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What Kind of Revolutionary Is Mr. Robot?

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Besides being the title of an EP by *The (International) Noise Conspiracy*, “Bigger cages, longer chains!” is an anarchist rallying cry. It’s meant to ridicule those political activists who compromise their ideals, make demands and then settle for partial concessions or, to put it bluntly, bargain with the Man.

In *Mr. Robot*, Christian Slater plays the anarchist leader of a hacktivist group known as fsociety. Mr. Robot won’t negotiate with the FBI and E(vil) Corp for bigger cages and longer chains. He tells Elliot Anderson, the young cybersecurity expert and hacker, “We live in a kingdom of bullshit!” Victory over the tyranny of corporations and states requires radical means to achieve radical ends. Mr. Robot wants freedom without limits, total liberation from corporate and statist control, and the opportunity to live in a world without bullshit. Mr. Robot’s objective is to free citizens of first-world nations from the cages of consumer debt and citizens of third-world nations from the shackles of extreme poverty. Meeting half-way will not do.

Where did these ideas come from? What are the inspirations for Mr. Robot’s hacktivist philosophy? The most obvious sources are David Graeber’s anarchism, which also influenced the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the hacktivist group Anonymous’s *moralfaggery*—the policy of some of its

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members to use collective computer hacking to serve the greater good.

Candidates for more remote sources are Marxism and pragmatism; the former, a blueprint for freeing the working class from their bourgeois oppressors; the latter, a philosophy of action, intelligent inquiry and democratic reform. Some might object that pragmatism is too conventional to be compatible with the radical ideas that motivate Mr. Robot's worldview. Hacktivism demands action, not mere thinking! But any organized social-political movement requires a well-thought-out plan as well as a vision of what its participants hope to achieve. Since pragmatism is a philosophy of action and reform, it's possible that Mr. Robot is a closet pragmatist!

Graeber and Occupy Wall Street

On September 17th 2011, nearly four hundred people flooded into Zuccotti Park in New York's Wall Street district to engage in political protest. They expressed frustration at the recent government bailout of big banks after the financial crisis, growing income inequality, powerlessness of the US electorate, political corruption and escalating consumer debt in the corporate-dominated American economy.

Two hundred activists stayed overnight in the park, setting up a tent city with amenities for sustaining a long-term camp-in. As time went on, the movement gained traction and support grew among the young and old, including members of the US Communist Party, Greenpeace, House Democratic Leader representative Nancy Pelosi, labor unions and some celebrities too. Political jokester Jon Stewart even showed solidarity with the Occupy activists: "If the people who were supposed to fix our financial system had actually done it, the people who have no idea how to solve these problems wouldn't be getting shit for not offering solutions" (*The Daily Show*, October 7th). Things had gotten out of hand. And they only looked to be getting worse. It was time for the Ninety-Nine Percent, as they called themselves, to tell the remaining one percent of the

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population, the political and economic elites, that enough is enough!

One of the masterminds behind Occupy Wall Street was a man named David Graeber, an anthropologist, anarchist, and activist who became disillusioned with the establishment after a decade teaching at Yale University. Once he got into political hot water with the university administration, Yale refused to rehire him. One of his last seminars, titled “Direct Action and Radical Social Theory,” signaled his transition from academic to activist.

In 2011, Graeber attended the initial organizing committee for Occupy Wall Street, but was convinced that they would only negotiate for bigger cages and longer chains. So he formed his own committee of leaderless, anti-authoritarian, anti-corporate hooligans who spearheaded the Occupy protest with inspiration from classic anarchism. Although more of an intellectual than Mr. Robot, Graeber would likely agree with him that consumer debt must end. In an interview about his sixth book, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Graeber laments:

The money has to be extracted from the most vulnerable members of society. Lives are destroyed; millions of people die. People would never dream of supporting such a policy until you say, “Well, they have to pay their debts.”

Anonymous and Moralfaggery

Besides Graeber and Occupy Wall Street, another philosophical inspiration for Mr. Robot’s hacktivism is the activist network Anonymous and the agenda of some of their members, called *moralfaggery*. Wearing Guy Fawkes masks at physical protests and bombarding servers in collective cyber-attacks, Anonymous harassed the Church of Scientology, PayPal, MasterCard, Visa, Sony, as well as the governments of the US, Israel, Tunisia, and Uganada.

The term *moralfag* describes hackers in the Anonymous network who commit themselves to their craft not just for

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the fun of it or to piss someone off, but for a higher cause, such as defending human rights or liberating humankind. Likewise, Mr. Robot sees the defeat of E(vil) Corp and freeing people from the shackles of consumer debt and poverty as a higher calling. He is not just hacking because it's a titillating activity or trolling to anger the Man. In the vernacular of Anonymous, Mr. Robot is a *moral fag*.

