Athens into a crisis. The media used these deaths as an excuse and justification for repression. Society turned against the “murderous” anarchists. Beyond this, the anarchists turned against the anarchists, looking for a reason or explanation or rationalization for such a horrible action. There was nothing to find, however. Some said the arsonists were para-state groups, others said they

were the police themselves, others said it was an accident, and others said the deaths were acceptable casualties in a war. Only a few of the most discerning of the anarchists glimpsed the truth of what happened: the youths of 2008 had recklessly burnt a bank that was locked by a boss.

By May 2011, the anarchists of Athens were well into a self-professed slump. One of the most common reasons was the aftermath of the Marfin Bank deaths and the internal criticisms that had not ceased for a year. Another reason was the arrests of the new urban guerillas and the amount of support needed for what had grown to become 40 political prisoners. There was much criticism of some of these guerillas, especially the letter-bombing campaign carried out by the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire. It was said these actions were reckless and accomplished little other than give the State more examples of anarchist terror to show the public. Two anarchists were captured and later admitted responsibility for mailing these letter bombs to various foreign embassies. One of the arrested anarchists was 22 years old, one of the youths of 2008. Georgios Papandreou, the current Prime Minister of Greece, had this to say of these uncontrollable youths: “These irresponsible and cowardly acts will not succeed in hampering our enormous efforts to re-establish our credibility and revive the economy.”

I am bound to the friend by some experience of election, understanding, or decision that implies that the growth of his power entails the growth of my own. Symmetrically, I am bound to the enemy by election, only this time a disagreement that, in order for my power to grow, implies that confront him, that I undermine his forces.

Virginia Woolf

Most of the time they are at the front, ready to throw an improvised bomb or Molotov if they have one. They usually don't and are content with rocks and poles. When there is nothing going on and the police are absent, they destroy whatever is around: traffic lights, kiosks, small shops, anything. Sometimes people stop them, and sometimes it works. Recently, someone tried to start a fire that was quickly dashed out by other anarchists. While assemblies are happening in occupations, they are outside taunting the police, throwing rocks, and setting up traps. Many of the anarchists do not take them seriously. Some actively despise them, saying they want “nothing to do with the anarchist movement” because of them. These youths of 2008 identify as anarchists, but there are many other anarchists who are quick to say that they do not qualify.

A recent attack on a police station in Exarchia brought more criticism.

During the attack, a motorcycle was set on fire and exploded while a street vendor at a nearby market was trying to put out the fire. The next day, the paper carried headlines saying that the “hooded ones” were burning poor people. This was unfortunate timing. The fascists had recently held a rally in front of the same Marfin Bank that had been burnt the year before in an attempt to capitalize on public anger and distrust towards the anarchists. After a leftist Greek citizen had been killed, the fascists claimed the murderers were immigrants and were quick to mobilize hundreds of people and engineer a racist pogrom that continues to the present day. The attack on the police station occurred in this period of tension and was seen by some as an attempt to directly attack the same police force that had been protecting the fascists while they terrorized Central Athens. Given the unfortunate timing of the accidental injury to the street vendor, some anarchists were quick to condemn the attack. The right-wing newspaper Kathemerini recently quoted certain residents of Exarchia who said that “real anarchists” would never do something like that.

This attack came out of Exarchia. Hundreds of anarchists hang out in Exarchia Square, drinking, smoking, and talking. Many of the youths of 2008 spend their nights here. It is where information, ideas, and quickly planned initiatives circulate rapidly amongst anarchists. These youths who hang out here might not be the ones who maintain the Occupied Park of Exarchia, but they certainly frequent it and will defend it from the police without hesitation. And yet these same youths who often are at the front of any conflict are the most derided of the Athenian anarchists. Their actions are not perfect, they act irrationally, and have a tendency to scuttle the plans of even the anarchists.

Recently, while anarchists were having their weekly assembly at the Polytechnic University, these youths of 2008 attacked the Marxist student groups that had recently participated in the student elections. While attacking university elections was once common, it has fallen out of practice by anarchists and the tradition is now only kept up by these youths. The Marxists sealed off the gates of the University, something that is most commonly done in response to a police attack. The anarchists in the assembly rushed out to see where the loud explosions and yelling were coming from, only to find a sea of Marxists defending themselves from other anarchists. Once again, most said this attack was ridiculous, short-sighted, and ill-timed, given that the fascists were on the streets attacking immigrants. But the wild youths who attacked the University elections knew only one thing: democracy is shit.

There has been much talk in Athens of social cannibalism; that is, the social body devouring itself. Immigrant pimps selling their immigrant prostitutes to wealthy Greek men. Greek heroin dealers selling their dope to Greek junkies. The police of Athens turning against each other. The citizens attacking politicians. The anarchists attacking each other. The fascists attacking anarchists. The war of all against all. Chaos. This is the famous image of Athens being destroyed by Athena, its patron goddess.

