
“THIS PLACE COULD BE A PARADISE”: SNOW DAYS, BLACKOUTS,
AND THE EDUCATIVE POWER OF THE ANARCHIST IMAGINATION

Gabriel Keehn
Vanderbilt Peabody College

In January of 2014, the city of Atlanta experienced a rare confluence of weather, traffic, and governmental incompetence that resulted in one of the most infamous episodes in the city’s recent memory. Dubbed “Snowpocalypse,” the less than two inches of snow that fell on Atlanta that day caused mass chaos in grocery stores across the city, overnight traffic delays, and briefly turned Atlanta into a national laughing-stock, even inspiring a skit on Saturday Night Live. While the lessons that most observers took away from this event generally had to do with things like the importance of disaster preparedness, public infrastructure, and so on, I want to begin my discussion with a personal anecdote of my experience during that day.

I remember seeing the forecast in the morning and chuckling to myself, being a freshly transplanted and somewhat smug New Yorker, over the borderline hysterical tones struck by the newscasters at even the suggestion of snow. Slowly, as the day went on and I saw people around me downtown starting to leave work early, heard reports of large supermarkets running out of staple foods, and finally saw an emergency declaration from the governor, I couldn’t help but wonder if I was somehow missing something important. Growing up in upstate New York, I had seen people routinely going about their daily business just hours after a multi-foot snowfall, and while vaguely aware of the fact that Southern cities simply weren’t used to this sort of thing, I was still genuinely confused. Could the city really be so unprepared and poorly organized that a snowfall that wouldn’t even cover the tops of my feet would careen hundreds of thousands of people and millions of dollars’ worth of public infrastructure into utter chaos? Atlanta, characteristically, responded resoundingly with the proverbial “hold my beer.” Sure enough, by around three PM, all of my classes and work obligations for the next two full days had been cancelled, many local businesses were closed until further notice, and the city was in a state of near complete lockdown.

Immediately, my wife and I began imagining the possibilities of what we could do with the next few days. Was sledding viable? Did we own sleds? Snowmen? Where was the closest cozy working fireplace and where could we get hot cocoa? Perversely, there wasn’t enough snow for any of our preferred activities, so we walked. We walked past the dark businesses, in the quiet center of a usually busy street, entirely unafraid of passing cars because there were none. We stopped to talk with other intrepid wanderers and played with their dogs. We ducked into one of the few local bars that still had power. We shared drinks with the bartender and our neighbors, and talked, usually about things

very far removed from the weather. The internet at the bar, and hence their payment systems were all down, so tabs were paid approximately, on the honor system, and extremely generously. I felt, during that day and the days that followed, something that I had felt many times in my life but increasingly rarely in my adulthood. It is the feeling that accompanies a sudden respite from ordinary life, an unexpected opening of truly free time when none had previously been expected. The world, and the component parts that we generally take for granted about it are in these moments put on pause, or, perhaps more accurately, peeled away, revealing something else entirely underneath. The world at the moment of suspension or peeling gives way to another world, or flashes thereof, however brief. To me, both in childhood and in those ethereal, slow moving days in early 2014, nothing represents this feeling more than the snow day, and it is that feeling that I want to preliminarily explore, particularly with respect to its political and educational implications.

For those of you who might hail from warmer climes and feel left out of the snow day example, (first of all, you're missing out) take another case that I think actually helps bring out another facet of this feeling. Recall the last time you were with a group of people (family, friends) and the power went out. There is the initial feeling of shock, sometimes frustration (what do we do about the ham in the oven, we need to ice down the perishables in the fridge, etc.), but this quickly dissipates. Candles are put around rooms, matches are dug out of seldom opened kitchen cabinet drawers. Someone starts shuffling playing cards and asks who knows how to play what games, the plastic is finally taken off of that Star Wars themed monopoly board gifted as a joke Christmases ago. Conversations start, books are pulled off of shelves, a bottle of wine is opened. A feeling sets in that, not only is this not so bad, it is actually a marked improvement over the previously scheduled Game of Thrones viewing. Inevitably, someone expresses the sense that they don't actually want the power to come back on, that there is something good, better, more vital about these moments of suspension, this time spent in a sort of secret world hidden away from the world we often call "real." There is, I think, often even a moment of melancholic dread that comes over us when the lights flicker back on and we are thrust back into that "real" world, at this point often against our will.