Anonymous's attack on the Church of Scientology bears a shocking resemblance to Mr. Robot's cyber-attack on E(vil) Corp. In 2008, Anonymous started its campaign against Scientology by ridiculing Tom Cruise's Church-sponsored video interview. After receiving a cease-and-desist letter from Church attorneys, Anonymous's network of hacktivists engaged in a guerrilla war of retaliatory measures, including prank calls, cyber-hacks on its websites and even sending blacked-out faxes to exhaust the Church's printer ink cartridges. A writer at *The Economist* describes the organization of Anonymous's hacktivist campaign against Scientology:

Organised from a Wikipedia-style website (editable by anyone) and through anonymous internet chat rooms, "Project Chanology," as the initiative is known, presents no easy target for Scientology's lawyers. ("Fair Game: Scientology")

Although Anonymous didn't frame a Church executive, as Elliot did under the tutelage of Mr. Robot, they used almost every *fsociety* tactic in their fight against the wealthy Church of Scientology. The Anonymous network cyber-hacks included Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, where hacktivists crashed online services by overwhelming them with requests, and the Low Orbit Ion Cannon (LOIC), where traffic from many sources was used to overrun servers. The Anonymous campaign escalated into real-world protests at Church of Scientology locations around the globe. Hacktivists donned Guy Fawkes masks and carried signs reading "Down with This Sort of Thing" and "Scientology Destroys Lives."

After the FBI arrested and jailed some members for the Church cyber-attacks, a period of in-fighting occurred within

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Anonymous. It gave rise to two factions: *moralfags*, who hack for a higher purpose or calling, and *trolls*, who hack for the fun of it or to upset others. Of course, Mr. Robot is a *moralfag*, not a troll.

Dewey, Trotsky and the Means-End Continuum

It's easy to find contemporary inspirations for the Mr. Robot character. He's like Occupy Wall Street's David Graeber or Anonymous's *moralfags*. But what are some historical sources for Mr. Robot's hacktivist philosophy? The Russian Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) had an intense debate in the 1920s about which of their philosophies is better suited for sorting out the proper relationship between means and ends. The question of whether the end justifies any means is a recurring dispute among political operatives and activists (as well as hacktivists)—some who are more principled, while others who are, let's say, more diabolical.

Take, for instance, the 2016 American presidential election, when former hacktivist-turned-whistleblower Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks, published e-mails of former Secretary-of-State-turned-Democratic-presidential candidate Hilary Clinton. To defeat an authoritarian, misogynistic, fear-mongering figure like Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, the Democratic Party recruited Malcolm Nance, an ex-intelligence-official-turned-politico, to tell the public that the Wikileaks documents were fakes supplied by Russian president Vladimir Putin. However, the story did not track the truth. Wikileaks had a perfect record of producing authentic documents. The Kremlin denied collaborating with Assange or Wikileaks. In other words, Nance was spreading lies. Sometimes the end (in this case, winning an election) will justify even the most morally objectionable means (such as telling bald-faced lies).

Compared to Dewey the mild-mannered professor, Leon Trotsky was a divisive figure with a colorful past. Along with

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Vladimir Lenin, he planned and led the successful assault on the Winter Palace in the Bolshevik-Russian Revolution of October 1917. Trotsky also served as the War Commissar for the Red Army in its drive to rid Russia of foreign-supported Tsarist forces during its bloody civil war. In an essay entitled "Their Morals and Ours," he articulated a Marxist vision of morality that departed from all other ethical systems. For Trotsky, doing the right thing does not require obedience to divine commands, universal laws or imperatives of reason. Instead, the capital owning class (or bourgeoisie) uses its "petty bourgeois morality" to hypnotize the working class (or proletariat) into a state of compliant obedience—what Marxists call "false consciousness." Trotsky insisted that the only ethical system that truly benefits the proletariat is the one that recommends violent revolutionary action in the service of "liberating mankind" (*Their Morals and Ours*).

John Dewey disagreed. In the essay "Means and Ends," he argued that even an ethically defensible end cannot justify the selection of *any* means whatsoever. The liberation of humankind—which Dewey commended Trotsky for adopting—requires democratic and experimental means for its realization. According to Dewey, the first step in navigating the means-end continuum is to survey

all means that are likely to attain this end without any fixed preoccupation as to what they must be, and that every suggested means would be weighed and judged on the express ground of the consequences it is likely to produce.

The problem with Trotsky's approach is that class struggle becomes *the* exclusive method to liberate humankind. It then licenses all ancillary means, including murder and torture, to achieve that vaunted end. As I have argued in *Great Debates Reconstructed*, Marxist ethics, while adversarial and revolutionary, was insufficiently democratic and experimental for Dewey's tastes.

