



DS: Lastly, I want to say that our project with A Murder of Crows is not one of convincing anybody of anything or wanting anyone to become our followers. We want people to think on their own, to use their critical faculties in understanding and analyzing the world around them. The articles we present in the magazine are a communication of analyses we find useful. There's no finality to what we say. We're open to a contention of ideas and practices that subvert this society. We want to find others who are interested in the development of this project, regardless of any labels.

KK * DS: Buck up and let's fuckin' roll



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*Conversation first published in Modesto Anarcho 4 (July 2007):
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We want to challenge each other and ourselves with willful determination. Our freedom rests on our ability to rediscover our power instead of becoming continually crippled by our lack of it.

KK: Every model that exists today has failed and we shouldn’t waste any more time. We need to completely abandon the stagnant formulas that dominate our ideas about how we should go about fighting back in this world. We have limitless opportunities to develop our projects exactly the way we want to, with others who share our perspectives and goals. We should attack domination while ensuring that we can sustain social war in the long term.

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ANARCHY, ACTIVISM AND INSURRECTION: A CONVERSATION WITH A MURDER OF CROWS

INTRODUCTION:

A Murder of Crows was an anarchist magazine published in Seattle in 2006 and 2007. The magazine was focused on critically analyzing the institutions of social domination and exploitation. The editors viewed the struggle against these institutions as hemmed in by people who would prefer to see things stay as they are and despite all odds they articulate a desire and willingness to fight against the immiseration that surrounds us. Their goal was to encourage greater critical thought concerning methods and strategies of social struggle.

In the following text “KK” and “DS” are interviewed by Modesto Anarcho (MA), an anarchist publication and crew out of Modesto, CA that continues to fight for a classless and stateless humanity.

We’re interested in social war and autonomy with anyone who shares that same aim, anarchist, insurrectionary, or neither.

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MA: How is insurrectionary anarchism as a practical tendency of action different from approaches to social change that involve formal organizations? What's the difference between formal and informal organization?

DS: First off, Kellen would agree with me that this label “insurrectionary anarchist,” like all labels, is limiting. We take what we want from a bunch of radical ideas and tendencies while rejecting any aspects of them that we don't find useful or worthwhile. So we want to reject becoming messials of any category, label, or ideological division. We're interested in social war and autonomy with anyone who shares that same aim, anarchist, insurrectionary, or neither. There's the saying that in the supermarket of ideas you should take what you find relevant and discard the rest. This should be done without buying into the complete package of an ideology. Steal what you need and burn the rest.

However, insurrectionary anarchism, which is just one anarchist methodology, makes the most sense to us as a tactic and a strategy in opposing the social order. We embrace insurrection as a dynamic and uncompromising attack against everything that makes us not free. It appeals to us because it poses itself against the failures of cooperation with the state, the Left, pacifism, reformism, fetishizing armed struggle, and so on that are prevalent

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MA: What are some things that you would suggest young people do if they are interested in doing some projects that would be organized along the lines of insurrectionary anarchist praxis?

DS: Insurrection will be made by all ages, not just the young. We'd suggest that people develop a stronger theoretical basis for a revolutionary practice. A lot of anarchist projects in the US are tedious, formulaic, and lack a dynamism that is vital to experimentation and growth. Our risks as anarchists are not confined merely to the kidnapping and imprisonments by the state's repressive apparatus. We need to risk acting and relating in ways that are both critical and experimental. There is a lack of energy amongst us because we fear thinking outside of the boxes presented to us for so long by the anarchist milieu, which is often stuck in the trappings of activism, Leftism, capitalist social identities, and subcultural ghettos. We've got to fight this inertness if we are to make ourselves a real and formidable threat or relegate ourselves to being another symbolic opposition easily swept into the dustbin of history.

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dens, squatting buildings, squatting in the woods, etc. Some of these were extensions of specific insurrectionary projects, while others were part of people's practical rejection of rent and private property.

DS: We're interested in experimentation with autonomous space and what kind of possibilities it can open up for us. In fact, it will be absolutely necessary to acquire, reclaim, or occupy space that we can use for things for recreating our lives, for learning new ways of interacting that aren't based on all this alienating shit, all the buying and selling and internet "socializing." We're so disconnected from the ecosystems we live in. We don't even have any kind of direct relationship with what most people call "nature." So autonomous space could give us the physical territory to start learning how to grow food and survive without destroying other people and our ecological surroundings.