Whether these specific examples resonate or not, I think that nearly everyone has some kind of experience like this, often many times throughout their lives (there are dozens of other examples we could talk about, the small freedom of your cell phone dying when you can't charge it, when you accidentally close your browser and erase the dozens of unnecessary tabs you've obsessively opened, etc.). I think it is critical that we do not dismiss them merely as fantasizing or escapism or momentary and insignificant. I think we must examine these moments critically, and with an eye toward their political implications. What does it say, both about the world that we live in and the ones we wished we lived in, that we dread the moment the lights come back on? I have come to call this feeling, this sense of briefly and illicitly being able to peek

behind the curtain of the real world to see what possibilities might lie behind it, “affective anarchism.”

Žižek and Badiou, though in different terminology, have both theorized the sort of eruptive moments that I am referring to as “affective anarchism.” For both of these thinkers (Žižek prefers the terminology of “the Act” while Badiou utilizes “the Event”) these moments are glimpses past the world as it is, the taken for granted, or what Badiou calls “the Situation.” Affective anarchism disrupts what we think of as reality and enlivens our imaginations. Fisher has described the advent of what he calls “capitalist realism,” i.e. the sense that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.¹ Affective anarchism represents those moments where capitalist realism is overcome, suspended, or briefly pulled back, revealing the potential for other, different worlds underneath.

Indeed, Žižek himself, although he more often utilizes Badiou’s terminology of the Event, has at times developed in this connection his concept of the Miracle as a sort of group analogue of the Act, collective moments (such as those described earlier in this discussion) that create ruptures in the narrative of capitalist realism. Near the end of *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek utilizes the language of miracles to describe the shattering Evental occurrences that completely restructure our lives in the process of their unfolding.² The use of the plural “our lives” here is crucial as it hints that a Miracle can indeed be a joint process. Žižek’s examples of miraculous Events in his popular writing include precisely such moments of spontaneous restructuring. Speaking on the Event of Tahrir Square in early 2011, Žižek writes that this moment must be read as “not simply the result of social causes but the intervention of a mysterious agency,”³ again signaling the indeterminate nature of these moments of symbolic rupture and the attendant opportunity for restructuring that they bring. Indeed, in concluding his thoughts on this subject, Žižek emphasizes precisely this fleeting moment of opportunity and new possibilities, writing, “Whatever happens next [again the acknowledgement, in an anarchist mood, of the undecidability of these moments], what is crucial is that this sense of ‘feeling alive’ is not buried by cynical realpolitik.”⁴ While these Miraculous moments of collective and apocalyptic Action do not necessarily feature as prominently in Žižek’s work as does the individual Act itself, I suggest that the move from individual Act to collective Miracle is not as difficult as it may appear, as illustrated by the cases of Nat Turner’s rebellion and Tahrir Square.

For Badiou, relatedly, Events are necessarily ruptural in relation to the dominant order. An Event declares, in the longstanding anarchist tradition, that

¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008), 376.

³ Slavoj Žižek, “The Miracle of Tahrir Square,” *Alternet*, February 10, 2011.

⁴ Žižek, “The Miracle of Tahrir Square.”

another world is possible. Events reveal the fundamental falsehood of the assumed reality of the Situation, hinting to us that Reality is not quite as obdurate as it may initially seem.⁵ While the Event is not inherently political, nor does it imply anything specific regarding the realm of the political, where that is understood as the traditional arenas of protest, revolt, and the like, the Event is precisely concerned with undermining the taken-for-granted political and social truths that undergird the continued existence of political structures. The result of an Evental moment is to puncture the facade of reality and expose the falsity of its assumed persistence. Existing hierarchies and value systems are undermined completely by the Event, particularly those that are present at the Evental moment.

The term “anarchism” may seem out of place in describing the phenomenon theorized by Badiou and Žižek, and indeed I believe something needs to be said in the way of explanation to justify its use. First, I want to make it clear that finding my argument here persuasive or interesting is meant in no way to be predicated on actually being an anarchist of any kind, particularly when construed as a discrete political ideology. Rather, I only ask that you engage in what Scott has called looking with an anarchist tilt,⁶ or seeing anarchistically. Indeed, this is the critical distinction I want to make in what follows. It is certainly true that anarchism is (arguably primarily) a concrete and relatively well-defined view of politics and social organization (i.e. the idea that society should be organized as non-hierarchically as possible, that domination and oppression in all forms must be radically opposed, and so on). At the same time, what I believe is at the core of all anarchist philosophy, and what truly expresses the spirit of looking with an anarchist tilt, is a fundamental and deep seated commitment to the idea, to quote one of the most famous anarchist organizational slogans of all time, that “another world is possible.” To think anarchistically is to think about the world as it might be, as we could make it and remake it together. The anarchist is in some ways a millenarian, seeing the current “real world” as façade to be broken down, a covering that hides something new underneath, something it is all of our jobs to collectively reveal, create, and explore. In this sense, the end-timey language of Snowpocalypse was perhaps even more appropriate than I realized at the time.

