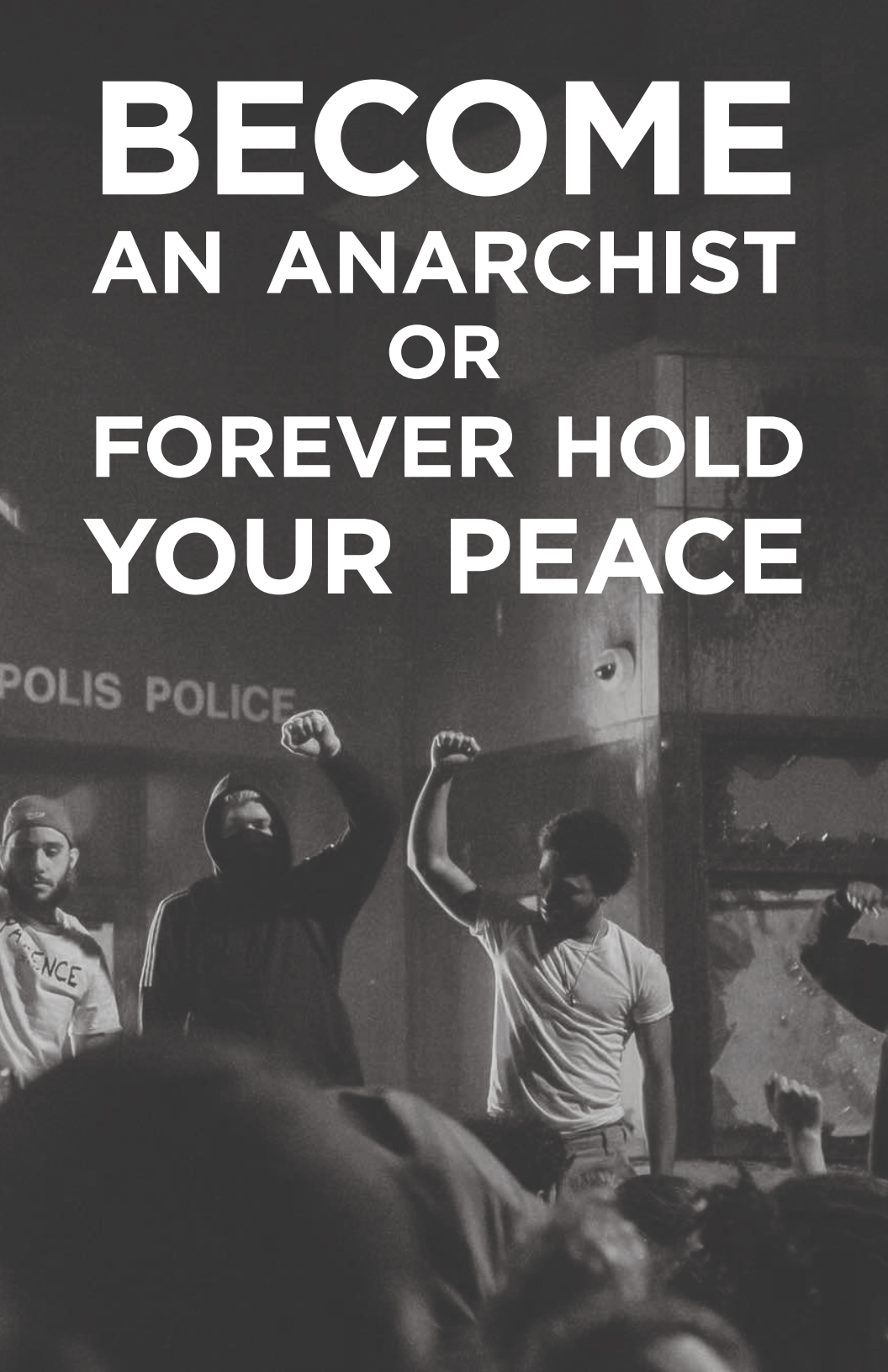
BECOME AN ANARCHIST OR FOREVER HOLD YOUR PEACE



Tyranny Is the Opposite of Anarchism

On February 8, the editorial board of the *New York Times* wrote that Elon Musk

> "is on a mission to rampage through the government's confidential payment systems with an anarchist's glee."

