Matt Bowles: My guest today is Joshua Steven. He is a writer, coffee obsessive, veteran of numerous social movements, direct action coordinator and long-term world traveler. Born in the United States and raised largely in Sicily, he has studied in the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. He has participated in the international solidarity movement in Palestine, played various roles in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S. and was once listed as a terrorist on the payroll of both the CIA and the Vatican in the official newspaper of the Myanmar military junta back in 1998. Joshua is a former board member of the Institute for Anarchist Studies and has published stories and interviews with Arab anarchists in Palestine, Egypt and Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring. He has also covered anti-fascist organizing and popular assemblies in Greece the during the anti-austerity protests. And he has published an autobiographical book on his Life in Washington D.C. as a professional Dog Walker that is simultaneously a series of humorous vignettes and a searing critique of the establishment. Today he primarily writes on themes relating to anti fascism, often documenting social movements and critical histories at the intersections of what are conventionally seen as apolitical aspects of life. For example, his writing has appeared in some of the world's top coffee journals like Standart, as well as the UK football quarterly the Blizzard. As he travels the world, he also works as a freelance writer, editor and content creator for various startups and anti-racist organizations. And he has spent the majority of the past two years in Bangkok, Thailand documenting the pro-democracy uprising there.

Joshua, welcome to the show.

Joshua Stephens: Thanks for having me, man, it's kind of an auspicious way to catch up with you after all this time.

Matt Bowles: Well, you and I have known each other for, for over 20 years now. I want to talk about that, but let's just start off by kicking this off and sharing where we are recording this from today. Unfortunately, we are not in person today, but we have agreed to make this a coffee infused interview. So I am actually in Asheville, North Carolina today on the east coast of the United States and I am drinking an espresso right now. Where are you and what are you drinking?

Joshua Stephens: I am in the deep east of Berlin, I think about maybe 150, 200 yards from the Soviet War Memorial. And I am drinking an Ethiopian Okolulu from Fjord Roasters, which is one of my favorite roasters here in Berlin. They also have a shop called Father Carpenter which was around the corner from my old office here. And I have run this on a V60.

Matt Bowles: Awesome, man. I love that. Well, let's start off by talking a little bit about how you and I know each other. We met in the late 90s. We were both at American University together at that time. And that was really a remarkable historical moment, I think, globally speaking. And maybe you can take us back there and share a little bit of this context. But that was right when the global protests and demonstrations against the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund and the World bank were all starting to emerge in the United States and then eventually elsewhere. And then also in the year 2000 was the second Intifada in Palestine. I'm wondering, can you sort of take us back maybe to that time and share a little bit about the context in which we met and then ultimately started doing activist work together around the Palestinian issue?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, before that, I just want to take a brief detour because I feel like given your current situation and the things that you're currently engaged in, your listeners might want to know that once upon a time you were not engaged in such lucrative employment. And you and I were paid to string outdoor

Christmas lights in the backyard of a very politically connected, very flamboyant Cuban expatriate in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood.

Matt Bowles: This was the moment in life where I have a master's degree but can't get a job. So, I'm doing temp work, doing all sorts of various things, including hanging Christmas lights with Joshua Stephens. Yes, indeed. I had forgotten that moment. I appreciate you bringing that back up. Yes, indeed.

Joshua Stephens: I figured you had. But anyway, it's kind of funny that you mentioned the explosion of the anti-Globalization movement or ultra-globalization movement, because that was essentially the occasion for me dropping out of American University. My roommate at the time got fired from the Whole Foods in Tenleytown for handing out union literature and took what money he had and booked a Greyhound to Seattle to be there for the WTO meetings. And to everyone's surprise, they won. And he came back and was like, we won. We're doing it again with the IMF. We've got five months, are you in or not? And I was like, well, I guess I'm not going back to class anymore. Really and truly, that was the reason I never finished in that moment. The late 90s were a really interesting time, not just in D.C. but on campus. Now there is a queer student office on the campus with probably multiple staff people at this point.

And that was a thing that we fought really hard for. I was in a meeting where I basically had to threaten administrators and say like, wow, the Washington Post would really love to know that queer students of color are coming to American University, which boasts its diverse demographic student body, and let a reporter know that when queer students of color come here, they have to face a double oppression with no support whatsoever. And we walked out of that meeting being told we were not going to get what we were asking for. And maybe a week or two later we got a call and they were like, you've got an office and a full-time staff person. And so, you know, there was a lot happening on that campus, in no small part because of Joe Eldredge, who I think was probably something of a mentor to both of us, sort of liberation theology chaplain on campus with roots in, I think, Latin American solidarity. I believe his wife was from Nicaragua maybe. And yeah, I mean, it was just a really vibrant time to be a left leaning student on that campus. Really fascinating people teaching there, encouraging students, building things.