Of course, questions of meaning, community, connection, and the like are not unique to anarchist thinking. Indeed, anarchism is generally thought to address larger-scale political questions of the state, capitalism, and the like, often to the exclusion of more subjective questions regarding the good life or interpersonal morality. At the same time, I believe that anarchism as a tradition is uniquely important in thinking possibilities of the world-to-come. That is, the anarchist operates, and must so operate, with the full conviction that there is another and radically different world-to-come, or at least a possible-world, which

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁶ James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

can come to be in the aftermath of an apocalyptic moment that will erase the world (the socio-cultural world as opposed to the actual, physical world, generally speaking) as it currently exists. This line of thinking regarding what I will call the anarcho-apocalyptic mood is by no means a new one, and detailed histories of the various millenarian and mystical movements beginning immediately in the aftermath of Saint Paul's writing clearly illustrate a thematic similarity between these movements and contemporary anarchist thinking.

Cohn has perhaps done the most work in tracing the genealogy of the anarcho-apocalyptic mood. In his far-reaching *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*,⁷ Cohn provides a panoramic view of the various instantiations of this mood through the Middle Ages. Cohn's concerns are most explicitly with illustrating how the influence of millenarian prophetic thinking came to structure and ground various popular uprisings among the masses of dislocated poor during the period. One such example occurs in the context of the Peasant's War in Germany during the Reformation, which explicitly mobilized an updated version of the heretical doctrine of the Free Spirit,⁸ which they referred to as "Spiritual Liberty,"⁹ which held that men could have transcendent, individual experiences of God that could render their lives on earth here and now sinless, therefore also rendering all governmental and social impositions of moral categories and injunctions fundamentally meaningless. Indeed, this movement gained significant enough momentum that Martin Luther took a meeting with a group of emissaries sent by its leaders, and he was sufficiently disturbed by the power of their message that he issued an official statement to the church in Antwerp, one of the movement's headquarters, warning them of false prophets in their midst.¹⁰

This millenarian sense of radical apocalyptic rejection of Order as such is equally present in the classical anarchists as well. We can see it in the works of perhaps the two greatest names in the history of anarchist theory, namely Kropotkin and Bakunin. For Bakunin's part, he explicitly transposes the language of religious exhortation into an anarchist frame in order to encourage others to undertake a type of revolutionary renunciation, writing famously in 1842, "And therefore we call to our deluded brothers: Repent, repent, the Kingdom of the Lord is at Hand! . . . Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source

⁷ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁸ For general historical works on the Free Spirit movement, see Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (New York: Zone Books, 1994) and Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

⁹ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 138.

¹⁰ Cohn, 138.

of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!”¹¹ Kropotkin is similarly committed to a new vision of the social world-to-come, writing in one of his many short pamphlets “Those who long for the triumph of justice, those who would put new ideas into practice, are soon forced to recognize that the realization of their . . . regenerating ideas cannot take place in a society thus-constituted: they perceive the necessity of a revolutionary whirlwind which will sweep away all this rottenness.”¹² The focus here is clearly on a radical and total break, likened in the latter case to a force of nature, as the intrusion of the Lacanian Real, with the established order, leaving in its wake not a new order, but a space of possibilities, or what Badiou calls “the possibility of possibilities.”¹³ This type of apocalyptic thinking can be detected in contemporary anarchist discourse as well, with some variation on the basic theme “another world is possible” serving variously as the slogan of the World Social Forum and the title of the concluding chapter of a book of interviews with Chomsky.¹⁴ Clearly, the idea of the passing away of the present order to make room for a new one is one of the core tenets of anarchist thinking broadly, a focus that lends itself uniquely to thinking through possible futures and worlds.

