

A close-up photograph of two matchsticks on a matchbox. One matchstick is lit, with a bright blue and white flame. The other matchstick is unlit and lies diagonally next to it. The background is dark, making the light from the flame stand out.

# Towards Insurrection

Anarchist Strategy in an Era of  
Popular Revolt

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## REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED READING

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- Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*
- Russell Means, "For America to Live, Europe Must Die"
- Russell Maroon Shoatz, *Maroon the Implacable*
- Yannick Giovanni Marshall, "Totalitarianism at 38th and Chicago: A Minnesotan Lie"
- Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti*
- Peter Gelderloos, "Diagnostic of the Future: Between the Crisis of Democracy and the Crisis of Capitalism"
- Josep Gardeneyes, "A Wager on the Future: Anarchist Organization, the Islamic State, the Crisis, and Outer Space"
- *Movement for No Society* (Philadelphia, 2018)
- *Thirty-Six Strategems*

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## INTRODUCTION

What role can anarchists in the United States play in popular uprisings like the ones of 2020? While many of us made solid contributions to the riots, the events of last year also highlighted some of our significant deficiencies. Anarchists' attempts to show up to riots in the ways in which we're accustomed, at least here in Philly, often felt ineffective and at best out of touch with those around us. I still believe that anarchists have the potential to contribute in crucial ways to destroying this system and making another end of the world possible. At this point, though, a willingness to reflect on and question our views is needed in order to really move in that direction.

This question of anarchist participation is fundamentally intertwined with issues around race and whiteness, and the past year's discourse on the topic has felt typically inadequate in addressing these questions. Leaving the bad-faith nature of many of the critiques aside, many white anarchists have found it easier to dismiss criticisms by automatically conflating them with liberalism or political opportunism. While this is often accurate, it shouldn't allow us to not take questions about our relationship to whiteness seriously. Whiteness isn't just a skin color that non-white people happen to be skeptical of. It's also a particular kind of colonized (and colonizing) mentality that restricts our imagination and can affect everything from how we interact in the streets to what we as individuals personally envision as our insurrectionary future (or lack thereof).

Aside from the anarchists who were radicalized over this past year, most anarchists today came into radical politics through resistance to Trump's presidency (which centered on an "antifa" that was majority white in the public imaginary, and often in reality), an Occupy movement dominated by white progressives, or what are now called the anti-globalization struggles of the early 2000's. Throughout these movements, anarchists of color have also appeared alongside white anarchists in the streets, though not necessarily identifying with them, and have tried to carve out space for the primacy of anti-racist struggles. But this past year has been a visceral and unavoidable reminder that Black (as well as Indigenous) radical struggles against the state have always been and continue to be far more powerful than most anarchists' occasional vandalisms, or even our more targeted (but isolated) acts of property destruction.

This article tries to take seriously the claim that white people, including white anarchists, will not be the protagonists of liberatory struggle in the United States — not in order to marginalize anarchists' uncompromised visions of freedom from the state, capital, and white supremacy, but instead to reveal some underexplored strategies for how we might actually get there. Today we face an unprecedented crisis of capital and the state, and despite our best efforts none of us can predict how any of it will shake out. Despite the Biden administration's best efforts to restore order and recuperate rebellion, it feels like the chaos that boiled over last year is fated to return, especially as ecological and economic collapse creep closer and the everyday executions of Black people continue with no particular changes that we can observe. In this context, we look around and take our inspiration from the resistance we see actually happening, even if it counteracts some of our inherited assumptions and desires. Right now, all possibilities are on the table.

This essay begins with some brief reflections on anarchist activity in the context of uprisings in several cities in the U.S. over this past year. In cities like Portland and Seattle, anarchist activity has shown both the potential and the limits of some tried-and-true tactics of the insurrectionary anarchist approach that's been established in the U.S. over the past couple decades. The rest of the essay explores other traditions that might expand our sense of how insurrections occur and how we might personally participate in moving things in that direction. We also include a Philly-specific map that we hope will provide a useful resource for readers in Philly. Maybe it'll also inspire others elsewhere in how they approach future moments of potential insurrection and State collapse.