And then of course, what became the National Conference on Organized Resistance, but was initially the National Conference on Civil Disobedience began there and became probably the largest anti-authoritarian left gathering in the United States eventually. And students began coming to American University because of that, because they thought that the conference was somehow a representation of the university as a whole, which could not be further from the truth. But it really changed the student composition at American university and the 2000 protests against the IMF and World Bank. What we called A16 kind of created the anarchist community that exists in D.C. now. I mean, in 1997 I responded to a call for local anarchists to meet up and there were three of us. And in 2000 I think a lot of people came into D.C. for the protests, and a lot of them never left.

Matt Bowles: Can you also share this story, speaking of the late 90s, since we're back there now, about how you wound up in the official paper of the Burmese military junta in 1998? Because I've never heard this story.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So back then, one of the first groups that I was doing work with was the Free Burma Coalition. And we did an action, there were 13 of us, where we took bike locks, like U locks, and put them around our necks and locked ourselves to the entrance of the embassy. And they had to bring out firemen who put fire coats over our heads and took blowtorches and circular saws to these locks. I think

they actually broke the jaws of life trying to get us out. And we were forced to pay restitution for them. And initially, we were charged with interfering with the business of a foreign government, which was a felony, a federal felony. And that got dropped down to invading the property of a foreign government, which was a misdemeanor, but still a federal charge. And all 13 of our names were printed in the Burmese military junta's official paper. And it said that we were all in the pay of the CIA and the Vatican. And I know the CIA has a whole record of duping people into things that they were bankrolling. Nina Simone, thankfully, never found out that she was roped into something. So as far as I'm aware, I've never been on the CIA payroll. But I thought it was really funny because I read that, and I just thought, like, how frequently are the CIA and the Vatican in cahoots? Like, what a fucking wacky combo to put in an official paper.

Matt Bowles: Well, the other thing that was going on around that time in 2000 was the second Palestinian intifada. And by the end of 2001, I think I had actually been to both the west bank and the Gaza Strip twice each. I'd gone first in 99, and then I went again a year or two later. Was very involved in Palestinian solidarity organizing in the D.C. area in and around that time. And you eventually got very heavily involved as well. And that's where you and I have probably spent the most time together and done the most work together. Can you share a little bit about how you got so involved and committed to the Palestinian struggle and supporting that?

Joshua Stephens: So, truthfully, when the intifada kicked off in 2000, I was probably aware of it, but it was not an area of the world that I had much engagement with. It was not an Issue that I was super steeped in on principle. I knew where I came down in terms of closing ranks with the underdog and closing ranks with the colonized. But after 911 I really felt compelled to take the skills that I had because at that point I had been pretty rigorously trained in nonviolent direct-action coordination and put those skills in the service of the most vulnerable in that moment. And in the aftermath of 911 it was just very clear that Arabs and Muslims were at the top of the list. And I didn't really have any kind of roadmap to who to throw those skills in behind. And so, I was just offering myself up to groups that were doing various antiwar work, you know.

We did lots of critical mass bike rides, blocking traffic to sort of oppose the, the invasion of Afghanistan and things like that. And then in 2002 I was really getting burnt out on working in exclusively anarchist projects which were overwhelmingly white, very cliquish, lots of internecine drama. And a mutual friend of ours, Mark Lance, approached me and said if you want to try something else, there's this Palestine solidarity group that really wants to do direct action stuff. But nobody in the group really has any experience with that. And they're in practice and in orientation as much if not more so anti-authoritarian than anybody I've worked with. And I was like, yeah, sure, I'll come to a meeting.

And I really think I attended one meeting and just listened to people talk and really was struck by how they spoke to each other. And I was just like, this is the healthiest organizing environment I've ever been in. I'm not going anywhere. This is it. Like I have arrived at the top of the mountain and on stem. And that was really the beginning of it. From there I got really, you know, steeped in and familiar with the more granular elements of that struggle and the history there and things like that. But prior to that it was just sort of like a general sort of orientation of like, yeah, I back the colonized. And it was really down to the fact that people were just really fucking good to each other in that group.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it was an amazing collection of people that came together. And the organization which no longer is exists was called SUSTAIN, which was an acronym that stood for Stop U.S. Tax Funded Aid to Israel Now. And the idea was that as Americans who pay our taxes and live in this democracy where our representatives are supposed to be responsive to our demands, that if Israel was committing human rights

