Ukraine and the Future of Social Movements

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War supplants participatory insurrection with the spectacle of professionalized violence, sidelining the general population.

Beneath the paving stones, the counterrevolution.

The professionalization of rioting.

The worst-case scenario.

Ukraine & the Future of Social Movements

We have heard terrifying stories from Ukraine: anarchists participating in anti-government street-fighting behind nationalist banners, anarchist slogans and historical figures appropriated by fascists… a dystopia in which familiar movements and strategies reappear with our enemies at the helm.

This text is a clumsy first attempt to identify the important questions for anarchists elsewhere around the world to discuss in the wake of the events in Ukraine. We present it humbly, acknowledging that our information is limited, hoping that others will correct our errors and improve on our analysis. It has been difficult to maintain contact with comrades in the thick of things; surely it is frustrating to be peppered with ill-informed questions amid the tragedies of civil war.

What is happening in Ukraine and Venezuela appears to be a reactionary counterattack within the space of social movements. This may be a sign of worse things to come—we can imagine a future of rival fascisms, in which the possibility of a struggle for real liberation becomes completely invisible. Here are our preliminary hypotheses about the events in Ukraine and an interview with an anarchist in Kiev.

First Hypothesis:
The events in Ukraine must be understood as part of the same global trajectory of revolt as the Arab Spring, the plaza occupations in Spain, Occupy, and the Gezi uprising in Turkey. This is not good news.

In each of these examples, initial police repression caused a single-issue protest to metastasize into a generalized uprising, transforming a square in the heart of the capital into a fiercely defended urban autonomous zone. This seemed to offer a new political model, in which people cohere around tactics rather than parties or ideologies. (It is telling indeed that Occupy was named for a tactic rather than a goal.) All these revolts could be broadly interpreted as reactions to the consequences of capitalism, though anti-austerity proved too narrow a frame: Turkey and Brazil saw protests over the effects of ascendant economies, not recessions. In any case, the majority of the participants have not described these movements as anarchist or anti-capitalist, framing them simply as grievances with specific governments and economic policies.

When photos began to circulate of the protests in Kiev, it's not surprising that many in the English-speaking world assumed approvingly that these were part of the same phenomenon. Once again people were criticizing the government, occupying a central square, fighting the police. The specific demands had always seemed incidental—whether it was the departure of a dictator or canceling a fare increase, we assumed that the important thing was the antagonism it facilitated against state control.

Then we read in horror that nationalists and fascists were at the forefront of the confrontations and dominated parts of the organizing. Many reacted by disclaiming any connection, concluding that the events in Ukraine were simply a fake revolution funded and orchestrated from above.

But all the secretive manipulation in the world wouldn't suffice to generate uprisings where there is no popular discontent. Comrades in Ukraine have emphasized that the revolution was produced by a genuine grassroots social movement, not only a far-right putsch fostered by capitalist interests. Anarchists in Venezuela have said the same about the protests occurring there, in which right-wing politicians have seized the opportunity to mobilize against the socialist government. In both of these countries, reactionary forces are taking

Occupy goes to hell.

Are they an image from the future?

this proclamation made a reverse effect, as even more people turned their backs to football fans.

After extreme police brutality in January, different leftists, and anarchists in particular, initiated "Hospital Guard"—a group of people that was trying to prevent police brutality against injured people in hospitals. "Hospital Guard" was quite effective, and a quite lot of protesters with moderate views joined it. Now, after fights against the police are over, "Hospital Guard" activists are thinking about changing it into an initiative that would fight against neoliberal medical reform. Only time will tell how effective it was.

> *Which aspects of anarchist rhetoric and approach have nationalists appropriated? What can we do to prevent this?*

Nazis from "Pravy Sector" and the Svoboda party have no need to appropriate anarchist ideas—they still stand for the strong state and have support with this idea. During the Maidan protests, they changed their rhetoric to be more democratic than before in order to get more sympathizers, but it still is very authoritarian and has no sign of anarchist influence.

The only fascist group that appropriated anarchist ideas was "Avtonomny Opir," the former National Labor Party of Ukraine. Their ideology is a mix of anarchism, nationalism, and the Third Way. Some of leftists were quite happy to see that former fascists had started to change their views, but in fact this evolution stopped on that ideological mix. The evolution of "Avtonomny Opir" also had another effect—some antifascists and anarchists started to cooperate with them and appropriated their ideas. So now groups like "Narody Nabat" (People's Bell) and "Socialny Opir" as well as Arsenal-Kiev football fans have basically the same views, including pro-life and rejection of feminism.