- to generate our own electricity just to achieve self-sufficiency. By making our own electricity, we can attack and sabotage the infrastructures of the State and the companies that occupy our territory, infrastructures we currently depend on” (46).
- *Land*: Taking back land from the United States and restoring it whenever possible to Indigenous stewardship is an aspect of the “collective survival” strategy discussed above, but such a foundational one that it merits its own discussion. Capitalism, or civilization more broadly, relies on cutting people off from self-sufficiency, a major component of which is the ability to grow food and access water. Restoring these abilities is crucial to ending capitalism and all other forms of social control; it broadens the possibility of autonomous survival. Indigenous people are at the forefront of this effort not just for ethical reasons, but for practical ones, since many still carry traditional knowledge of how the land works. As Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “Indigenous peoples offer possibilities for life after empire” (235).
- *Repression on multiple fronts*: While we are familiar with State repression and the well-known Leftist betrayals of revolutionary undertakings in the 20th century, we are also up against white vigilante groups that aggressively seek to carry on the legacy of their settler ancestors. Self-defense is important and we should all be down to assess and discuss with our close comrades what our capacity is for dealing with these kinds of threats, and what skills we still need to learn. Not everyone has to take part in these types of struggles, but those of us who say we want to need to be honest with ourselves about what we're willing to do.

## A BROADER STRATEGY

What does this all mean for insurrectionaries here and now in the United States? While we've already discussed the need for destructive attacks and other major interventions into moments of widespread unrest, the following concepts might help develop a longer-game approach to insurrection:

- *Decentralization*: In addition to spreading out our activities during another mobilization, those of us who are drawn to this sort of thing can also study guerilla strategy and skills, as this would be the way to go up against the State (and everyday right-wing vigilantes) in the event of an actual collapse.
- *Multi-racial struggles and white "race traitors"*: Our personal visions of rebellion and our role in it should be discussed honestly within anarchist spaces, political organizations, friend groups, and/or other people in our lives, especially across racial lines if possible. The point of this is to build trust and relationships that can push back against and betray whiteness, Eurocentricism, and everything else the State stands for. As we saw last year, the State and the media aggressively attempt to worsen interracial distrust once multi-racial uprisings break out, so working on building what foundations we can in advance would help us all emerge stronger from repression and recuperation. We will not be able to accomplish much without figuring out how to operate together (to a certain extent) despite our significant differences.
- *Collective survival*: The authors of "A Wager on the Future" wrote back in 2015, "In whatever form, we must all start posing the question of survival. This means that the projects and activities we encourage and amplify through organization should concern themselves with the self-organization of life; that they should be useful for us as well as for other people; that they should support and augment our capacities of struggle, understanding struggle as a basic aspect of survival for people who desire liberty" (45). Survival-based strategies and fighting-based strategies (similarly to social and anti-social insurrectionalism) are most effective when they complement one another in a kind of ecosystem of struggle. The authors cite as an example: "As a Mapuche comrade said, explaining a project for generating electricity in a community in resistance, 'We don't want

## ANARCHIST STRATEGY IN THE STREETS

Unlike cities like Philly, where open conflict with the cops erupted for only a few days and was quickly followed by weeks of peaceful protests, Portland protesters kept rioting against the police all summer and have been an inspiration for their bravery and dedication in the streets. For the past year, black blocs have consistently done "direct actions" in which they marched to a police building or until they were met with a line of riot cops, where fighting and destruction would ensue.

From afar, it also looks like clandestine actions have been on the rise in Portland since at least the fall of 2020. The recently published zine "This Rose Has Thorns: A Year of Anarchist Attacks in So-Called Portland" compiles communiques from these actions, including one that reports setting an unattended cop car on fire overnight (it also references the four police vehicles that were similarly targeted in Philly in August 2020). These acts seem strategically important, not necessarily in their immediate impact, but at least in developing skills that can help take riots to the next level or prepare people to take part in some kind of guerilla strategy, if the State reaches a certain point of instability. The April 12<sup>th</sup> attack on Portland Police Bureau cars in their parking lot, while a demonstration was attacking cops head-on at the sheriff's headquarters elsewhere, is an example of moving towards this type of anarchist contribution to a mass uprising.