abuses, then we wanted our military aid and our economic aid withheld until they complied with international law. And we were going to make that policy, demand and use that as an educational framework for other Americans to understand why Israeli government human rights abuses were absolutely relevant to every single citizen of the United States that pays taxes. Because the United States government is funding those human rights abuses and they are politically protecting and defending their ability to commit those human rights abuses in the United Nations and so forth. And so that was really the organizing framework. And then it just attracted, as you said, some of the most extraordinary human beings that I have ever worked with to this day.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, I mean, end to end. I'm not even joking. I have a full sleeve tattoo on my right arm that began as a tribute to those people. It has a quote in Arabic, and I'm not a big fan of people tattooing themselves with languages they don't speak. But I have the final line of [Mahmoud Darwish]'s mural tattooed in Arabic script at the base of my forearm. And the bulk of my arm tattooed solid black, breaking up toward the shoulder as a sort of tribute to those people and the impact that they had on my life.

Matt Bowles: Can you share who [Mahmoud Darwish] is and what the translation of the tattoo says?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, [Mahmoud Darwish] is sort of the poet laureate of Palestine and also an incredibly renowned poet in the Arab world at large. Began as a sort of poet of resistance and branched a bit later in life around, I guess you could say, kind of romantic poetry, love poetry, but really affecting and really beautiful. And the final line of Mural, Mural was a poem that he penned after he had a surgery, I think in the 80s maybe. And while under anesthesia in the surgery, he flatlined for about two minutes and they managed to revive him, but he was effectively dead on the operating table for some period of time. And he wrote this small book length poem sort of describing and reconciling what he experienced while dead. And the closing passage of it is him sort of saying to the people in his life. At least my interpretation of it was him saying, like, *now that I have experienced what's waiting for me, I'm no longer attached to being here in the world*. Like, I'm not scared of what's coming and I'm no longer clinging to this physical life.

And so, what he says to people is, it closes with him saying, I am not mine. I'm not mine. I'm not mine. And I interpreted that as him sort of saying like, I don't belong to myself anymore. I belong to the people around me. And I thought that that was Just such a beautiful way to sort of wind that massive work down. And such a beautiful sentiment as well. And so, on my forearm, in Arabic script, it says, which is I'm literally saying I am not from myself. Because, you know, Arabic being a language of the Quran, it's very difficult, I think, to express possession. There's not a lot that belongs to you, but it's all gods. But yeah, I began this tattoo as a tribute to those people and the impact that they had on my life.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. Well, I want to go all the way back now and talk a little bit about your journey in terms of how you got to that point in your life. And maybe can you just begin by sharing a little bit about where you grew up. And I know you moved around a lot growing up, and so maybe just when you think all the way back, coming up as a young kid, maybe share a little bit about the impact that travel and place and relocation had on the development of your identity.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So the punchline is that as far as my passport says, I'm a Florida man, I'm the guy on bath salts jumping in with the Crocs and stuff. Yeah. Which is weird. You know, even like when I was in Palestine, you know, I'd like cross checkpoints and they'd be like, oh, you're from Florida. And I was like, sure. I was born in Orlando, not far from Disney World. I have no memory of any of it. I think I was very quickly taken out of Florida by my mother. I never met my biological father. And I am the only member of my

family that was not born in and has never lived in Mississippi. My whole family is from a town in Mississippi not too terribly far from Tupelo. It's in the north, close to the border with Tennessee. It's called Ripley. And I think we were there for a little bit, not terribly long. I think it was just sort of long enough for my mom to figure out what next.

And at some point, she met another man and married him. And he was from central Pennsylvania, basically Harrisburg. And so, we moved to a town in the middle of nowhere, central Pennsylvania called Grantville. We lived in a trailer on a strip of grass off the parking lot of this one-story motel that was off the side of a highway. And at about age 5, they bought a bigger house in a working-class suburb of Harrisburg just across the river called Enola, which is basically a train yard. And I lived there until I was 10. And at 10 years old, I don't actually quite to this day understand what happened? But my mom got the opportunity. She had worked for the U.S. Navy as a civilian for her whole career, basically. And she took a position that moved us to Bermuda, and we lived there for two years.

And that was like a really kind of vertical change in circumstances for us. Like, I think her career kind of leapfrogged in some way, and our lives changed completely from that point. We had a very comfortable life in Bermuda and two years later relocated to the east coast of Sicily, where there is a very strategically significant U.S. Naval air station. Virtually every air war that the U.S. has fought anywhere in the vicinity of the Mediterranean, certainly in the Middle east, in North Africa, when they were routing Gaddafi not too terribly long ago, the planes were taking off from the. The very base that I went to high school on. And that was where I spent my teenage years, was going to school with Navy brats on this air base and hitchhiking with Sicilians out on the side of Mount Etna, basically.