For a full reading list of primary sources about the events in Ukraine, consult the online version of this article at crimethinc.com.

advantage of the same popular ferment that anarchists considered so promising elsewhere.

In fact, there have been signs of this possibility all along. In 2011, Greek flags suggested the presence of nationalists in Syntagma Square in Athens; fully-armed militia members showed up to Occupy Phoenix in Arizona. Frustration with the government and the economy do not automatically suggest anarchist solutions. In Ukraine, caught between Russian colonialism and "corruption" on one side and European Union neoliberalism on the other, nationalist movements make more intuitive sense to many people than a movement to abolish nations.

A few years ago, it was possible to hope that the coming insurrections would be a naturally fertile ground for anarchist resistance. Now it is clear that, although anarchists can find new affinities within them, nationalists can capitalize upon them just as easily. This may be an inherent problem with movements that cohere around tactics, and it poses serious strategic questions to anarchists. Would we have done anything differently in 2011 had we known that we were developing a protest model that fascists could appropriate wholesale?

What had been a purely symbolic conflict over space with Occupy became full-on paramilitary urban warfare in Ukraine. By taking the front lines in confronting the authorities, nationalists and fascists have won themselves legitimacy as "defenders of the people" that will serve them for many years to come. Surely fascists around the world have been watching, and will be emboldened to try the same thing elsewhere when the opportunity arises. Fascists, too, are plugged into a global imaginary; we ignore this at our peril.

But it is not simply a question of fascists emboldening other fascists. The real danger is that the popular imagination about what it means to resist will become militarized—that those who wish to be "effective" will conclude that, like the Ukrainian rebels, they should form hundred-person fighting units with a strict hierarchy of command. We are not opposed to armed confrontation, of course—as we have argued elsewhere, it is essential for any social movement aimed at liberation to be able to push back the police, and this is rarely pretty in practice. But different formats for confrontation encode different power relations and forms of social change within them. The model we have seen in Kiev opens the way for fascists and other reactionaries to recreate the ruling order within resistance movements—not just by inserting new structures of authority (and, not coincidentally, gender roles), but also by confining the substance of the struggle to a

clash of armed organizations. In other words: the professionalization of rioting, rather than the extension of subversion into every aspect of social relations.

All this serves to remind us that we are not simply in a conflict with the state in its present incarnation, but in a three-way fight against it and its authoritarian opponents. The present social order will regenerate itself indefinitely until both are defeated.

Second Hypothesis:
More upheavals of this kind are in store. Those who take the initiative in shaping how they begin will determine the stakes of much larger social struggles.

The movement in Ukraine is not the only one to occur in Eastern Europe; it's just the most spectacular. It was preceded by tremors in Slovenia, Bulgaria, and elsewhere; more recently, Bosnia erupted, though thankfully most of the participants there explicitly disavowed nationalism. Barring worldwide revolution, the crises inflicted by capitalism will continue to provoke social unrest until the emergence of some massive new mechanism of control or appeasement.

In a globalized world, state structures are forced to impose and perpetuate these crises, but are increasingly powerless to mitigate the effects. This makes the state a sort of hot potato; any party holds the reins at its own risk, as Morsi's downfall showed in Egypt. On the other hand, in moments of crisis, whoever is capable of effective action against the repressive forces of the state will accumulate popular credibility. This is how our present era is anarchist even where fascists are concerned. It follows that the most important conflicts play out between the antagonists of existing states, not just between them and the state itself.

Identifying ourselves, via word or deed, merely as antagonists is not clear enough when we are not the only antagonists of the ruling powers. Our opposition to all hierarchy and control must be communicated in everything we say and do; otherwise, we risk bolstering a reactionary opposition. Pursuing escalation for its own sake won't necessarily communicate our politics, nor open a path to liberation; it could even equip our enemies to do the opposite. But avoiding escalation will have even worse consequences.

The fact that these movements can be hijacked by nationalists does not mean that we should remain aloof from them. This was the initial reaction of many anarchists to the plaza occupations in Spain

"anarchists" and antifascists are rather manarchists, reject feminism and pro-choice movements as "bourgeois," and cooperate with national-anarchists from "Avtonomy Opir" (Autonomous Resistance).