The communiques accompanying these actions seem to be thinking through some of the limits of Portland's ongoing street-fighting strategy. One communique notes that "the cops have made public statements addressing how they are not responding to 911 calls due to their focus on brutally attacking and arresting protesters," implying that this frees up possibilities for anarchists to attack outside demos. The writers additionally note that "the police are not (and should not) be our only target" ("Starbucks and Whole Foods Attacked for Night 100"). Another communique reports removing and destroying dozens of Amazon Ring and Google Nest doorbell cameras, encouraging us to expand our understanding of law enforcement to include these elements of surveillance.

The goals expressed in this communique and others, though, are themselves limited to spreading action across the city — which in reality is not a goal, but more like a strategy for getting to one. We tend not to name the goal itself — insurrection? — maybe because it seems so far out of reach, or

because we believe that insurrection is an ongoing process, rather than a one-and-done event like the “revolutions” of the past. It remains to be said, though, that going out to fight the cops head-on night after night is not a limited strategy because it doesn’t stretch the cops thin enough — although that is certainly true — but because it seems unlikely to destroy what we ultimately want to see destroyed.

While radicals in Portland seem to be concentrating on escalating street-fighting tactics and honing their ability to do targeted clandestine attacks, anarchists in Seattle have proposed broadening these approaches through decentralized action. “Decentralized Action: A Brief History and Tactical Proposal” (published on Puget Sound Anarchists in November 2020) describes the regular marches as “daily actions tying up and attacking the infrastructure which maintains the white-supremacist American police state” and notes that the “high visibility of these ongoing actions opens up considerable space for decentralized militant actions to occur away from the public callouts.” The proposal emphasizes decentralizing action in order to minimize police efficacy (with examples ranging from incidents during the George Floyd rebellions, to attacks on fascists, to prior years’ May Day calls for autonomous actions). It proposes attacking targets elsewhere in the city at the same time that mass public mobilizations are happening.

I think it’s important in these moments to be clear about how exactly this might move us towards collective liberation. Is the idea to take a kind of vengeful pleasure as the cops become spread thin and helpless, lacking resources and publicly losing their shit? Regardless of whatever else happened, I think a lot of us experienced that particular type of joy last summer. Is it to experiment with our capacity to attack, pitting ourselves against the vast resources of the state? Is it a kind of practice for an insurrection, with many more steps yet to be taken? Could it itself lead to an insurrection?

Peter Gelderloos (and many others) argue that this makes the framework of “anti-fascism” insufficient in a context like the U.S. — settler states encourage a diffuse model of white supremacy, rather than fascism’s centralized model, “because the entire point is to get all people who are classified as white to reproduce it voluntarily” (35). As Yannick Giovanni Marshall writes, “The right to go on a racist expedition to stop, harass, and kill with effective impunity was not invented by the modern police but was woven into the settler project of the US colony. It is an assumed birthright in settler culture.”

Moreover, in contrast to the disciplined adherents of a fascist government, the white mobs of a settler society often seemingly “conflict” with the official views or practices of the government (as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has outlined), but ultimately align as two complementary strategies of enforcing racial order with and without the law. For example, “the regular army provided lethal backup for settler counterinsurgency in slaughtering the buffalo, the food supply of Plains peoples, as well as making continuous raids on settlements to kill or confine the families of the Indigenous fighters” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 220). Hence the apparent conflict between white mobs and the U.S. government — most recently with the notorious January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol takeover — which in reality serves the U.S.’s white supremacist project, while allowing the State itself to look relatively innocent in the process.

## ANARCHISTS' ROLE IN THE RIOT

This is technically true of any nation-state (that its fundamental goal is to take and hold territory), but in a settler-colonial one like the U.S., it means, first of all, that the U.S. has specialized methods of taking and controlling territory that it continues to use on all the populations it controls domestically and attacks abroad. James Grenier calls this the “American way of war” — a type of irregular warfare “whose purpose is to destroy the will of the enemy people or their capacity to resist, employing any means necessary but mainly by attacking civilians and their support systems, such as food supply...[It] encouraged attacks upon and the destruction of noncombatants, villages and agricultural resources ... in shockingly violent campaigns to achieve their goals of conquest” (Grenier, quoted in Dunbar-Ortiz 58, 219).