MA: What are some communities, movements, projects, and places around the world that you would contend are showing insurrectionary anarchist tactics and ideas in practice (although maybe without that label).

DS: We're not going to say what's already been better written. The best reference would be to check out our magazine for several examples of insurrection and re-

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KK: I think affinity is the best basis for organizing ourselves. Affinity is generally misunderstood because the term was used a lot in the anti-globalization movement in reference to organizing for various summit protests. To these people affinity was synonymous with people you simply know or who you are friends with, which completely empties the word of any meaning. Affinity is deep reciprocal knowledge of people's ideas, perspectives, personal relations, how they work, and so on.

It's a way of directly relating to each other that involves delving into our similarities and differences in terms of what we think constitutes the present social order and how to go about combating it. People try to develop affinity with one another with the perspective of building a foundation for action. The face-to-face interactions, in the forms of debate, discussion, planning, etc. provide us a strong base that goes much further than uncritical false unity that others promote. There's something more genuine and direct about this face-to-face communication that allows us to know each other intimately. The internet and all that has degraded our ability to communicate about things that actually matter.

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A common critique you'll hear brought against affinity-based organizing is that it has the potential for informal hierarchies to develop. In reality the probability of informal hierarchies is equivalent in both formal and informal organizations. No matter what, we have to combat hierarchies, it's not just the form of organization; it's also interpersonal relationships as well, like ignoring or erasing people or positions based on someone's gender, race, etc. On the other hand we've seen the reverse mirror image which validates people's ideas based solely on these identities. We're not interested in just inverting societies standards, we want to recreate everything ourselves, redefine everything.

DS: A lot of times we've seen women being marginalized in discussions. And there's also the assumption, which is itself a product of hierarchical social relationships, that anarchist theory is the intellectual realm of men only. There is an insidious way that anarchists have compartmentalized activity and ideas. People see *A Murder of Crows* and think it's not for women. Some people think the magazine is only relevant to anarchist men because our strategy doesn't have the heavy emphasis on identity that other magazines do, like *Left Turn*, *Clamor*, and others that anarchists read.

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author of *City of Quartz* and *Planet of Slums*, talks about the "prison-mall" that cities have become. What he means by this is that cities are areas that physically express the dictates of capitalism. Public spaces in which people can gather are being eliminated because they can pose a danger to the social order, and they are being transformed into areas solely for commerce and designed for easy surveillance and control of populations.

You've got to think that cities, towns, suburbs, etc. are a product of specific social relations; therefore if we are talking about total transformation, our living spaces are going to require complete transformation as well. But in the here and now, we're going to have to reclaim and occupy physical space.

DS: So yes, we are fighting for room to breathe in the present. So there is a definite necessity to link the creation of autonomous space and insurrectionary anarchism. They cannot be separated since ultimately what we want is the ability to live without being dominated. We will need space in which we can organize, relate, develop our theory and practice, and physically sustain ourselves.

KK: Many IA comrades we've met have been involved with autonomous space via social centers, starting gar-

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It's not a bad thing that anyone would be a part of a worker's co-ops. But they're irrelevant as a strategy for undermining and overthrowing capitalism; they still have wage labor, recreate the division between life and work, make you your own boss, etc. But some radical land projects interest us due to their capacity to sustain those in revolt. However many become an end in themselves, reinforcing the idea that if everyone did land projects that we can merely secede from capitalism.

Many think that a revolution is possible without decisive and destructive attack on the social order. They think that somehow the state might wither away, and their coops, bike shops, vegan cafés are going to provide the infrastructure for a new world. It's not going to happen, sorry. We aren't fetishizing insurrection, we just recognize it as a necessity towards our self-liberation.

MA: How would you say insurrectionary anarchism is linked with the creation of autonomous space? Should insurrectionary anarchists use autonomous space to further their projects?