> *Can you imagine anything anarchists and antifascists could have done in the previous years that would have prepared them better for this situation?*

In fact, the whole situation was quite unexpected for everyone—even for the Opposition leaders. It was the government who provoked the protest to grow larger with brutal violence of riot police squads.

Also, there are not so many anarchists in Ukraine. For example, the 1st of May demonstration in Kiev gathered about 300-350 anarchists and antifascists in 2012, and their number decreased to about 200-250 the following year. Other cities have much smaller anarchist and antifascist scenes. A lot of people changed their views from anarchism to social democracy or national-anarchism. I think that the main reason was that we had very few workshops, discussions, book publishing, etc. Now the main issue is to increase the number of activists again and concentrate on workshops about theory.

> *What strategies have different anarchist groups pursued for engaging with this situation? What conclusions can you draw from the results?*

When the "Euromaidan" had just started, different leftist and feminist groups, including the syndicalist student union "Priama Diya" (Direct Action), tried to infiltrate the protest in different ways with social and feminist slogans, criticizing the idea of Euro-integration at the same time. They were pushed out of the protest by the boneheads; activists of the communist party "Borotba" were even beaten very harshly. Some activists continued to infiltrate the protest in different ways, but not so openly—for example, organizing different workshops among protesters—but there ware almost no results.

Antifascist football fans of "Arsenal-Kiev" decided to join the protest against police brutality. They declared the "truce" with Nazis and joined the fights against the police. Also "Arsenal-Kiev" fans made a call for all anarchists and antifascists to join their struggle, while they were cooperating with national-anarchists from "Avtonomny Opir." After anarchists spoke some criticism about such alliance, football fans threatened everyone criticizing them with violence. Of course,

Appendix: Interview with a member of the Autonomous Workers' Union in Kiev

> *How were nationalists able to establish themselves so visibly within the movement? Was it because they were there first? Was it because they had more resources? Or was it something about the issues and demands of the movement itself?*

There were several reasons. First of all, nationalism is not rejected by the vast majority of protesters. Even people with liberal views haven't said much against the party "Svoboda" (Freedom) and other nationalistic organizations. Most of them prefer to turn a blind eye to the aggressive actions of nationalists, imagining that nationalists will not follow their ideology. Surely, this is a delusion.

Secondly, nationalists from the Svoboda party started to infiltrate almost any social protest long ago. They have numerous activists while other parties don't. These activists did a lot of organizing work during protests. During the clashes with police, boneheads' support became even more valuable. This concerns also the "Pravy Sector" (Right Sector) group. On the other hand, Svoboda lost some support on account of aggressively infiltrating others' activist space and brutal fights with other protesters.

Thirdly, other opposition parties need Svoboda votes in the parliament. Even though quite a large number of people still weren't very happy about Svoboda (as well as some European politicians, who would prefer not to cooperate with nationalists openly), Svoboda was appreciated as a legitimate part of the protests because of their resources.

> *Why were anarchists and antifascists not able to establish a similar presence? Would it have been possible if they had acted differently?*

There are not so many anarchists and antifascists in Ukraine compared to nationalists. Also, a lot of anarchists were skeptical about the protest when it was all about Euro-integration, they partly joined in when "Maidan" changed mainly into a protest against police brutality. Nevertheless, it was quite dangerous to agitate about any social issue, as the far right could attack at any time.

Another reason for this was that anarchists and antifascists in Ukraine are divided because of several principal issues. Quite many

and Occupy in the US, and it could have been disastrous. Standing aside at a moment of popular confrontation with the state permits rival antagonists to seize the initiative, connecting with the general public and defining the stakes. No, we should be there with all we've got—for what is at stake in each struggle is never just a single issue, but rather the spirit of opposition itself. We have to be in the front lines ourselves if we wish to set the terms of engagement and determine the narrative. For anarchists, that does not mean forming paramilitary organizations, but rather offering points (in space, tactics, and discourse) around which much larger social bodies can cohere according to a logic that challenges both the state and its authoritarian opponents.

We fear that many of our potential comrades will respond to the news from Ukraine by avoiding future confrontations—effectively siding with the preservers of the status quo and leaving the field of struggle to authoritarians. On the contrary, the events in Kiev show what that path leads to.

As far as we can tell from reading the reports, anarchists and others who had avoided the demonstrations were compelled to get involved after all when the stakes were raised to dictatorship or revolution. But at that point, the front lines were dominated by fascists, who attacked anarchists and feminists when they tried to organize under their own banners. So anarchists had to participate on others' terms, and their contributions may have strengthened a movement from which fascists are deriving new power.