It also means that the U.S. remains in a (mostly hidden) ongoing war with those it stole the land from, many of whom are still here. We can approach our insurrectionary aspirations in part by making that war more visible and taking a side in it, and with the understanding that the land has been devastated by settlers and needs to be restored to those who have historically shown they are committed to more responsible relations with it. Moreover, many radicals’ utopian ideals or notions (such as “the commons”) are at best tone-deaf to the realities of Indigenous people, and in many cases perpetuate settlers’ hold on the land instead of taking steps to end it. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes in her introduction to *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, with regard to the willful optimism shared by liberals and many radicals: “Those who seek history with an upbeat ending, a history of redemption and reconciliation, may look around and observe that such a conclusion is not visible, not even in utopian dreams of a better society” (2).

Moreover, while individual racists unfortunately exist all around the world, a specific kind of white supremacist vigilante violence has played a key role in establishing and upholding settler colonies like the United States. Dunbar-Ortiz writes: “Western empire was brought about by ‘small groups of frontiersmen, separated from each other by great distances,’ i.e. settler rangers who autonomously destroyed Indigenous towns and food supplies. America’s values of democracy and dispersed, self-sufficient individualism continue to encourage its citizens to independently take initiative to enforce its racist order — the white vigilante mobs we see today are the continuation of a foundational tradition that is critical to the operation of the United States.

In Philly, anarchists were far from being the main character of the 2020 uprisings. Most anarchists attended the Walter Wallace riots around 52<sup>nd</sup> St in October in an observational or supportive role, joining the fierce street fighting initiated by the majority-black residents of that neighborhood. In that context, those who arrived in black bloc were met with skepticism and occasionally with violence. At least one group of anarchists in bloc got jumped near 52<sup>nd</sup> St, while another pair were accused of being cops, then agitators, and narrowly avoided being attacked.

It was heartwarming to see multi-racial groups of people coming together to fight cops in the streets and set things on fire — this happened especially in May, when riots erupted in the wealthier downtown, commercial zone where none of us had anything at stake and everything felt up for grabs. The antipathy towards anarchists in bloc, though, when the riots moved to West Philly — a gentrifying neighborhood where many of us live, but are not originally from — shows us that these multi-racial moments of struggle are far from doing away the real hierarchies and differences between us, even in the joy and chaos of the moment. Many of us who are white anarchists severely underestimate the extent to which non-white people, whether rebels or reactionaries, distrust white people, regardless of what they hear us say about our politics. This distrust is heightened when they see us in their places of residence.

This brings up questions of how (or whether) to participate in such uprisings, and how to present ourselves in the process. One approach would be to show up in a role that’s clearly supportive and shows solidarity — handing out rocks and bats to people fighting cops, offering assistance to people getting tear gassed while looting. Others have pointed out the importance of responding to accusations against us in the moment, when possible, and engaging in conversations about what we’re doing there and why.

As white radicals we can only get more answers to these questions by having more honest conversations about how we relate to and carry ourselves in the midst of a struggle that is fundamentally about and carried out by Black people. As a multi-racial anarchist space, we can look for additional answers by considering how we as anarchists can contribute to destabilizing State power in ways that only we as anarchists will want to do (this aspect is addressed in the following section, “Beyond the Riot”). In the case of white

radicals especially, it would benefit us to pay closer attention to what non-anarchists are saying, since our subcultural isolation can lead us to make mistaken assumptions about what we have in common with other rioters. Anarchists often see riots as some kind of confirmation of our own desires and ways of seeing things, for example, when in reality there is probably a lot going on there that is well out of the scope of our experience and understanding. This doesn't mean compromising our core principles, it just means that none of us know everything and we can benefit from being more flexible and creative, something we pride ourselves on as anarchists anyway.