If you know any real-life anarchists, you know how absurd this is. Given access to the government's payment systems, no anarchist would begin by cutting off resources to starving children or medical research. An anarchist would begin by cutting off funding to the police and the other instruments of state violence—precisely the institutions that Donald Trump and Elon Musk will expand at any cost.

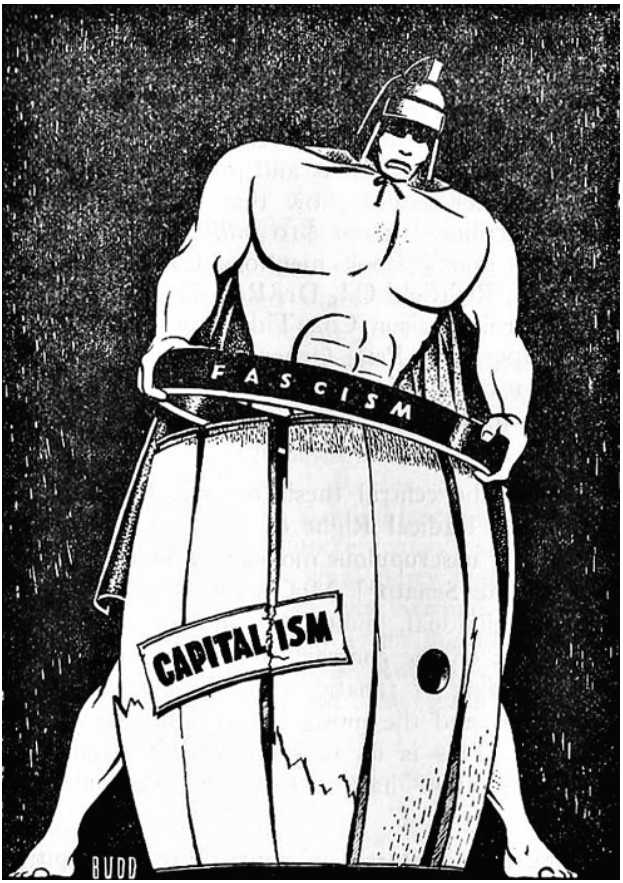
Anyone who tells you anarchism is about abolishing the social safety net for the sake of unbridled profit is lying to you outright. There are other words for that—for example, *neoliberalism*.

Anarchism is something else entirely. Anarchists propose to abolish all institutional means of coercion, so that no one can dominate or oppress anyone else:

> Anarchism is the idea that everyone is entitled to complete self-determination. No law, government, or decision-making process is more important than the needs and desires of actual human beings. People should be free to shape their relations to their mutual satisfaction, and to stand up for themselves as they see fit.
>
> Anarchists oppose all forms of hierarchy—every currency that concentrates power into the hands of a few, every mechanism that puts us at a distance from our potential.
>
> *-To Change Everything*

In other words, anarchists seek to bring about a situation in which no politician or billionaire, elected or not, could ever be in a position to cut off essential resources to millions of people with the flick of a pen. This is a profounder commitment to freedom, equality, and the well-being of the general public than one can find within the halls of any government.

At this moment of peril, when aspiring autocrats have taken power and are attempting to consolidate permanent control of the state, why would the *New York Times* muddy the waters by taking a cheap shot at some of Donald Trump's most determined enemies? Looking more closely at the quote above, it seems that the editorial board's chief concern is not what will happen as a consequence of Elon Musk's actions, but whether Musk and his cronies are following the rules properly.



A Three-Sided Conflict

As Trump and Musk carry out a hostile takeover of the United States government, outlets like the *New York Times* are narrating a story in which there are two sides: on one side, democracy and the rule of law, and on the other side, the criminal oligarchs that threaten to undermine them.

But this is not the only way to understand the situation.