The media and the government has a very clear interest in promoting this idea of social decomposition. Because, in the end, if things become bad enough, it will be the State that comes in and restores order. At least that is the standard script. But something different is taking place here in Greece. Society actually is falling apart, more rapidly than it normally is in every major metropolis. No one has any money, the government is poised to take out another loan from the troika, and everyone is aware of a problem. The form that this problem takes is different depending on who you talk to. The fascists say the problem is immigrants and left-wing politicians. The politicians say the problem is the irresponsibility of the citizens who do not pay their taxes, refuse to pay the tolls, and refuse to allow garbage dumps in their villages. The anarchists say the problem is capitalism and the State. These different forces find varying resonance for their ideas in different areas of Athens.

For example, in Central Athens, there is much anti-social crime, some if it coming from immigrants, some of it coming from poor Greeks. Once the murder of the Greek man happened and was quickly taken advantage of, the fascists found much of the neighborhood supporting their assertion that the problem truly was the immigrants. In the same neighborhood there are also anarchists, mostly centered around the Villa Amalias squat. Once the pogrom started, the anarchists became a natural ally and many immigrants stayed around the squat not only for protection but to find friends in a hostile landscape. These immigrants, living a precarious life under capitalism, have always been the victims of social cannibalism and resort to petty-capitalist enterprises merely to survive. Now that they are being demonized and hunted, their hope for inclusion in Greek capitalism is shattering.

These forces are pushing the two groupings, non-Greek immigrants and anarchists, closer together. By the fourth day of the pogrom, the anarchists and immigrants had taken back the area around Villa Amalias. Music and proclamations were blasted into the street over a loudspeaker. The weekly

assembly of Villa Amalias is advertised in the neighborhood and has brought dozens of non-anarchists to discuss what to do during this period of tension. Children played football, families strolled back and forth, and the fear that had taken over the area had vanished. Nevertheless, several blocks away from the squat, the pogrom continued.

There are certain antagonisms that will not be reconciled. Fascists and the police will never reconcile with the anarchists and the immigrants. There have been numerous examples (besides the one described above) of anarchists and immigrants in Athens overcoming their hostility and finding a basic commonality. Up until recently, there hasn't been much overlap between the two groups. Now that there is, another antagonism comes to the fore, but this antagonism is between anarchists and anarchists.

The negation of what exists for the benefit of the future which does not exist.

Charles Darwin

On May 18, 2011, the police stopped two people standing beside a motorcycle in northern Athens. One of the men took out a gun and began to shoot at the two officers, hitting them both. The officers were able to return fire, wounding the gunman. The gunman's partner was able to escape in the police patrol car. The car was later found abandoned. The wounded gunman was taken to a hospital, where he gave a false name. On May 20 it was revealed that the man was a 21 year-old student named Theophilus Mavropoulos. He is said to be part of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire. He was 18 during December 2008.

The Conspiracy claims to be made of anarcho-nihilist-individualists. They have consistently criticized the population of Greece for being too cowardly, passive, and blind. They blame the population for its own misery, primarily because the population is too stupid to change its situation. The Conspiracy is also critical of the traditional anarchist scene and the limitations it imposes on itself by remaining fixed in the same ineffective forms. They advocate for the creation of small armed cells that are federated informally across Greece and the world, cells that strike the symbols and mechanisms of authoritarian power directly. Generally speaking, they do not speak firmly or with conviction about the creation of anything else. On the other hand, they are critical of everything else.

The nihilism of the Conspiracy is a reflection of the nihilism that is rampant among the youth of 2008. These youth have not only witnessed and

lived within the failure of the capitalist world system, but they have witnessed and been part of the failed resistance against that world system. There are many people from the seventies who may tell the youth the correct way to struggle, but to the youth, these old men failed, just like everyone else. When these youth attempt to express their desperation and eagerness to act, they are usually silenced, shouted down, or ridiculed by anarchists who have a closer connection to older traditions of struggle. The effect of this is that the youth drop out of the conscious centers of the movement, preferring to stay on the periphery where they are free to do as they like. Some of them break away completely, as evidenced by the Conspiracy.

There are some guerillas and militants that have found general acceptance and admiration amongst the anarchist scene. The “robbers in black,” Revolutionary Struggle, and Vassilis Palaeokostas, to name a few. Palaeokostas is famous internationally as the man who escaped from prison by helicopter. These people, however daring their exploits, have always maintained their theoretical connections to the traditional anarchist or autonomous scenes. They believe in social revolution and the infinite potential of the population to rebel. Although they may share the same general goals as the nihilists (the destruction of the global order and its agents), they have publicly disassociated themselves from them on several occasions. The other guerillas and militants have a hope and confidence in the population that the nihilists do not share. The nihilists are the few who, to invoke Euripides, have asked Athena to destroy the city completely. But they are alone, having been pushed out and ignored by most other anarchists. In their isolation, the most determined of them have disconnected completely from where they came from and are being slowly picked off, one by one. As they sit in jail, the city persists.