One example would be to consider the conditions under which something like black bloc emerged and why we tend to react so defensively whenever that tactic is questioned. The bloc has been a major point of identity for most of us anarchists in the U.S. since, to my knowledge, the anti-globalization struggles of the 2000s. In the era of summit-hopping, anarchists would form a massive bloc within an even larger, more liberal march. This allowed them to signal militancy while also using the bigger, more liberal crowd as a shield. This use of bloc continued in bigger cities more recently, for example in New York during the Occupy era.

It's also accustomed us to having to constantly defend the use of bloc — to liberals — since it is now (usually correctly) associated with an intention to escalate or to support escalation in the context of a public demonstration. Despite these interminable arguments, bloc has still been the best way to keep ourselves safe while we engage in property destruction or otherwise break the law. Everyone wearing the same color provides anonymity on a whole different level.

But what about when the larger crowd around us is not a bunch of (mostly white) liberals and pacifists, but Black or other non-white people who are for the most part attacking the police and businesses much more intensely than the individuals in bloc? When people from those populations are threatening or attacking us for arriving dressed all in black, maybe that is no longer the safest outfit for us. Maybe more conversations and propaganda will open up understanding as to why we dress that way, but in its absence, it is understandable why the intentions of a group of white people in bloc roving around a riotous Black neighborhood, the residences and existences of whom have already been under threat by white people for generations, are not automatically trusted. And when we are mostly barely keeping up in the streets, and are not really capable of defending ourselves from attack by people

crucial to organize in a decentralized manner; they managed to stick together through a “collective focus on defeating their enslavers’ attempts to control them” (110). This was the only thing like “centralization” that brought them together, given the significant differences among them. Decisions were made democratically, according to Maroon's research, then coordinated and carried out by decentralized groups. Decentralization, as many insurrectionary anarchists have also tried to point out, does not have to mean a lack of coordination. These formations prevented imperial powers like the Dutch and English from being able to target a particular group or leadership and thus take out the whole movement. Decentralization is the only way to make an insurrectionary movement unbeatable against a resourced and centralized State power.

The Haitian Revolution from 1791-1804, which is the only revolution in which an enslaved population rebelled against their imperial captors and won, also used decentralized elements. Once the revolution was over, its leaders came into power and sought to tie Haitian peasants to plantation agriculture once more and force their participation in the global economy. Ordinary Haitians resisted this throughout the 1800s, acquiring land for themselves rather than working for others. They withdrew from the market economy by squatting former plantations, moving to remote mountains, and literally hiding their farms from view. This land-based strategy was coupled with armed resistance from below — setting fire to slave huts, sugar mills, and other plantation infrastructure, plus continued practices of West African voodoo and secret societies, which nurtured traditional spirituality and the lifeways of a culture. Johnhenry Gonzalez notes that by seeking refuge in the hills and appropriating land on which to grow their own food, they gradually undermined the plantation system and ultimately destroyed it. Gonzalez argues that these land-based approaches made Haiti a “maroon nation” that lived outside the world economy of its day.

The original Indigenous inhabitants of what is now the United States also managed to maintain their distance for generations despite state aggression. This history has many potential lessons and ways of reshaping our worldviews, and we can't do it justice here. The most fundamental lesson, though, is again about the primacy of land — the United States remains a settler-colonial nation that is all about maintaining its hold on land that it stole.

## THE CONTEXT OF ANTI-STATE STRUGGLE IN THE UNITED STATES

The picture I've been painting of black bloc anarchists stepping into a Black neighborhood that's already on fire leads us to some bigger questions about the context in which most anarchists find ourselves in this blood-soaked, colonized, white supremacist continent. When we ask the deep question — how could an insurrection actually happen here? — and begin to prepare ourselves to participate in its answer, we must take into account several things.

The United States is an enemy as such, but also insofar as it is still the primary manager of a capitalist world system. Less acknowledged and even less understood, the United States is also a settler colonial project that depends for its existence on an ongoing legacy of chattel slavery. Certain populations on this continent have been at war with the settler project, whether to maintain territory or evade forced labor, since its inception. While there have certainly been many white radicals and anarchists who took immense risks to fight American oppression, the most forceful and effective resistance has by necessity always been by Black people and Indigenous nations directly threatened with extinction by the U.S. Studying these historical successes and their limitations can offer us some important insights into how insurrection could spread in the United States.

