

There is no time to waste seeking the comforts of being recognized as virtuous in defeat, of appearing on the right side of history even as history blazes and burns indifferently ahead. Success will not be measured by the degree to which we are represented by power, by the degree revolt accumulates as images, but only by whether we abolish any power that could possibly hope to ever recognize us.



LIBERAL INFERNOS

anarchy emerges as the surrounding crowd that pulls them free. When officials try to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate protestors, anarchy blurs the boundaries of conflict, scrambles the coordinates of what's at stake, and invites more and more into the struggle. When authorities demand that everyone identify themselves, anarchy emerges as the masks that are pulled up over everyone's faces. And when those in power demand to negotiate with representatives of the revolt, anarchy emerges as the reply that "no one could ever represent us." For anarchy, there is no need to be redeemed or made righteous, no desire to be anointed or to ascend to a higher place, but only a struggle against power wherever our world and its inhabitants continue to burn.

Once a genocide has begun it will never exhaust itself, it is always able to find something further to consume. The inferno spreads, igniting ever more as the liberal order works to ensure that the flames burn equally and do not discriminate. Genocides only end when they are defeated, when they are *forced to stop*. Within the revolt against the liberal order, there is an insurgent and impious choreography that works to dismantle the hell that power has everywhere built, that aspires to destitute everything that dominates and thus dismantle and destroy whatever keeps the inferno burning. A greater wealth than what could ever be found in heaven awaits those who dare to extinguish what so liberally incinerates us all.

LIBERAL INFERNOS

IAN ALAN PAUL

First published on Ill Will, April 27 2024.

Cover photo by Larry Schwarm.

While authoritarianism is in many ways distinct from liberalism, both share the same love of power, both keep the inferno burning using different means. Whereas authoritarianism can respond to revolt only by directly confronting it, liberalism's ability to incorporate and recuperate revolt represents a more developed form of power. In the final analysis, however, although the liberal order occasionally finds it necessary to condemn the excesses of authoritarian regimes, it remains eager to cooperate and form alliances with them. Anarchy, on the other hand, the movement to destitute each and every form of constituted power, is something which liberalism is unable to capture nor consume as fuel. Anarchy is precisely what refuses to be represented and recognized, what cannot be definitively depicted or digested or defanged as an image. Anarchy can only ever be glimpsed when it jumps into the flames of the inferno to confront them. Because it cannot be recuperated, because it is far too profane, liberalism subjects anarchy to the most extreme forms of violence and repression, those which aim to simply erase it from the Earth and deny it any possible afterlife. This is why when liberalism represses anarchy—suspending all rights, abandoning any veneer of norms, freely unleashing its violence—it can so easily be mistaken for authoritarianism. Posting flyers brings charges of terrorism, raising bail money causes police to raid your home, and camping in a forest to halt its destruction is answered with an execution. Even posing the question, “What are you doing?”, to the thugs of liberal law and order as they brutalize someone on the street will have you thrown on the concrete and cuffed. Liberalism cannot tolerate what refuses to play along, what chooses to respond and relate directly to the world rather than always defer, capitulate, and submit to what so densely represents and represses it.

It is exactly because it eludes being integrated as another pillar of the liberal order, that it resists being contained and controlled, that anarchy continues to pose such a threat. When a ship attempts to depart with munitions, anarchy emerges as the shutting down of the port. When one university encampment is violently dispersed, anarchy emerges as the multiplication of many new encampments. When a city bus is filled with arrestees, anarchy emerges as blockades that prevent the bus from carrying everyone off to jail. When someone is grabbed on the street by a cop,

the world into its flames ever more inclusively, the inferno grows larger by the day. By diversifying what does the burning, the racialized, sexualized, and classed lives that are the focal points of the fires can continue to be burnt. Although liberalism cannot promise to temper its violence, it is committed to more equitably representing and recognizing everyone within its deployment. Everything can be conscripted and made scripture. Let the unruly energy of revolt burn away so a docile saint can emerge from the smoke in its place.

The ideology of liberalism also functions in a third way, as a weapon of counterinsurgency, when it is deployed to help incorporate and *reabsorb* the energy of the revolt. Its operation aims to fragment the revolt apart, cleaving open and then sharpening divisions between the saved and the damned, the voices of reason and the cries of madness, the blessed protestor and the cursed rioter. When liberal authorities enter into dialogue with the so-called representatives of a revolt, their goal is to turn parts of the revolt against itself. Before sending in their own police, it is often helpful to introduce new lines of division by recruiting new officers from within the movement, in the form of protestors who have chosen to negotiate, agree to concessions, and ultimately cooperate with their own repression. We are instructed that if we don't find our proper place in the furnaces, if we don't help keep the fires going uninterrupted, that we may find ourselves consumed within them. All can become martyrs. There's enough room in hell for everyone.

For revolt to remain a weapon, for it to pose any threat at all, the spell of liberalism must be broken. There is no time to waste seeking the comforts of being recognized as virtuous in defeat, of appearing on the right side of history even as history blazes and burns indifferently ahead. Success will not be measured by the degree to which we are represented by power, by the degree revolt accumulates as images, but only by whether we *abolish any power* that could possibly hope to ever recognize us.

Confronting the liberal order first requires that we recognize that liberalism is not opposed to authoritarianism but only to anarchy, to that which remains incommensurate with and thus dissolves power as such.