It would be more precise to say that there are three camps—those who desire to return to the forms of governance that prevailed until January 20, 2025; those who are currently in the process of overturning that system in order to impose an even more oppressive system; and those who reject both of those options in favor of a more egalitarian alternative.

In the first camp, we find people who believe that a certain amount of self-determination is acceptable, as long as it falls neatly within whatever laws happen to be on the books. They are also comfortable with a wide range of ruthless self-seeking destructive behavior, provided that it, too, complies with those same laws. When people in this camp talk about "equality," they do not mean that all of us should have comparable leverage on the conditions that determine what we can do with our lives. They mean equal opportunity on the market and equality before the law—both of which are preposterous to speak about when some people start life with pennies while others start with billions. People in this camp are concerned about Elon Musk overhauling the federal government, but they had no objection to him amassing hundreds of billions of dollars while a hundred million Americans lived paycheck to paycheck. They are concerned about Trump's plans for Gaza, but until a few weeks ago many of them were perfectly at ease with the United States government funding a genocide there.

In the second camp, we find those who are determined to consolidate power in their own hands, regardless of what laws happen to be on the books. Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and their various capitalist, nationalist, and fascist backers will preserve whatever laws assist them and overturn the rest. They have no allegiance to any particular legal system or protocol. They seek their own advantage by any means, mendaciously claiming that they are the only ones who can

address the problems of our time ("I alone can fix it"). Such people have always existed, but only over the past few years have resources become so unevenly distributed that a handful of them could take over the United States government.

Finally, in the third camp, we find anarchists and other rebels who also have no allegiance to the system of governance that has prevailed until now, but for entirely different reasons. Anarchists believe that everyone deserves the maximum amount of freedom, regardless of what laws happen to be on the books—and therefore, that no one deserves to be able to *dominate* anyone else, whether by hoarding access to resources or wielding the instruments of state repression. People in this camp hold that regardless of what any constitution proclaims, regardless of how an electorate votes in an election, none of us owe any allegiance to institutions that exist solely for the purpose of imposing disparities in power, whether we are talking about government departments, banks, or private military contractors. In contrast to those who are comfortable with oligarchy and ethnic cleansing as long as no one breaks the rules, there is no way to bribe or blackmail anarchists into making excuses for oppression.

Whatever your politics, **you** are probably sympathetic to the anarchist analysis to some degree—perhaps more than you think. Try this thought experiment:

> How much do you buy into the idea that the democratic process should trump your own conscience and values? Imagine yourself in a democratic republic with slaves—say, ancient Athens, or ancient Rome, or the United States of America until the end of 1865. Would you obey the law and treat people as property while endeavoring to change the laws, knowing full well that whole generations might live and die in chains in the meantime? Or would you act according to your conscience in defiance of the law, like Harriet Tubman and John Brown?
>
> If you would follow in the footsteps of Harriet Tubman, then you, too, believe that there is something more important than the rule of law. This is a problem for anyone who wants to make conformity with the law or with the will of the majority into the final arbiter of legitimacy.
>
> *-From Democracy to Freedom*

No Law Will Give You Freedom

Staking the defense against Donald Trump on the principle that "no one is above the law" has failed for eight years now. Worse, with Trump back in control of the government, it's a self-defeating narrative. What happens when his lackeys in Congress pass new laws and the judges he appoints rule in his favor? At that point, all this rhetoric legitimizing the law as a good in itself will only strengthen Trump's hand.

Many people spent several years of Trump's first term waiting on former FBI director Robert Mueller to investigate and prosecute Donald Trump. As we argued back then, before Mueller's investigation ended in a complete washout, this doomed strategy reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of the balance of power and the nature of law itself:

> Democrats still don't understand how power works. Crime is not the violation of the rules, but the stigma attached to those who break rules without the power to make them. (As they say, steal $25, go to jail; steal $25 million, go to Congress.) At the height of Genghis Khan's reign, it would have been pointless to accuse the famous tyrant of breaking the laws of the Mongol Empire; as long as Trump has enough of Washington behind him, the same goes for him. Laws don't exist in some transcendent realm. They are simply the product of power struggles

> among the elite—not to mention the passivity of the governed—and they are enforced according to the prevailing balance of power. To fetishize the law is to accept that might makes right. It means abdicating the responsibility to do what is ethical regardless of what the laws happen to be.

