

Russia: F*** anarchy, there's no future anyway

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Ten years ago, Russian activist lawyer Stanislav Markelov was murdered in Moscow. This article presents his recently translated reflections on power, the state and revolutionary maximalism.

Ten years ago this January, activist lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova were murdered in downtown Moscow. As it became clear later, this was a pinnacle moment in Russian ultranationalists' campaign of terror. As a human rights lawyer, Markelov defended a series of high-profile cases throughout the 2000s, often connected to police and security force violence.

A rights defender with an impressive record, Markelov was also an activist and public intellectual trying to reanimate new left thinking in Russia during the mid-2000s.

This text by Stanislav Markelov, originally published in Novaya Gazeta, indicates a further dimension to Markelov's political thought which, in many ways, supplements ideas presented in other texts. His great denunciation of contemporary Russian nationalism ("Patriotism as a diagnosis") is complemented here with a warning not to confuse the concept of power and the state. It shows a genuine attempt to reconcile Markelov's social democratic (or democratic socialist) political stance with a serious grappling of anarchist ideals. His conclusion, via literary excursion, is twofold. The political state is a necessary corrective to the arbitrary rule of power and the contemporary nation state is one no longer fit for purpose.

This short piece is a constructive attempt to find an exit from the present deadlock by not repeating the old schemas of the twentieth century - and in criticism of maximalist schemes of the past.

"There's no future." Any punk, drunk and lying in a pool of his own vomit, knows this truth better than any armchair dreamer, stuck in futuristic flights of fancy. The true marginal has no future at all and knows this only too well. A kid from the suburbs and the workers districts will never have money for a good education and the kind of environment where he can rise in status. His "radiant future" consists of alcohol, drugs and wreaking havoc. His "freedom of choice" is the freedom between mugging someone, with a thug-like sense of duty in defending his own neighbourhood, or the life of the punk above who, lying in a puddle, has fully come to terms with the fact that there is, indeed, no future.

There really is no future. The Russian humanist dreamers of the 19th century received a fruity and bloody volley of spittle from writer Varlam Shalamov at death-infested Kolyma, as he announced that they, with all their humanism, could not and did not wish to oppose the new despotism and violence. To this day, the noble dreamers have never been able to wash off this spittle.

It is easier to buckle and break than to wash away reality, losing one's own freedom-loving principles

in the process. The Russian poet Sergey Yesenin, having “hoisted up his trousers and run toward the Komsomol”, hoisted them so far that he did away with his own head when he hung himself from a heating pipe at the Hotel Angleterre. The anarchist stallion from his poem “Prayer for the First Forty Days of the Dead” in the end choked to death in the taverns of Moscow.

Where did those singers of the radiant future, the Futurists, disappear to? They put a bullet through their brain, like the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, after filling volumes of Bolshevik panegyrics. Their “love boat crashed against the everyday” [a famous quote from Mayakovsky’s suicide note] because the routine of today always proves stronger than the shaky reveries of tomorrow. The “Cloud in trousers” disperses when the “wind carries away the execution lists”.

How quickly the delightful meditations of national revivalists and other admirers of native corners sink into oblivion. The Belarusian chump Yanka Kupala, deciding to elegantly do away with himself, attempted hara-kiri, only he, the fool, did not understand that a real samurai has a helper who chops off his head. He was forced to wash his own guts and write elegiac odes to Comrade Stalin for ten years, rhyming “communism and socialism”.

If anyone from the usual anarchist romantics decides that their dreams will take off during the revolution, then let them count the number of corpses. The flight of revolution looks like a great bender – afterwards comes the hangover, which is, unfortunately, often a bloody one. It is not a question of whether revolution is good or bad, it is simply that dreams are bad. When people smash up today thinking of tomorrow, then reality needs to be goaded with the blows of police batons and rifle shots.

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The dreamers think that their enemy is the state. I have seen what happens when the state collapses. In the North Caucasus after yet another bloodbath (that is, an interethnic conflict), the village elders themselves say: “What a shame that we had no real state institutes, they would have impeded the youth from taking revenge and wreaking violence.” Yes, the state is a fat bureaucrat thinking only of bribes and his own career, but precisely for this reason out-and-out violence makes no sense to him. It was the fat-arsed pen pushers headed by that fool Khrushchev who put a stop to Stalinist terror.

Anarchist dreamers do not understand that power and the state are different things. The collapse of a state system does not lessen power but, on the contrary, increases it, giving it the form of explicit violence. If power and the state are one and the same, then the anarchist ideal can be found in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), where in the last few decades there has been practically no state while the civil war has already passed into a form of explicit and senseless elimination of whole populations. Or Afghanistan where instead of the state there is the power of warlords and the heroine trade. Or maybe Georgia in the 1990s, where gangs divided up the country like pieces of cake? Or Tajikistan?