Of course, different crises offer different opportunities, and Ukraine was a worst-case scenario from the beginning: relatively small anarchist and anti-fascist movements, entrenched nationalist traditions and organizations, and the situation of being torn between authoritarian Russia and the neoliberal European Union. Even if a powerful anarchist movement capable of self-defense had been prepared to show up to the Euromaidan protests from day one, what position could anarchists have taken on the question of trade with the EU without violating their principles or alienating the rest of the protesters? (To be fair, we have read that Right Sector does not endorse integration into the European Union, either.) If nothing else, this situation drives home the importance of initiating contagious responses to today's crises on our own terms before history beats us to the punch.

We are not faulting our Ukrainian comrades for how things have turned out. They are doing their best against incredible odds.

Rather, we need to understand what has happened in Ukraine so we can be prepared before the next situation like this arises.

Third Hypothesis: The higher the stakes, the messier the fight.

If we understand the Ukrainian revolution as part of the same wave of protest that overthrew several governments in North Africa, the tremendous impact of this phenomenon on global politics becomes clear. It is no trivial matter to bring Russia to the brink of war with a nation of 45 million. It is likely that a variety of capitalists and state actors are now evaluating these protest movements as a way to pursue politics by other means. As more resources flow into the hands of reactionary participants in social struggles, we will likely see more developments like those in Ukraine and Venezuela.

Likewise, powerful governments will not stand by and let common people get a taste for overthrowing them. They will be pressed to intervene, as Russia has in Ukraine, in hopes that war can trump insurrection. War is a way of shutting down possibilities—of changing the subject. It supplants participatory insurrection with the spectacle of professionalized violence, sidelining the general population. This is a risky business, however—it can help governments to consolidate their power, but history shows that it can also destabilize them.

With war looming, even the limits of violent nationalism become obvious. Mere protest militancy is worthless in the face of the Russian military; only contagious disobedience could serve to even the odds when a social movement does battle with a superpower. This is the one thing anarchist opposition to the state has going for it today: in a globalized world, all insurrections must ultimately become international or perish.

And as long as capitalism produces crises, there are going to be insurrections.

Strategies for the Worst-Case Scenario

From this great distance, we have struggled to understand what different strategies Ukrainian anarchists and anti-fascists have employed to make the best of this situation, and what conclusions they have drawn about their effectiveness. We would be grateful to hear more from Ukrainian comrades about this.

We have read about some supposed anarchists, including the group Narodniy Nabat ("People's Bell"), who have tried to work alongside fascist groups like "Autonomous Resistance" in hopes of influencing them or at least getting access to the same public. This strikes us as a dangerous mistake; the weaker ally is more likely to absorb the logic of the stronger, and to strengthen the position of the stronger ally rather than their own. It seems that at least some of those trying this approach were not comrades in the first place, holding reactionary views about abortion and similar issues.

At the same time, we agree with one Ukrainian syndicalist that standing aside completely in such contexts can only strengthen the state, and that it is inappropriate to justify this on anti-fascist grounds when there are fascists on both sides of the conflict.

We have read some Ukrainian comrades arguing for the establishment of a separate front of struggle outside the Maidan occupation. As a long-term strategy, this seems sound. But it seems to us that opening another front shouldn't mean simply falling back on what is familiar—the forms of protest and labor organizing that have been less and less effective over the past century. We doubt that the strategy of workplace organizing will be any more effective in Ukraine than it has been elsewhere around the world since the triumph of capitalist globalization; workers in revolt are increasingly finding one another in the streets, not the workplace. Presumably, the Euromaidan protests have been so successful in part because they are contemporary in the same way that Occupy was: rather than starting from the increasingly unstable foundation of the workplace (or the marginality of subculture), they contested the center of society—literally in urban space, figuratively in political discourse. Any attempt to establish a second front should study what made Euromaidan such an important front in the first place.

Finally, we have heard rumors about anti-fascists who were able to keep fascists out of the protests in Kharkiv. This sounded promising until the newspapers reported that Viktor Yanukovych had fled to Kharkiv—if anti-fascists were able to keep fascists out of the movement only in the parts of Ukraine in which the movement was too small to threaten the government, that is not particularly good news. We await more updates from Kharkiv; it will be especially interesting to hear how anti-fascists are interacting with pro-Russian demonstrators there now.