Matt Bowles: Can you trace a little bit of the trajectory of the development of your politics and your social consciousness and your worldview? And I know there were a lot of different influences on you as you were growing up, ranging from stand-up comedy that you were exposed to, to skateboarding culture, to punk rock music. Can you take us a little bit on that trajectory and through those different experiences that you had, how your politics developed?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, you have to keep in mind, I was born in 77, so by the time I started elementary school, that first really big wave of standup comedy was in full swing. By the time I moved to Bermuda, Eddie Murphy's Raw had been released. And that wasn't even the peak of it. So, Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, all of these people were some of the biggest stars in American media when I was a kid. And that stuff was always around in my house. My stepdad was a really big fan of a lot of that stuff. And I remember it being kind of in the ether, being played in the house. I remember when we got cable, I remember seeing, you know, HBO specials and things like that. And really and truly, I think it was first grade. For Christmas, my parents gave me music for the first time and I got two albums. One was Def Leppard's Pyromania, which was really hitting right about then. And the other was Steven Wright's stand-up album, I have a Pony, which is like canon at this point. You know, it was new then, but it's canon now. And I memorized both of them. And stand-up comedy was just as much a part of my life as music, as television.

And at a certain point, I encountered George Carlin. I'm pretty sure either my best friend's parents had on one of his specials, or I don't remember exactly how I saw it, but seeing Carlin just set the world on fire for me. I think I must have been nine years old or something, and I just could not believe how funny he was, but also how unintimidated he was, how unfazed he was, and how just blistering he was in his critique of the United States and the United States place in the world. And that planted some seeds. And so, I got into

skateboarding around the same time. And when we moved to Bermuda and I started making friends through skateboarding, a lot of them were older than me and they were into punk rock.

And so, I started hearing Black Flag and Husker Du and Agnostic Front and Circle Jerks and 7 Seconds. And, you know, some of these bands were not so political, but some of them very much were. And because I had kind of already been primed by Carlin and to some extent, Richard Pryor, although Richard Pryor's comedy, like, I understood that it was talking about race and racism and stuff, but it was a little over my head, I think. And in part because he was just so creatively masterful in what he did. But by the time I encountered punk rock, my guard was down. Like, I was ready to hear those things. I was ready to take those things seriously and absorb them and not really resist them. It was incredibly porous to anti-war politics, to critiques of racism, to all these sorts of things.

And by the time I moved to Sicily and heard Minor Threat for the first time, that hit me at a time where, you know, I moved to Sicily in 1990, and in 1991, the Gulf War started. And the plates that were running sorties over Baghdad were taking off a football field distance from my mom's office. And I already knew that I was anti-war, even though I was like 12, turning 13. I was 13 when the Gulf War started. I knew how I felt about war. I knew I didn't trust the U.S. government. And I was really eager to set myself apart from the sort of fascist microcosm that is the U.S. military community. And hearing Minor Threat and learning about Straightedge was just this way of me drawing a line in the sand and saying, I am not like any of you.

These things that you are all obsessed with and care about. I am not like any of you. And not only am I going to do it in my speech? I'm going to do it in my body. I'm going to make this refusal manifest in my body in terms of the things that I do, in terms of the things that I put in my body. And yeah, I just could not have been sort of more well calibrated to receive that at that time. And that completely changed the course of my life.

Matt Bowles: And can you say a little bit about what Straight Edge is for, just for people that aren't familiar with that term? And then how that was for you for the duration of your time in Sicily, being immersed in literally a U.S. military base, and then how your politics developed from there until you went back to the United States?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, Straight Edge is this sort of sub, subculture of punk that sort of rejects intoxication and intoxication culture as a sort of form of conformity and as sort of antithetical to meaningful resistance to the status quo. And it's not new. I think there's a lot of sorts of haughty self-righteousness that comes out of that scene and that history, when in reality, you know, the American Indian Movement was a sober movement. The Panthers were really serious about that. I mean, Spanish anarchists from the 1930s in Andalusia were rejecting alcohol and gambling and all of this stuff. And, you know, certainly the Zapatistas to this day are still dry communities and have a particularly feminist critique of drinking culture, which can be dodgy, right. Because that was the temperance movement as well, which is, you know, not something that I think we will want to valorize.

But I think that the Zapatista examples are really instructive. And so, any number of communities that have been engaged in resistance and have been victimized by addiction and substance abuse and the proliferation of those things have set their sights on that and sort of taken it out of the equation as a way of fortifying the forms of resistance that they engaged in. So Straight Edge was not by any means new, but that was where I encountered that was through punk and hardcore. And it really did transform my life in as much as, on one hand, it showed me that I could be really disciplined about something despite

extraordinary pressure. You know, the pressure as a teenager, particularly among a bunch of American kids isolated on the other side of the world who had literally nothing to do but get into trouble. The pressure to drink and get into drugs and things like that.