Though we can call very few revolutions or struggles “successful” when global capitalism and colonization are still in effect, the experiments of insurgents demonstrate pretty conclusively the limits of centralization and the advantages of decentralized fighting when it comes to winning particular battles or regaining stolen territory. Russell Maroon Shoatz, a formerly BLA-affiliated political prisoner and theorist, argues that the Maroon tradition in North and South America shows over and over again the efficacy of decentralized warfare, rather than a centralized party or vanguard: “Throughout the western hemisphere, we witness these collective Maroons developing and using a very effective form of decentralized organizing that not only served to help them defeat their former enslavers, but has helped them remain autonomous from all unwanted overseers for hundreds of years – until our time” (110).

As Shoatz points out in his discussion of the history of Suriname, the Africans who had been brought there and then became Maroons were from many different backgrounds from one another. This was another reason it was

we thought might be comrades, does the militancy of the all-black aesthetic really still feel appropriate for us?

The geography of the city is complex and also worth considering along race and class lines, whether in the context of mass rioting or autonomous demos. On the first night of the riots following Walter Wallace's death in October, the big march that gathered in West Philly split between protesters who headed east to the more gentrified University City area, and others who turned back west to the precinct where Wallace's family was gathered. Tension erupted in this split between people who felt that everyone should follow the lead of the grieving family and people who wanted to target UCity because it was a whiter and wealthier neighborhood. In the end, the UCity march did significant damage to police stations in that neighborhood and marched victoriously back west to 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, where by that time rioting and looting had already been initiated on a massive scale by residents of that area.

## BEYOND THE RIOT

Anarchists are not necessarily the most militant rioters or looters, then, but we have visions of a future free of oppression, and of how to get there, that others may not. With regard to street fighting and action, this means we can think purposefully and in advance about what we might target in moments of mass uprisings. As the Seattle anarchists and others have pointed out, we can intentionally decentralize our attacks so as to make it harder for police to do their job. This can prolong riots and expand the scope of an uprising's destructiveness, but let's not lose sight of the fact that the most desirable outcome of this approach would be to ultimately make that job — policing — permanently impossible. In order to do so, we must again think not only about decentralizing our actions, but also what our actions target. What elements of the State might we be able to take out that, coordinated with a sustained crisis of policing, could take mass uprisings over the precipice of State collapse?

These questions might feel like a total nosedive into the realm of fantasy at this point (sorry to the Philly nihilists reading this), but I think it makes sense for those of us who talk about destroying the State and are out in the streets about it to think about how we might get there. Moreover, if things eventually do get completely out of the State's control, how would we then help hold whatever it is we've gained? Especially if defending a city like Philly involves opening up resources on a massive scale, so that the State can't creep back in because it turns out people can't live without it. It also involves protecting comrades against right-wing mob reaction and intervening so that certain other groups can't swoop in and turn it all into some kind of disgusting authoritarian socialist paradise. It's not possible, nor is it desirable, for us to plan these things in advance, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't think and dream and prepare for them.

In the Bay Area, radicals have taken up a use of clandestine attack that, while not happening at exactly the same time as mass protests in the streets, capitalizes on popular sentiment against governance and directly targets those responsible. In July 2020, as resistance swelled around the crises of policing and housing, vandals targeted the mayor of Oakland's home; in January 2021, Nancy Pelosi's house in San Francisco was vandalized along with that of Mitch McConnell in Kentucky, expressing widespread rage at the time about the U.S. government's failure to give us our money. Also in January, more than 30 anti-racists attacked San Francisco's ICE office, expressing an

intention "to initiate what will hopefully be the first in a series of breaks into and out of prisons and detention centers throughout the country." It remains to be seen if more of us will dare to emulate (and take much further) actions like these that directly target State institutions and the individuals in charge, especially in moments when the destabilizing context of mass protests might exponentially multiply such attacks' effects.