KK: Nearly every inch of the world has been completely transformed and colonized by capitalism for its needs. Capital wants to commodify all space, and to reduce our interactions to simply buying and selling. Mike Davis,²

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The conflict so often discussed in our magazine is seen through the social order's lens, one that has made violence and destruction some macho expression of maleness. It's not. Women do attack policemen and trash stores, take part in sabotage and all other facets of social war. All of us need to step the fuck up. We have to find our capabilities again, the ones that have for so long been buried beneath social roles and servitude.

KK: Back to the formal/informal question. Many anarchist formal organizations are based on principles of unity, which represent the lowest common denominator of ideas. These often look like “we are against racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism” and so on, into infinity. This type of group often gathers a variety of anarchists with very different perspectives under one banner. Similarities and differences are rarely gone into in an in-depth way because everyone in the group is an “anarchist.” And, anyone with any experience in the anarchist scene in the US knows that the label anarchist is extremely vague. These groups, which are built on a false unity, generally die out pretty quickly and end up spending most of their time bickering.

On the other hand, there are anarchist formal organizations that have constitutions and programs of struggle, which are decided upon in organizational congresses.⁷

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Obviously this is a problem for us. Let's say an anarchist formal organization adopts a position. But then let's say the position runs counter to the situation people find themselves in. What do they do? The organization has adopted a position as decided upon by its membership, so they're supposed to stick with it, at least until the next congress. This wouldn't give us the necessary flexibility to respond to conditions as they change and events as they develop. Situations arise quite quickly, and we need to be ready for them; preordained programs of action can be highly limiting

DS: There are also more general problems that occur with many types of organizations such as an organization lasting beyond any need for it. Thus the organization becomes an end in itself. It's like night of the living dead the corpse stays alive well after it should have remained dead. And many organizations embrace a quantitative understanding of social struggle that puts emphasis on membership building and recruitment. This is part of a tendency we see in how various organizations and groups relate to people as instruments for political goals, as potential recruits, symbols, and causes, which mirrors the social order's way of utilizing people as tools in various power games.

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that keeps us exploited and dependent. So for us, we have to be able to organize for attack before we can start dreaming of utopias.

KK: "Building alternatives" in the anarchist milieu consists of such things as bike collectives, worker's coops, Indymedia, "community" gardening projects, and Really Really Free Markets. Most of these are an extension of anarcho-activism, a place to volunteer and "help the community." Some actually think that these are the infrastructure of a new world that will eventually take the place of capitalism. Hilarious.

Some of these "alternatives" are completely institutionalized, meaning they are legal non-profits funded and dependent upon grants. Here in Seattle, people promote community gardens, which are sanctioned and regulated by the city; that's not an alternative. On the other hand, bike co-ops are one of the purest forms of anarchist subcultural consumerism. It's the perfect volunteer activity for anarcho-bike enthusiasts. Obviously it presents no challenge at all to capitalism, and promotes the Leftist ideology of alternative and green transportation. Bikes are about as green as the petrochemical factories that produce their tires, and the mines that provide the metals for their frames.

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So to address your question again, we don't need to be reliant on the Left for developing class-consciousness. Class-consciousness is not as scarce as some assume it to be. The widespread destruction of businesses and the attacking of the police in many riots make this very clear. What is not present is class solidarity and widespread class conflict. We believe that the experiences of the exploited, through direct action and social conflict, are the main force for transforming people's perspectives and relations.

MA: There are some that say that insurrectionary anarchism focuses more on the negative, and not enough on building alternatives. How would you respond?

DS: That's completely true. A negation of the institutions of power requires the destruction of everything

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KK: Point is, organization matters and it's always a question of what type is going to help us meet the ends we have in mind.

MA: How can we draw new people into the anarchist movement without projects like Food Not Bombs, Really Really Free Markets, etc.?

KK: Considering that literally thousands of people in the US have become involved in anarchist activity prior to the debut of the Really Really Free Market, it's not really worth addressing this project as though it's been a main contributing factor to the growth of interest in anarchist ideas and action of recent times.