In the long run, the courts cannot constrain Donald Trump. He controls the executive branch, the part of the government that is supposed to enforce their rulings.

Nor will the courts constrain Elon Musk. Even apart from Trump's support, he has unlimited money for court cases. If the courts attempt to punish him by imposing fines, he can afford to pay for tens of billions of dollars' worth of illegal activity. He already routinely refuses to pay rent and other bills that no ordinary person could ever get away with shrugging off.

Nor will the police and other law-enforcement agencies constrain Trump or Musk. In theory, the police exist to enforce laws; in practice, the average cop knows very little about the law—they're not lawyers, after all—but a great deal about obeying orders. Trump is the favorite politician of the mercenary caste, the ones who sell their capacity to inflict violence to the highest bidder (be that the state or private security contractors). Just as Trump has filled his government with disgraced public figures who depend on him, the police are his natural allies—the more so as a consequence of their compromised relationship with the general public.

Continuing to emphasize the centrality of law in objections to Trump's agenda can only hamstring future movements, discouraging the emergence of the only kind of resistance that could offer any hope once he has completed his takeover of the federal government.

> The truth is, neither the powerful nor the oppressed have ever had good cause to obey laws—the former because the same privileges that enable them to write the laws release them from the necessity of obeying them, the latter because the laws weren't established for their benefit in the first place.
>
> -"*Take Your Pick: Law or Freedom*"

LAW &
ORDER
VS
ANARCHY
THE
FIGHT OF
THE CENTURY

Remember How We Got Here

The binary narrative about criminal oligarchs undermining democracy and the rule of law is misleading in another way. The authoritarians who are overhauling the government do not represent the opposite of the preceding order, but the inevitable *consequence* of it. Their power grab is the result of several decades of democratically-managed capitalism, which enabled a coterie of billionaires to accumulate so much wealth and power that they no longer believe that they need the trappings of democracy to keep the populace appeased.

It was the rules of the previous game that created this situation. Wanting to go back a single step in history, to the previous stage of the process, is foolish, because that was the stage that led us directly to this one. It is impossible to rewind the clock—and even if we could, that would only mean arriving once again at the same situation. The problem is not simply that Musk's protégés have run rampant through the databases of the government, though that is already producing consequences that will likely be impossible to undo. The real problem is the emergence of a caste of billionaires who no longer require the services of democracy and have enough power to do away with it.

These billionaires can buy up communication platforms, buy up both politicians and voters, use the global infrastructure under their control to determine the outcome of geopolitical struggles. Donald Trump and Elon Musk are the ones who are currently attracting the most attention, but behind them are Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and many more. The individual character flaws of these men are beside the point; the significant thing is that the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism are systematically concentrating power in the hands of people who are completely disinterested in others' agency or well-being.