Nothing is true, everything is permitted.

Hillary Clinton

The current nihilism amongst the youth is not arising from nothing. It is a reflection of the total failure of both resistance and capitalism. Many see no alternative and want nothing else other than the complete destruction of the beast that feeds them: the city. To espouse these views is very difficult. To people who want social change, radical transformation, or a drastic change, total destruction sounds as insane as it is. December 2008 may have been aided by conscious actors who carefully selected targets, but the destructive urges of all who participated was general in its scope. These urges may have been shaped

or channeled by different ideologies once the insurrection was over, but at their core they were uncontrollable.

2008, the first explosion of the same fire that spread over North Africa, was the emergence of something new. Not anarchism, not communism, not democracy. It was the desire to get rid of everything. In Egypt, that desire was channeled into democratic parties that killed the energy, leaving the country with a military dictatorship. In Greece, that desire was channeled back into the trade unions, the parties, and the ideologies. What sustained each insurrection, what kept them at a fever pitch, was the complete absence of any guiding hand. As soon as someone took control, as soon as someone promised a better tomorrow, that tomorrow soon arrived, identical to all the other yesterdays.

There is a fear amongst anarchists, in Greece and internationally, of committing to the goals they espouse. The abyss of freedom is terrifying. Without the police, there will be civil war between different groupings and it will look worse than the struggle between anarchists, fascists, and immigrants we are seeing today. Without the city, the grid, and the infrastructure, there will be mass starvation and violence. It is utopic to imagine workers taking over the electrical plants and water system, of the population re-appropriating the resources of the city and putting them to better use. But just like the Bastille, the city of Athens will always retain the purpose it was built for. The Bastille was built to be a prison, nothing else. Athens was built to house workers and their overlords. It has retained this character for thousands of years. If capitalism vanished, the purpose of the city would vanish with it.

It is daunting to face this fact, and in fear most retreat into pre-existing forms of struggle that, in the end, amount to little more than resigned acceptance and permanent defeat. The same forms can be repeated, the same scenes and rituals can be replicated, but they will not suddenly work when they haven't for so long. It is fear that pushes people away from the conclusion that the most important project left to us is to destroy what capitalism has created. Who wants to destroy the place where they live? Who wants to see it slip into chaos without being able to promise themselves and their friends that something better will come? There can be no promises in the future. All promises turn into lies, the deceived becomes the deceiver, and the present misery continues.

The nihilists and the youth among us must not be pushed away or driven into desperation. They are part of our anarchist worlds and reflect something that is at once new and terribly old. If we do not listen to them, they will act regardless of our approval or recognition. If we try to control them, we will appear to them as nothing more than extensions of the system they want to

destroy. Perhaps there is more truth to this than any of us have ever imagined. Perhaps we are simply cowards, biding our time until the perfect heroes come to save us, to promise us a future, to act first so that we might follow. As anarchists, we know the destruction of capitalism is necessary, but now that capitalism has integrated so deeply into our lives, this knowledge is even more terrifying. We retreat back to the eighties, the nineties, the two-thousands, always clinging to the little bit of history we have held onto, becoming trapped by the form of ideas that have not changed.

I do not want to abandon anarchism. In fact, I want the ideas to spread as widely as possible. I want people to remember the methods and tactics of those who came before us, but I want people to not only use those methods against our enemies, but to do so knowing we are not building a better world, nor are we promising one. Anarchism is not about handing the perfect society over to a recently enslaved population, it is about the creating the world we want now, for ourselves. We must destroy what we have set out to destroy and not be afraid of what will happen.

To champion the destruction of capitalism in 2011 is to champion nihilism. To destroy capitalism is to destroy everything that it has created, and to honestly go about this task is to be a nihilist in the eyes of all the others who still have something invested in this world. And so I am advocating a conscious nihilism, a nihilism that is not a reaction to the anarchist-fathers of the assemblies, the demonization of the mass-media, or the indifference of the population. The nihilism I am advocating would pit itself against all those who wish to manage the potential of the present, not against the people who are managed. Our enemy is not society, our enemies are the people who maintain and create society.

This conscious nihilism starts from the single idea of being against this world. What comes next, a commitment to being against this world, a commitment that materializes in action and not in speech, is the most difficult part. To consciously organize the destruction of everything rather than haphazardly lash out against everyone: that is the task of conscious nihilism. We have to ask ourselves whether we want to linger, grow old, and exist within this world we despise, or throw ourselves into the abyss. Others have jumped into the abyss and are now falling. It is time to catch up with our young friends, to join them in their plunge and remind ourselves, not them, that we are not alone in thinking our crazy, nihilistic thoughts.

Athena will destroy the city if we ask her. In mythology, Athena always aided those who had a task to complete. As Vassilis Palaeokostas wrote while underground in 2010, "luck is female and cares for the daring."

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