DS: Likewise, the Really Really Free Market is a project that has unfortunately met with little criticism or analysis of its relevance to anarchist goals. Having a marketplace where people share mostly discarded items that are products of capitalism won't foster any autonomy or facilitate social struggles. It is akin to dumpster diving—an activity that may help us spend less money and work less but all within the realm of capitalist survival. This isn't about rejecting it and forming some anti-Really Really Free Market ideology. This is about looking at it as an activity that may not be doing much at all to get us closer to any kind of anarchist way of relating. We

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As for Food Not Bombs (FNB), it should be said that it is more of a charity project that some anarchists participate uncritically, a free social service that fosters no sort of autonomy and merely alleviates a very small and localized portion of one of capital's disasters: hunger.

KK: FNB, Critical Mass, Really Really Free Markets, and so on are generally easy to start and do, thus a lot of people get involved in them. Many people in the anarchist scene want to do something, anything, so they get involved with projects like this. Something isn't always better than nothing.

I was personally involved in FNB for a couple of years when I first became interested in anarchism. I wanted to put some of my ideas in practice in a collective setting and the only activities in my city were FNB and Critical Mass. As a young person trying to get involved, these projects were easy to join, but at the same time I actually think they were detrimental to my development because they got me oriented towards a sort of alternative social

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I was personally involved in FNB for a couple of years when I first became interested in anarchism. I wanted to put some of my ideas in practice in a collective setting and the only activities in my city were FNB and Critical Mass. As a young person trying to get involved, these projects were easy to join, but at the same time I actually think they were detrimental to my development because they got me oriented towards a sort of alternative social

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KK: Also, we have to think about how we relate to specific situations. For example in response to the Iraq war, many ad-hoc anti-war groups were set up in the US by a variety of people, not necessarily by any Leftist group. On some occasions these groups presented opportunities for people to discuss and implement radical strategies, in many cases they were dead ends for any direct action.

So, we must make the distinction between these ad-hoc groups that arise around certain issues like the war, pollution, and organizations such as unions, parties, and NGOs. The latter are all institutionalized bureaucratic organizations that seek to represent people and causes. The ad-hoc organizations, however, can become part of the Left, but that isn't always the case. It's complicated, and you have to be smart about it, otherwise you end up being used by someone or some organization.

DS: That being said, we should never seek to strengthen the Left. We should challenge Leftism in anarchist thought as well as oppose openly the programs and proposals of the Left in any situation of social struggle. If we fail to do this without mercy or hesitance, we aid our own disposal at the hands of a new set of masters who will, as history has always shown, show us no mercy when we oppose their version of exploitation. All you've got to do is read about the Russian Revolution₉

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Socialist Organization, for example, have dozens of monthly events, lots of literature, speakers, funding, etc. so people join them who aren't necessarily committed to Leftist ideologies or programs.

On the other hand, there are many on the Left who are much more ideologically committed. These people propose more symbolic activity intended to appeal to those in power, or activities that seek to show large numbers of people while deemphasizing direct action. On occasion they propose direct action as a last resort and as simply a tactic—a means—towards political power.

DS: If you look at Bangladesh in recent times you'll see how various political factions use mob violence and rioting in order to disrupt other political parties' functions or to debilitate the ruling party's own programs. Violence was widespread in Dhaka during the elections of early 2007. And it took place at the encouragement of parties who wished to dominate the government. That kind of rioting has nothing to do with direct action as an aspect of autonomous organization. It was a harnessing of anger and a channeling of it into violence that could be directed for a different set of aspiring rulers. Again, we need to be critical. Not every violent clash is revolutionary just because it uses violence and sabotage. We have to see what underlies it and what it is being used for.

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DS: I spent over a year doing weekly FNB. At that time I did not consider myself anarchist but could more accurately be labeled an activist. FNB fit with the activist way of relating to people. The poor and homeless were interested in our food because it was convenient and easy. On a practical level, we were just another charity group feeding the hungry and feeling bad for them as they left.

As a project it didn't foster any sort of autonomous mode of sustenance but rather reinforced an institutional dependence on charity. We have to be critical of these projects and really ask ourselves, "Is this a meaningful and useful activity that meets our aims and goals of destroying capital?" I think FNB fails in doing so but yet it's been widely embraced throughout the anarchist milieu.

MA: How can we interest people in our ideas and then get them active in more militant forms of action?