Trotsky clung to the absolutist doctrine of Marxism even when alternatives to class struggle would have proven more

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effective. He wrote the essay “Their Morals and Ours” as a response to the widespread criticism of his handling of the Kronstadt rebellion, an uprising of sailors in the Russian port city of Kronstadt during the Russian civil war. In March of 1921, near the end of the war, the Trotsky-led Red Army brutally suppressed the Kronstadt labor strike. According to Trotsky’s biographer, “He would not have written it if not for the fact that at the time he had come under attack over his position and actions, seventeen years earlier, during the Kronstadt rebellion.” The protest was organized to demonstrate the workers’ discontent over low wages and poor working conditions. Even though the strike reflected the ideals of the Russian Revolution, it stood in the way of Trotsky achieving his strategic goals. “Problems of revolutionary morality,” Trotsky wrote, “are fused with the problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics.” According to Trotsky’s playbook, it was acceptable to act on the ethical principle that the end justifies using any means whatsoever to obtain it, no matter how brutal or contrary to the revolutionary movement’s ideals.

Mr. Robot is not a Marxist, at least not one in the mold of Leon Trotsky. In the first episode of Season 1.0 he pressures Elliot to give him the DAT file so that fsociety can insert a rootkit into E(vil) Corp’s server. Once inserted, the outcome will be two-fold: 1. secure a load of data and e-mails that fsociety can later threaten to dump into the public domain and 2. leave a trail of false evidence pointing to E(vil) Corp’s Chief Technology Officer as the hack’s culprit. “Once you do that,” Mr. Robot tells Elliot, “we will have put in motion the biggest revolution that the world has ever seen.”

While he employs the Marxist language of revolution, other jargon such as *class struggle*, *historical dialectic*, *false consciousness* and *Communist utopia* never fall from Mr. Robot’s lips. He also doesn’t rely on Trotsky’s playbook. He appreciates hacking as the most effective means for reaching his final goal, but the goal does not justify selecting any methods whatsoever, no matter how unsavory. For instance, replacing debt slavery with actual slavery would not be an acceptable means, for it would undermine the ideals of the

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movement. Instead, Mr. Robot hand-picks those means that will achieve his end-in-view while preserving the *society* movement's integrity. What Dewey, Trotsky and Mr. Robot all share in common is a single overarching objective: liberating humankind.

Mr. Robot—Anarchist or Pragmatist?

In the second episode Mr. Robot presses Elliot to frame the E(vil) Corp executive Terry Colby for the hack, declaring, "You are either a one or a zero! You are either going to act or not!" This propensity toward action points in the direction of pragmatism, but the overall objective of the action—to free the world from corporate control and domination—has its roots in anarchism. It could be said that Mr. Robot's means are pragmatist while his ends are anarchist. Dewey's insight is that the means chosen should always be suited to achieve the end. Dewey recommends democratic means to achieve democratic ends. But Mr. Robot's ends are anarchist. Thus, they require anarchist means.

Anarchist means include subversion, violence and even harassment, all of which would probably not pass democratic muster. The qualification *probably* is important here. Sometimes violence can constitute a democratic means. For Dewey, democratic methods usually encompass careful inquiry, organization, intelligence and experimentation. Yet he also noted an exceptional case:

The one exception—and that apparent rather than real—to dependence upon organized intelligence is found when society through an authorized majority has entered upon a path of social experimentation leading to great social change, and a minority refuses by force to permit the intelligent action to go into effect. Then force may be intelligently employed to subdue and disarm the recalcitrant minority. (*Liberalism and Social Action*)

Violent action may be undertaken against a "recalcitrant minority" if the minority refuses to conform to the will of a dem-

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ocratic majority. If the minority is one percent of the population, or the social and economic elites, then it would seem that, according to the logic of Dewey (as well as some anarchists in the Occupy movement), the Ninety-Nine Percent are justified in forcing the elites to comply with an agenda of social, economic, and political reform.

So the answer to the question of whether Mr. Robot's hacktivist philosophy is anarchist or pragmatist is not so simple. Mr. Robot's identity is not so simple either. By the end of Season 1.0 it is revealed that Mr. Robot is one of Elliot's multiple (well, at least two that we know of) personalities, a dominant force in the main character's split psyche. Elliot's Mr. Robot persona impels him to bring his hacking to a higher level, from prying into the lives of those around him to liberating the world from corporate domination—or in the vernacular of Anonymous, from trolling to *moralfaggery*.

Less Thinking, More Action!

Karl Marx wrote that the point of Communism is to change the world, **not** to philosophize about it. Even though Mr. Robot isn't a Marxist, he can still appreciate what happens when you have too much philosophizing, not enough action. The danger is that the window of opportunity to act and change the world will pass. It might even mean settling for bigger cages and longer chains. Armchair philosophers might not like all this talk of action. However, if a philosopher is to become an activist (sometimes they are called 'public philosophers'), then she has to combine theory with action. Ideas can change the world, but it takes bodies and force if you want to make it happen now.

The advantage of Mr. Robot's hacktivist philosophy is that it entertains just the right mix of action and philosophy (including anarchism and pragmatism); enough to motivate effective activism (or hacktivism), but not so much as to induce cerebral overload or idle slumber (think of the effect of a boring philosophy lecture). So, is Mr. Robot a closet pragmatist? Probably. His hacktivism is predominantly

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anarchist, but with a pinch of the pragmatic thrown in for good measure. Shouldn't the best social-political movements, like the tastiest mixed drinks, contain a combination of spirits?