I mean, kids I skateboarded with were huffing gas and I just remember thinking, like, did you not have a moment where you felt your dignity leave your body when you put your mouth around the nozzle of a gas canister. It struck me as profoundly absurd and embarrassing when they recounted this evening that they had spent huffing gas. And on the other hand, it also taught me how little I need in order to be content. Like how easy it is to do without things and still be content and still have a rich and fulfilling life. So, I began taking responsibility for my own development politically in that space. And you know, surrounded by teachers who were in this God school system in the U.S. military and then my mom's peer group who I was often getting taken to dinner with and things like that. Everyone from Navy officers to contractors from Boeing and stuff who were pitching things to the Navy. I got to hear them shit talk so many things from Marxism to Gandhi to whatever.

And I figured out at a certain point that being the only English-speaking anti-war person probably on the island of Sicily in 1991 was not an enviable position. I was getting threatened within an inch of my life daily. I got shoved down a flight of stairs one time, I got all kinds of bullying and just really grueling sorts of interactions on the daily. And I figured out, and I don't quite know why this worked to this day, I learned that if I could exercise a superior command of information and argument, it was kind of a get out of getting my ass kicked free card. Oftentimes people would back down or an adult would intervene. And so, I just decided I was going to arm myself. And you know, I was 13. It wasn't like I had a roadmap for that. But I knew I didn't like the people who were sort of in positions of authority and the adults around me and I knew what they disliked. And so, I sort of took that as an indicator of what might be worth looking into. Because it was basically just like, if you guys hate this stuff, there's probably something to it. Like I probably stand to learn something from it.

And so, I really, I started skipping class and skateboarding over to the public library and just, I read the entire Eastern section of this massive religious encyclopedia set. I read feminist sociology, I read very, very sort of pedestrian accounts of socialism and Marxism and things like that. And then I also off the base began going to this place called Centri Sociali Auto. The Centro Sociale is a movement in Italy. It's called the Centri Sociali Autogestiti, which means just the self-managed social center. And there's a network of these throughout Italy. In Rome, there's one that's Literally a castle. They squatted a castle and turned it into like this collective living space and concert venue. And I think there's like a print shop and all kinds of stuff. It's on the outskirts called Forte Prenestino. And I went to this Centro Sociale in Catania that I think was a former, like, nunnery or monastery or something. And I would go there to go to punk shows. But what I encountered there was that in the south, in Italy, they were mostly run by like, autonomous Marxists.

And so, I started encountering hammer and sickle graffiti and Italian language zines about socialism and ant Centro Sociale capitalism and Marx and all this stuff. And at the time, my Italian was terrible, but I was like, I want to know what this is about, you know, like, I want to know why these people are into this, because I think these are my people. And between skipping class and skateboarding over to the library and at night hitchhiking down the mountain into the city and going to the Centro Sociale to go see punk bands and stuff, I sort of came to a place of confidence about, like, yeah, you're not going to bully me into falling in line with this idiot dogma and ideology that animates this whole community. I have plenty of things to fall

back on, to feel good about and confident in my understanding of the world and my positions. And I don't think I would have been able to arrive at that if I hadn't encountered straight edge at such a young age.

Matt Bowles: And can you talk a little bit about how you eventually arrived at anarchism? And can you also explain anarchism a little bit just for folks that are not familiar with that as a political philosophy and as a political organizing framework? Maybe some people have literally just heard the term as the sort of pop cultural quipped to mean nihilistic chaos. Can you just share a little bit about what the fundamental tenets and elements of anarchism are and how you ultimately, through this journey, arrived at that worldview?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, by the time I left Sicily, I understood myself to be a socialist. And my first order priority when I got back to the States was to find where people were doing work around that. And so, before you and I met in SUSTAIN, I had met Rami and Zayn El Amino, also Dave Zirin, of all people, in an international socialist organization meeting in D.C. and so I very briefly dabbled with the ISO. I ultimately found it a little cultic and kooky and was turned off and left. And it's noteworthy that Rami and Zain and their brothers were effectively purged from the ISO for defying the ISO's party line about Seattle. The ISO issued this statement that said the Seattle uprising wasn't historically significant because it wasn't led by workers. It was led by this coalition that included workers. And the El Amin brothers and a number of other people issued a rebuttal to this. And this is preposterous and massively, historically irresponsible. Like, you can't say this. And they were like, yeah, okay, well, you guys can leave.