The liberal order overseeing and administering the genocide in Palestine is built upon the marriage of egalitarian values and exterminating violence, upon the intimate coupling of supposedly hallowed rights and the hell it unleashes upon the world. Arms must continue to be delivered, just as their use must be denounced and condemned. Demonstrations must be celebrated, just as orders must be given to smother them with tear gas. Everything thus burns twice, as the fuel of liberal politics and the fuel of liberal carnage, feeding an inferno whose fires rage *ever more democratically*. If there is no need to resolve the formal tension between its abstract ideals and its violent realities, this is because liberalism is the indefinite elaboration of this contradiction. For every sanctified constitution, there is a detention camp that will never close; for every promised equality, there is an economy imposing its cruel hierarchies upon every area of life; for each civic norm, a mob of police marching through the streets drunk on power.

The liberal order takes the moral high ground in a world where rubble accumulates and graves are dug everywhere below. It offers breathing room for regret and remorse in a world where machines of mass death asphyxiate ever more numerous lives. The scorching desolation of the liberal order burns brightly in organizations such as the International Criminal Court, who document each and every detail of the ongoing genocide only to file them away for later review. It is kept alight by heads of state who speak of the sacred right of national self-defense while commanding those who live beneath the genocidal waves of violence to strictly adhere to the rules of war. University presidents also do their part to tend to the inferno, invoking the need to preserve a safe learning environment while positioning snipers on campus roofs and calling in militarized riot police to drag their students away. Just as Aquinas imagined that the saved would experience nothing but joy as they looked down upon the damned burning for eternity below, liberals nurture their immaculately beautiful souls as they serenely watch their social order transform ever more of the world to ash. Heaven is little more than the means of managing and maintaining the hell it everywhere sets aflame.

It is a bleak irony that the liberal regimes that defined themselves through their opposition to the genocides of the 20th century now resolutely cooperate with one another to facilitate genocide in the 21st. Indeed, any remaining defenders of liberalism must ask themselves not why the liberal order has failed to put an end to the genocide in Palestine, but why the liberal order so eagerly supports and sustains it. Alliances remain firm, logistical supports stay online, trade routes flow, the international system survives, while an entire people is buried beneath burning debris. What is liberalism other than the demand that its processes be respected, that its rules be followed, and that its elected leaders be knelt to, even as its forms of devastation burn without restraint? To remain a free and open society, the population must be brutalized and the prisons must be filled. To defend universal human rights, the killing must continue at a steady pace. To save the soul of liberalism, no one who steps out of line can be spared. This is the reality of today's liberal order: a sweeping and unrelenting violence executed by those who say "*never again.*"

Liberalism sees revolt as something that was necessary and needed in the past, but which is always too extreme and explosive for the present. Rebellion has its value, but only as a memory. When it comes to life as an encampment on a campus or a march pouring through the streets, it must be quickly repressed. There is a spectacular form of capture at work in liberalism, which aspires to neutralize all revolt by transforming it ever more into *an image*, into a tame history which can be displayed in the halls of power, into a resistance that has been successfully pummeled into the past tense. The liberal imagination celebrates revolt as something *represented* while working assiduously to pacify its *present* reality, seeks to burn away its volatile potential in order to then archive and exhibit the remaining cinders. As they're being pepper sprayed and ziptied, protestors are instructed to submit and surrender to their defeat today so they can be recognized as righteous tomorrow, to repent now so that when the fight is over and they've lost they can be redeemed again.

The recent wave of unrest against the genocide in Palestine has not been immune to this confusion, which functions as a form of internal pacification. Liberalism triumphs wherever those who step onto the

streets are convinced to subordinate the act of resistance to its appearance as representation, believing that revolting against power is ultimately only ever a means of being recognized by the powerful. Arendt's aphorism that "the most radical revolutionary will become a conservative on the day after the revolution" only reveals the degree to which liberalism has colonized the understanding of revolt, the degree to which every form of resistance can only be contemplated as another dialogue with power aspiring only to be represented more fully within it, another image to be incorporated into the panorama of liberal governance. The chant, "The Whole World is Watching," which regularly breaks out at demonstrations as people are being dragged away into the backs of police vans, shows just how many have already learned to embrace themselves as images. The problem, of course, is precisely that people are *only watching*, that even would-be insurgents understand being seen as an end in itself, that the desire to be recognized usurps the desire to revolt.

Liberalism's recuperation of revolt is what allows it to seek forgiveness for all of its sins, to be perpetually cleansed and reborn. The penance it pays for all of its historical wrongs becomes a source not merely of consecration, but of self-renewal. Past domination is repackaged into marketing material, monuments, and museums, evidence of the liberal order's progress toward perfection. The heads cracked open by police in Selma are held up as the testament of a post-racial America, rather than as one entry in an archive of racialized brutality that continues to expand. Just as liberal societies always memorialize their own past violence in order to claim that they have freed the world of it, they insist that their violence in the present is an integral part of the liberal order which must be preserved in order to be able to absolve the violence once again. Each liberal order aspires to dominate you without appearing to, to repress you while presenting themselves as the last defense against your repression.

On the stained glass windows of liberalism's cathedrals there are depictions of all female fighting units shelling refugee camps in the distance, of weapons manufacturers with demographically diverse corporate boards, and prison guards undergoing training to address inmates with their preferred pronouns as they lock them in their cells each night. By folding