One could provide countless examples. For some reason, when a state falls people do not become free; on the contrary, they begin to survive by hiding from outright violence. So then why is anarchy needed in any case?

When state power collapsed in Rwanda and the former dirty Belgian colonialists left the country, while its pen-pushers scattered in all directions, there begun a genocide where the price of death was three to four dollars. This was not the cost of survival, but the price you could pay to be shot quickly instead of being hacked to death by a machete or burnt alive in rubber tires. An official also

takes bribes, but usually doesn't have a machete in his hands and doesn't love the smell of burning rubber tires.

The mixing of power and the state in a single cocktail is the basic and fundamental mistake of any anarchist construction.

In primitive society, there was no state, but power could be harsher rather than weaker here. There is little sense in speaking of the freedom of the individual in traditional organisations, after all, there the individual melts into the community and the collective. The state does not arrive alongside power, however strange this may sound, the state limits power. It's another thing that it does so in an ugly, vile way while bearing a hideous bureaucratic grin, which provokes the hatred of futurists, political dreamers and a lasting allergy amongst all normal people.

People ask me: "So what then? Is it really necessary to shake a person to attention when they try to look at the horizon and what's beyond it? Are we really not going to go any further than the proverbial 'state of universal wellbeing', where the highest value has remained the acquisition of material wealth and the guarantee of security?"

The largest mistake the revolutionary futurists made was that of trying to predetermine our future, depriving it of variation and unpredictability. And when they wish to carry their project out in reality then this mistake turns into a crime. No matter how benevolent their ideas, they are similar to researchers and explorers, bringing fatal unknown diseases to the natives, and bloodthirsty colonisers to newly discovered lands. For some reason, I have more sympathy for the natives than for the explorers and colonisers.

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The state is a tool, a form. Behind fortress walls in the Middle Ages there could be found both a dungeon and a city-commune, but the walls themselves were not guilty of how they were used. Yes, the state systematises and structures the apparatus of oppression. As the poet Velimir Khlebnikov wrote: "A patch of land is a wonderful thing, it is the meeting place between me and the state. The state reminds me that it still exists". Given the sphere of my activity I know this to be the case.

No matter how much you want, you cannot include Khlebnikov in the canons of anarchism, insofar as he named himself with the completely unanarchist title of the "Chairman of Planet Earth". It is true that people suffered from many romantics with revolvers, while the "Chairman of the Terrestrial Sphere" never caused anyone any harm. He simply, like the last punk, roamed with a bag full of poems on his shoulder, presiding over his terrestrial sphere. His "Budetlyane" order ["Men of the Future", a futurist group] already existed, he did not need to dream up a future for everyone. Because there is no other future, but if someone wishes to live by their own yardstick of the future or of the past then he is living in the now. Just as Khlebnikov, a bird fancier and creator of a new trans-language, did.

Those who attempt to get to the core of things and do not try to influence people through the barrel of a gun are more easily labelled mad, holy fools. In order to see society, they step aside and do not try to crash into the middle of it riding a tachanka [a Civil War-era horse-drawn cart mounted with a machine gun]. Therefore, that which they say ends up in the literary supplement and remains on the curb of history, where streams of blood flow towards the rapids. Khlebnikov did not influence society, he was simply able to predict the revolutions of 1917, despite how everyone laughed at his art. And in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere", he advanced an idea which has still not been properly appreciated, neither by public figures nor by legal scholars. If the state is

a free organisation of citizens created to ease the management and cooperation with them, then after the old state – the “state of the nobles” – where the basic criteria were the unity of power, general territory, the border, centralisation, then there should emerge a new state, the “state of the creators”, where everything will be determined by time, the existence of a commonality of aspirations, shared rules of life without any centralisation, borders or national and territorial divides.

Throughout history, the state has been reorganised more than once. It is clear that there has now come the need for the state to crawl into a new skin because the old one has begun to appear anachronistic. Taking those principles set down by the “President of the Terrestrial Sphere”, one can imagine any society and any state. They are good in the sense that there are no boundaries into which people can be forcibly driven into. Thus, people outside of these borders cannot appear, and no one can be violently corralled into the Procrustean bed of radiant ideas.

Much like today’s liberal values, traditional values – and their opposing values in society – all have one main disadvantage, their totality. They are, for some reason, universal and should apply as a minimum to all humanity.

But maybe, freedom for some is a guarantee of extinction for others? And our own welfare is built on the poverty of people you do not even know? Maybe that crazy dervish with his sack of poems on his shoulders was more correct than all those ardent revolutionaries with their burning eyes, attempting to make a new society from people like culinary offerings from pre-prepared ingredients?

Maybe the bureaucracy will turn into a gloomy duty, where people who can’t do anything else but work as a clerk will be sent? And there will be no one to give bribes to?

If this comes about, then even the last punk will no longer need to lie in his own puddle. Everyone will know that there is no future, and this will no longer be the punk’s individual fate.

Stanislav Markelov

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