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KK: A lot of anarchists just want others to accept the ideological package of anarchy. Our goal is not the promotion of an ideology or a label. Instead we want to see the exploited autonomously organize themselves. Being insurrectionary anarchists does not oblige us to promote that perspective as an ideology. Rather we think the insurrectionary methodology—autonomy, self-organization, conflictuality, and so on—is most appropriate for successful social struggle.

DS: And secondly you’re asking, “how, on a practical level, do we get these people to take more conflictual activity?” Becoming active in “militant forms of action” is not our greatest interest since the idea of militancy can and often is divorced from the quality of theory that should back any anarchist projects.

KK: Also, the notion of us trying to get people active implies an organizer-organized relationship as well. We’re much more interested in relating to people in a horizontal way. Also we are not going to be the main catalyst for getting people to be more conflictual. A lot of that is going to come from people’s everyday experiences in

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KK: We recognize that there are individuals from the Left who become interested in anarchist projects and there is potential for them to work with us. On an individual basis, people are much easier to work with, but we have to be wary of strategies that are proposed which would drag us back into the paradigm of representation and alternative management schemes. For example, if we were trying to plan some kind of action against the war it wouldn’t be necessary to exclude everyone who was a member of some Left group. Some of these people may be interested in taking a project in a radical direction. Many people, especially in larger cities in the US, get involved in Leftist projects because they are more widespread and “active.” Groups like the International

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But then again, in Italy several years ago, in a town where an incinerator was being built, anarchists blew up a pylon that supplied electricity to the worksite. People in the town were extremely supportive of the action, and when anarchists participated in demonstrations against the incinerator later on, people came up to anarchists telling them that that action was great. So it goes both ways, and we have to use our heads and not treat every situation in a formulaic way.

MA: What would you say to those who claim that while unions, the general left, etc. may be reformist, they are the biggest vehicles for creating class (or any other) consciousness in people that exists right now in the US, so therefore it should be strengthened and worked with?

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... the part that anarchists can play in those situations is to push those ruptures further by intervening in the conflict in a way that promotes, through action and ideas, autonomy, direct action, and the rejection the political process completely.

For instance, in France during the fight against the CPE, a bill intended to increase bosses' power at work, people took action to extend the conflict by attempting to paralyze the economy. Train stations were blockaded, attempts were made to communicate with other workers who weren't involved, people transformed demonstrations into riots, etc. They weren't promoting an ideology; they were creating momentum through their actions. And these actions, this practical experience, subverted a variety of social separations such as work, academia, racial boundaries, breaking the social peace through direct action against cops, political structures, business, etc.

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MA: Does the importance that insurrectionary anarchy places on “organizing for attack” mean that some people will feel alienated from certain modes of struggle? Is it simply a push for anarchism to be more “militant?”

KK: Sure, some people will feel alienated from it, but then again, a lot of people are alienated from ritualized demonstrations with hippies, weirdoes, leftist sects, and so on marching around in circles. The thing is, we are socialized to be passive, to have shit thrown in our face all day long by bosses, cops, social workers, etc. This society has debilitated us, so we feel like conflict should be avoided, and we should just accept things as they are. Feeling alienated is a condition of our existence under capitalism, and we’ve got to undo its effects. We’ll have to unlearn this conditioning through our actions and attempts at transforming our relations.

DS: The idea of militancy is highly problematic from our perspective. But as a short answer, no we don’t just want people to be more “militant.”

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There is a fetishization of militancy in the American radical scene, a glorification of violence, weapons, etc. This includes anarchists too. So we hear completely uncritical and idiotic glorification of the Weathermen, the Black Liberation Army, and even Hezbollah. People talk about going underground or doing one major action, as if these are glorious things to sacrifice your life for. But there is no glory in sacrifice or isolation.

In Anne Hansen’s book Direct Action, she describes in great detail the fear, alienation, and social paralysis that resulted from living completely in secrecy while trying to undertake a few large underground actions. There will always be risk in revolting, and we have to look out for repression and our security. But we can do this without becoming slaves to causes that lose relevance to our desires for something completely different than this society.

MA: Some have charged that adding militant tactics to certain struggles equates to vanguardism, or using struggles that are not our own to our personal gain. How would you respond to that?

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