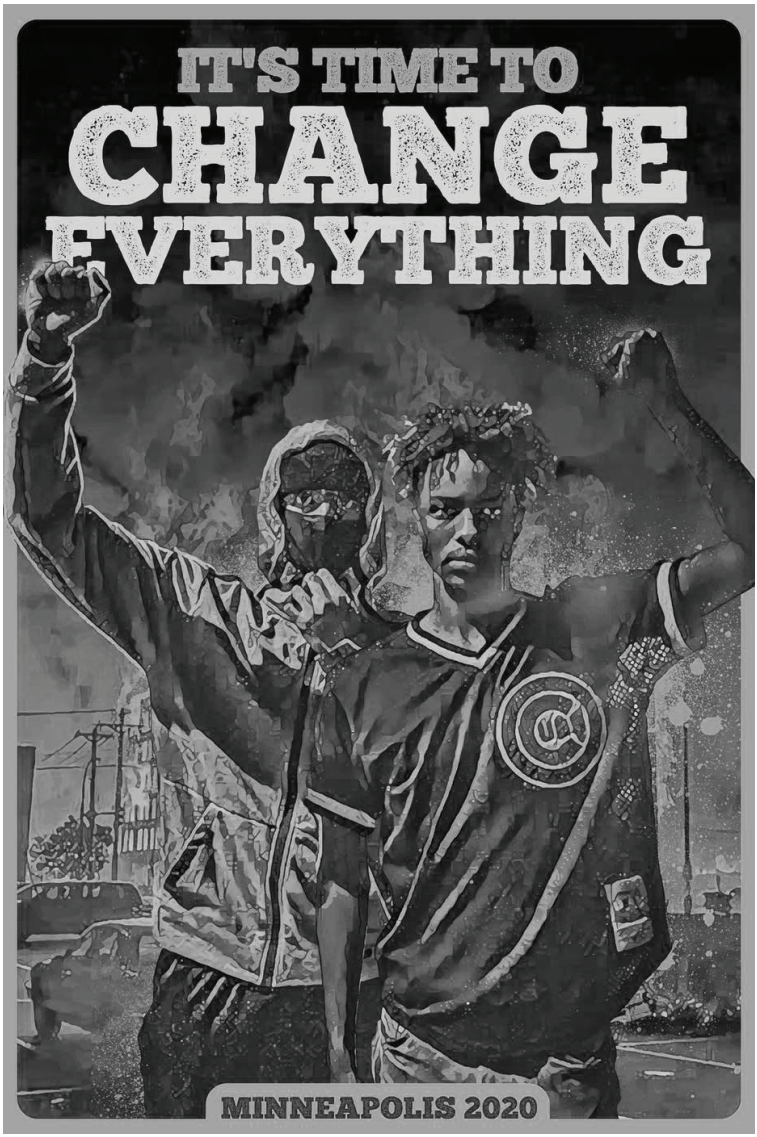
This is why milquetoast centrism cannot offer a convincing alternative to the despotism of the fascists and technocrats.

Describing the Democrats' unsuccessful strategy of chasing Republicans further and further to the right, one Democratic politician quipped that "voters who ordered a Coca-Cola don't want a Diet Coke." This doesn't put things strongly enough. Considering that Trump won the election on an explicit platform of mass deportations

and autocracy, Democrats imitating Republican talking points while promising to "defend democracy" is like offering Diet Coke to a cocaine addict. Today's Republican voters are motivated in great part by the desire to see violence directed against those more vulnerable than themselves. It is autocracy itself they desire, not any particular policy.

This bloodlust is the consequence of the avarice and narcissism that neoliberal capitalism fostered in so many people and then failed to fulfill. Those who have become accustomed to powerlessness and passivity, who urgently desire revenge but do not understand who is responsible for their situation, will elevate tyrants to power for the vicarious thrill of seeing *someone* made to suffer, even if the consequences make life worse for practically everyone. Doubtless some of them would change sides if they saw a real opportunity to improve their lives, but that would require much more than a promise to go back to the Biden era.

If the defenders of democracy cannot offer anything more inspiring than a return to the previous state of affairs—the one that caused this catastrophe in the first place—they will lose, and they will deserve to lose. It will take a more ambitious and far-reaching vision to defeat oligarchy.


IT'S TIME TO
CHANGE
EVERYTHING
MINNEAPOLIS 2020

Become an Anarchist or Forever Hold Your Peace

In 2020, the most powerful uprising in living memory took place in the United States. Millions of people filled the streets. They were not galvanized by a timid electoral campaign, nor simply by the footage of police murdering George Floyd, but by the brave actions of ordinary people who stood up to injustice—above all, by the burning of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis. By driving the political discourse in the election year, this uprising not only turned voters away from Donald Trump—it also showed billionaires that Trump would not be able to preserve conditions suitable for business, forcing them to temper their ambitions.

One poll showed Americans supporting the burning of the police precinct by a larger margin than any victorious presidential candidate this century.