And, you know, that was the beginning, I think, of Left Turn, which was sort of adjacent to SUSTAIN, which was a brilliant organization and publication. And then, you know, at AU, I actually had a class called Deprivation of Liberty with Jeffrey Something. But he identified as a classical liberal in that libertarian vein. He had us reading Thomas Szasz and Milton Friedman and Hayek and all these market fundamentalist libertarian types. And in that class, I was just like, you really misunderstand the place of class. And you're all about eradicating coercion, but you don't recognize forms of coercion that are more subtle. And I'm really not down with it. Like, I'm down with abolishing drug laws. I'm down with abolishing the death penalty. I'm down with elevating people's ability to determine the course of their lives. But this free-market stuff is garbage.

And I felt a little conflicted about. I felt like a tension there. It was like, well, there were parts of this that I identified with. But then at the same time, like, I'm just not ever going to be down with capitalism. And the summer of 97, which was probably after my first semester at AU, because I started in the winter semester or the spring semester, I guess I read, and I think it was just like a pamphlet from, like, Kropotkin or something. Yeah, it was Kropotkin's Anarchism and Anarcho-communism. And it just broke everything open because it reconciled that tension. It was like, yeah, there can be socialism that isn't organized by a government and isn't administrated by a government. Socialism that's organized from the bottom up and is organized directly, democratically, by workers, organizations, by community organizations. And I was like, I am home. Like, this is it. Like, this is exactly what I'm about. And I dove headlong into that.

And what I eventually learned and what I think is probably the most sophisticated way to explain anarchism, it's not about bringing about some state of affairs or set of conditions through some cataclysmic turns. It's like Chomsky describes it as a sort of tendency or an orientation that seeks to transform relationships of domination into relationships of cooperation and democratic collaboration and equality. And what I learned from Murray Bookchin was Marxism's primary object of analysis is exploitation. That's what Marx is about, right? He's about identifying where exploitation is taking place and just ripping it out at the roots. The problem, and this was the problem with historical Marxist movements

really, is that not all forms of domination involve exploitation. Heteronormative domination of queer people doesn't always involve exploitation. Domination of religious minorities does not always involve exploitation. And so, our object of analysis has to be something broader.

And for anarchism, the object of analysis is domination. In its classical iterations, it was always about the state and capitalism. Those were the things that needed to be abolished. Like the classical era, turn of the 20th century, anarchism was about abolishing the state and capitalism. And then, you know, other things came in. There were women's movements and things like that, but by and large, those were the pillars. And I think now we can take that same mode of analysis and apply it to any relationship of domination. It could be about men and women, it could be about race, it could be about colonialism, it could be about disability, it could be about indigeneity. It could be about any number of things. But if you understand that this is the sort of tool is how do I identify where domination is taking place, and then what's my relationship with that and how can that be best transformed? That's the anarchist project. Like, that's it. It's a practice more than it is a sort of, like, political ideology.

Matt Bowles: One of the, I think, most inspiring movements of the 20th century, I would say, that has embodied a lot of these tenets that you're describing is the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. Can you talk a little bit about maybe just for folks that are not familiar with that, just give a little bit of context for that movement. And then I would love to hear about your experience spending time in the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah, I honestly, especially after spending time there and studying with them, I think that if you put a gun to my head and said, which do you identify with more, Zapatismo or Anarchism? I'd probably come down on the side of Zapatismo just because it is a much more robust, more sophisticated, more beautiful sort of expression of that vision. The Zapatistas are an indigenous movement born in the jungles and highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, who, which is like the state of Chiapas, houses the poorest people on the North American continent. I mean, if you go outside of the cities in Chiapas, the modes of living that people have there are unlike anything that you would imagine in the Northern hemisphere. It's really the sort of thing that you would think had most people anyway, would think had gone by the wayside some time ago. And it's on the border of Guatemala. There are three hundred and fifty different languages there. And this state is also highly exploited for everything from tourism to energy resources to I think water and a number of other sort of industries have really treated Chiapas as just like a strip mine.

And you know, one of the things that was kind of the final thread that these people were hanging by was that enshrined in the Mexican Constitution was the right to ejidos, which were collectively administered farms that could not be sold off to private entities or private investors or anything. They belonged to the community; they were a common. And so worst-case scenario, people could still farm on a hero and feed themselves. And when the North American Free Trade Agreement was negotiated, one of the things that the U.S. strong armed the Mexican government into doing was removing that article from the Mexican constitution. And indigenous people in southern Mexico rightly saw this as a death sentence and began organizing and preparing for this. And so, when NAFTA took effect on January 1, 1994, they declared war on the Mexican state and rose up. And you know, to say that they declared war is technically accurate, but most of them didn't have guns. And there were actually only about 11 days of armed conflict. Many of them went and seized military bases holding sticks just so that if they were like spotted in night vision stuff, they would look like they had guns.