It seems to me that this type of political thinking is more necessary today than ever before. While the hideous day-to-day threats posed by rightists of all stripes must clearly be met with ruthless pragmatics and direct action, it is also I think too easy to get lost in the minutiae of parsing twitter feeds, tracking and analyzing this or that candidate’s lunch plans for the week, or who has used what types of tones to talk about impeachment. While the policy battles must be fought relentlessly, and though it is undeniably a good thing, say, to have ten fewer holding cells in an immigrant concentration camp somewhere in the Arizona desert, without a clear sense of why any of this matters in the first place, what the world we are fighting for looks like, at least in some affective, vague sense, all of our political actions only ever boil down to vulgar utilitarian computation.

In many ways, by their very nature, moments of affective anarchism (or, in Badiou’s terms, events) are unsystematizable and therefore difficult to imagine or describe in advance. These moments are inherently eruptive, unplanned, and potentially unplannable, a feature that makes the project of developing examples, plans, let alone prescriptions, for what affective anarchism might actually look like in the classroom difficult. That being said, the characteristics of these moments can, I believe, give us some guidance as to the preconditions for their emergence, and it is these types of qualities that we can

¹¹ Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. & trans. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 57.

¹² Peter Kropotkin, *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger N. Baldwin (New York: Dover, 1970), 36

¹³ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), 243.

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005).

hope to create in our classroom spaces. At the same time, the relationship between the emergence of Evental moments and the constrictive conditions that give rise to them are difficult to parse. That is, without some forms of restriction, a world-as-given, to push against, it is unclear how an Evental moment can erupt, or what there might be for it to erupt through. If a classroom, or any other Evental space, is too open, too conducive, to the eruption of an event, the event loses the very qualities that define it as such. The practical failures of this or that revolutionary moment are less important than the space that they are able to open up, out of which something fundamentally different *may or may not* grow. The anarchist can, and often does, plan tactically regarding the best means of creating this opening, but she also recognizes the radical undecidability of what will come to be on the other side of that opening. Indeed, there is a sense in which the other side of the opening is actually definitionally unknowable. Insofar as the revolutionary moment opens the possibility of radically new ways of relating and an entirely new field of experience, “an authentic political revolution cannot be measured by the standard of servicing goods . . . it is a goal in itself, an act which changes the very concept of what a ‘good life’ is.”¹⁵ Since, from our vantage point, embroiled as we are in the structures of global capitalism, the moment after the opening of revolution is, in our symbolic order, strictly impossible, and we could never know or even imagine in advance what it might look like. What the anarchist is committed to is a continually enacted faith in the possibility of these different structures of social engagement, a faith which avoids “the resigned conservative conclusion [arguably a position held by Foucault] that every revolutionary upheaval has to end up in a new version of the positive order which reproduces itself through its obscene inherent transgression.”¹⁶ Even in the face of the monstrous and even violent failure on the part of actual revolutionary movements (such as Stalinism) which ultimately do reproduce the same old power relations, the Žižekian anarchist insists that the fight for “*a sociopolitical transformation that would entail the restructuring of the entire field of the relations between the public Law and its obscene supplement*”¹⁷ is a fight “worth pursuing.”¹⁸ The anarchist can lay the battle plans for this fight, as Nat Turner and the participants in the French Revolution undeniably did, but they can never purport to determine or even know the shape of the outcome, and this is the core of the distinction between teleological and tactical planning, the latter of which is a criterion of the Event of affective anarchism.

Berkman begins his primer “What is Anarchism” by asking the reader, what do you want out of life?¹⁹ I think Berkman’s instinct to cast anarchist politics from the outset in the terms of the possible is exactly correct here, in that

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 380.

¹⁶ Žižek, 306.

¹⁷ Žižek, 308.

¹⁸ Žižek, 306.

¹⁹ Alexander Berkman, *What is Anarchism?* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), 1.

all political thinking is first and foremost ethical thinking, thinking about the good life. What kind of lives should we lead? Who do we want to be? What do we want out of our time together on this planet (for however much longer we are able to inhabit it)? We want time to spend with people we care about, we want to get some fulfillment or (god forbid) joy out of how we spend our moment-to-moment existences, we don't want to be constantly burdened with meaningless nonsense, we want connection.

Affective anarchism is the feeling we get when we can genuinely see some possible options for these desires lived out, if only for a flash. It is the sense of getting a sneak preview of the world as we could make it, however difficult the path to that world may be. Our politics, and I would argue, our education need to be guided by these goals, these desires, these vignettes of possible futures. We need to cultivate the radical, utopian, and even seemingly childish impulse within all of us that still wants to ask without any hint of irony, "why can't every day be a snow day?"