In response to the uprising, Joe Biden and other Democrats doubled down on supporting the police. This shows that the Democrats believe that it is impossible to maintain power under capitalism without channeling more and more resources towards repression, tasking the police with keeping an increasingly desperate population under control.

Today, the Republicans are going even further, cultivating support for explicitly patriarchal, racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian politics—in short, for fascism. The implication is that as billionaires accumulate more and more power and the consequences of their rapaciousness trickle down to the rest of us, it will take more than police to keep the population under control: it will also take informal militias, and falsehoods about why some demographics deserve to have more power than everyone else, and probably, in the long run, ethnic cleansing and genocide on a larger scale than we have yet seen.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. invited us to trust that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." But today it is clear that things are not slowly, steadily getting better, neither in the field of civil rights, nor in regards to the natural environment, nor justice, nor governance.

The state is not the solution to these problems. It is a protection racket that—until recently—purported to solve our problems in order to lull us into dependence ("I alone can fix it"!) while suppressing our ability to meet our needs without it. Now, under Trump and Musk in the United States and rulers like Javier Milei elsewhere, there is no longer any pretense that the state exists to do anything besides oppress people and defend the profits of the rich. All this time, the state has been accumulating the means—both technological and social—that are required to force this new reality on us, and now the tyrants are intent on using them.

Yet in doing so, Elon Musk and Donald Trump are giving millions of people cause to reevaluate their priorities and dedicate their lives to profound social change. The 2020 uprising offered a glimpse of what it looks like for large numbers of people to act on their own initiative, creating a groundswell of resistance that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Our chief error, in 2020, was in imagining that we could simply return to business as usual afterwards, when in fact our only hope is to change the world.

As Trump and Musk gut every aspect of the state that is not about profiteering and repression, the stakes of this moment are coming into focus. There is no more middle ground. If you care about public health, you have to become a revolutionary. If you care about medical research, you have to become a revolutionary. If you care about climate change, about labor conditions, about the well-being of children in warzones, there is nothing else for it—you have to become a revolutionary.

In the movements to come, we must make space for the civil servants Elon Musk has fired, for the scientists and academics whose funding has dried up, for those who once sought social change through electoral politics. They should put all their skills to work in new contexts, experimenting with new forms of resistance and spreading whatever strategies work far and wide. But we should not simply try to rebuild the broken system that brought us to this dire situation. We must build a new vision together along with the means to bring it into being.

Anarchists propose to build our collective capacity to act on a horizontal and decentralized basis, rather than entrusting our agency to leaders. We seek to create a lattice of overlapping participatory and voluntary associations that can meet people's material and spiritual

needs. Rather than hoarding resources for ourselves the way the billionaires do, we seek to abolish all of the mechanisms that impose artificial scarcity, to create commons that benefit everyone. We seek to generate abundance, not profit.