And the ideas that animated this movement and continue to animate this movement, I don't want to talk about it as past tense. They're still very much present. The origin was that there had been a sort of Che Guevara inspired cadre that went from Mexico City into the jungle and said like, hey, we want to foment an indigenous revolution and let us talk to you about Marxism and whatever. And the indigenous were like, yo, we're down, but the ideas are going to come from us. Like, this stuff you guys are talking about is crazy and we'll take what we want from it, but you guys are nuts and you're not going to be in charge of this. And so, some of them allowed themselves to be adopted by these indigenous communities and began operating under the leadership of these incredibly democratic traditions, these long-standing sorts of structures that people had for administrating social life. And Zapatismo was born of that. And I think it's something like 98% of Zapatistas are Catholic. And if you ask them, without any irony, they believe that the Virgen de Guadalupe was a Zapatista. Like this woman precedes the movement by several centuries as a concept, but they believe that she is one of them.

Matt Bowles: I can remember when I went down to Chiapas and stayed with the Zapatistas in their communities, which was around the year 2000 turning into 2001, which was the anniversary of their uprising. And the timing was, of course, just after Christmas, right? And so, as you mentioned, I went to mass there on Sunday and the sermon was this whole liberation theology sermon. And literally in the church, in the chapel where the mass was held, they still had the Nativity scene, right? Because the Christmas decorations were up and the Nativity scene had two wise men and one Zapatista soldier wearing a ski mask. They integrate that and as you mentioned, the Virgen de of Guadalupe, big mural on the wall. Not of the church. It's a separate part of the community. A huge wall mural of the Virgen de of Guadalupe wearing a Zapatista ski mask.

Joshua Stephens: 100%, Yeah. And it's incredible. They say things that you just assume they must be joking and they're 100% serious about it. To enter a Zapatista community, you have to have paperwork saying that you're authorized to be there. You have to go to the Oficina de Vigilancia and get documentation. And you have to have an external civil society group vouching for you saying you're not a cop and you're not a soldier and like, whatever. And when I went to study there, there were these two Weimaraners, these two silvery dogs that were running around Oventik and constantly getting into trouble and wrestling and like, whatever.

And our first day of like, my cohort's orientation in Oventik, they said, don't pet those dogs because they don't have authorization to be here. And we felt that that was just them being cute. And they were like, no, really, like, they're not allowed to be here. We don't have any way to keep them out, but they're not supposed to be here. And like, there was constantly stuff like that where it was like, surely, you're joking. Like, surely this is just like a cheeky metaphor. And they're like, no, we're for real. And I love that being immersed in it. I was just like, there's something really transformative and powerful about this because it extends to other things, right? Like, they don't have teachers and students or cooks and consumers or doctors and patients. They have *promotores de salud*, *promotores de educación*, *promotores de comida*. Like, they don't have these dichotomies, and they refuse these dichotomies even in their language.

We don't have teachers. We have promoters of education. We don't have doctors. We have promoters of health. And they're very serious about sort of flushing colonial conditioning out of the sort of ether in their general vicinity and really creating something different. And there's something so beautiful about the way that they have gone about that. And I think that it has been profoundly underappreciated incidentally. To this day, a lot of my friends in New York don't know that there are Zapatistas in East Harlem. Because in

2006, the Zapatistas launched what they called *La Otra Campaña*, the other campaign, where they sort of wanted to take Zapatismo out of Chiapas and make it not just a national thing, but they even say, like, intergalactic politics. They were like, we're not just talking about global transformation. Like, we're really in it to win it, right? Like, we're talking about intergalactic liberation. And *La Otra Campaña* had, like, a set of principles that people had to agree to in order to be affiliated.

And there is a group of Mexican immigrants in East Harlem who are adherents to the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, which was the document that founded the other campaign. And they call themselves Movement for Justice in El Barrio. Left Turn did a really great piece about them back in the day. What's not appreciated about them, especially in a city like New York, where people are hyper conscious of housing and speculation and all of these things. This group in East Harlem put a British holding firm into bankruptcy. A British holding firm clearly leveraged out its ass, bought, like, 27 buildings in East Harlem and proceeded to try and push tenants out so that they could flip them. But this group went and organized the tenants of all but I think, four buildings and successfully resisted people being pushed out to the point that the bill came due for the financing for all of this. And this British holding firm went into bankruptcy because a bunch of Mexican immigrants who identify as Zapatistas kicked their asses in East Harlem and like, how beautiful.