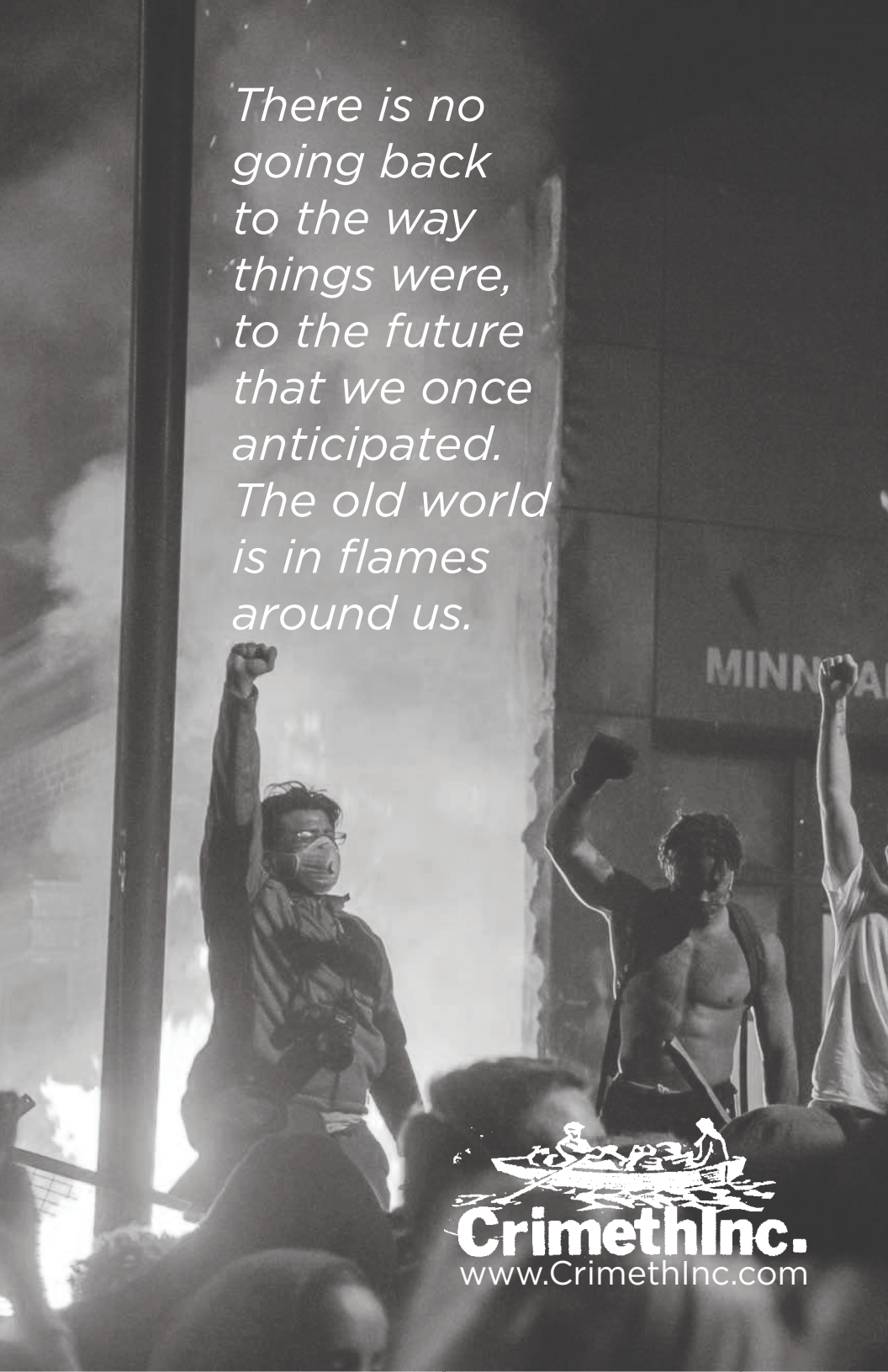
To be an anarchist means to recognize that our freedom and well-being are inextricably bound up with the freedom and well-being of billions like us. It means discarding all the old excuses for remaining subservient to those who only endeavor to enrich themselves at others' expense. It means becoming fiercely loyal to what is best in ourselves and each other, to our capacity for compassion and cooperation and courage. Across two centuries, anarchists have resisted under monarchies and persisted through dictatorships. Now that liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism are concluding in a new form of tyranny, a new generation must draw on this long legacy of struggle.

There is no going back to the way things were, to the future that we once anticipated. The old world is in flames around us. Become an anarchist, or forever hold your peace.

"The function of government is to centralize power and impose domination: to enforce, to punish, to administer. Politicians preside over an economy more oppressive and invasive than any dictatorship could be by itself."

Further Reading

- *To Change Everything: An Anarchist Appeal* available from CrimethInc.
- *The Case for Resistance: What We're Up Against—and What It Could Look Like to Fight* available from CrimethInc.
- *Ahead of Another Summer of Climate Disasters, Let's Talk about Real Solutions* available from CrimethInc.
- *Life Without Law* available from by Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness
- *A Communism We Can Use* available from Living and Fighting
- *A Gift To Humanity: The George Floyd Rebellion* available from inhabit.global
- *Ecosystems of Revolt* available from Ill Will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