And also, just like, you know, all these housing organizers in Brooklyn and Queens and stuff. She's like, y' all need to go, like, start taking classes in East Harlem. Like, what are you doing? Like, these guys are in your backyard. There's proof of concept to the efficacy of how they approach struggle and how they approach configurative politics and a reconstructive vision and being there and studying with them. They are very poetic and very cheeky. You know, like, I went there doing Spanish immersion. I took two years of Spanish in Sicily in high school, but I basically lost most of it and converted it to Italian.

So, I went back to do immersion in that. And you do immersion by learning about Zapatismo in Spanish. And they do really clever, cheeky things. Like the way that you learned that words in Spanish that end in ion are feminine is *el problema es masculino La solución Es femenina*. Like, it's this kind of stuff, right? And that was really transformative for me. And I think I went there five years after going to Palestine for the first time, but I was well on my way by the time I went to Chiapas. But by the time I came back, I was just like, I'm fucking done with white anarchist circles. Like, I'm just done with this. There are so many more meaningful places to be doing radical politics. And I think at that point I really became very sort of ecumenical and agnostic about my sort of anti-authoritarianism, where it was just like, do I identify with Zapatismo? Do I identify with anarchism? I don't know, do I identify with the first Intifada? I'm happy to take from all of these.

Matt Bowles: Well, let's talk a little bit about that Palestine trip. And maybe just for context, if you can share a little bit about the international solidarity movement and what that was all about, which was the context in which you went to Palestine, as well as the context of SUSTAIN and all that, the activist work that you were doing at the time in the United States. And I'm actually thinking, as I'm posing this question back to that time, because I remember that you and I were talking, because I had been to Palestine twice at that point. And I remember that you were talking to me about your upcoming trip. And when we were talking about the ISM, you were bringing up to me sort of the history of this type of international solidarity work. And you were talking to me about the Abraham Lincoln Brigades and some of this kind of stuff. So maybe even just started a little bit further back, since we've now been discussing a lot of anarchism, maybe start all the way back and share a little bit with folks that aren't familiar with the Spanish Civil War

about the role of international solidarity back then. And then for you, within that framework that you had, how you gravitated towards the international solidarity movement in terms of going over to Palestine.

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, the Spanish Civil War was effectively a struggle between the left and Francisco Franco's fascist uprising in Spain. And obviously the left lost that and Franco was in power until 1975. But there are two things I think, that are really instructive. Well, there are a number of things that I think are really instructive about that history, but the two primary ones, and they're the ones that are probably most visible and most studied and most well-known, are first of all, that anarchism took off like one wildfire in Spain at that time, like 1936 to 1939, in primarily Barcelona, but also other parts of the country, like the formerly Muslim south of Spain, like Andalusia, Anarchism was huge.

Barcelona was for a significant amount of time completely administered by what was effectively an anarchist labor union. They collectivized every industry except for finance. They abolished money in some places. They established a four-hour workday in full employment for the first time in Spanish history, I think. And the first real sort of murmurs around queer liberation and stuff came out of this moment in Spain. So, there's this incredibly intense history. And because of the timing of this, people of your and my age group in the United States, oftentimes, if you ask their grandfathers fought in World War II, you go to Barcelona and you ask people of the same age group what their grandparents did. They were anarchists. Like, more often than not, they were anarchists. And that is still very much sort of in the air and in the DNA of that city. I mean, obviously it's a neoliberal city like any number of other Western capitals, but that heritage is still there.

So, there's that right where there was this sort of utopian moment. Literally, George Orwell was one of the people who went and fought in the Spanish Civil War. And he wrote this book, Homage to Catalonia. And the opening chapter of that book is one of my favorite pieces of literature because he's describing arriving in revolutionary Barcelona and just being blown away. He's like, I feel like I've landed on a completely other planet. And the thing that I remember in particular, because I laughed out loud when I read it was. He describes walking past a barbershop and there's a sign outside the barbershop that says, do not tip us. We've thrown off our shackles. Which is like. It's almost Zapatistas esque.

Matt Bowles: Right.

Joshua Stephens: It's like so over the top. And this was profoundly transformative for people, especially outsiders who came in. And the International Brigades were a really big deal almost in the way that, like, a lot of people are going to Rojava now to fight with the YPG and the YPJ in this Kurdish anarchist experiment that is, you know, heavily influenced by Murray Bookchin and social ecology and stuff. And by the way, that's very big here in Berlin. A lot of people are really. You see PKK and YPJ graffiti all over Berlin. They just had a memorial service for a guy. He had an Italian name, he might have been German, though, who died fighting in Rojava. And the Kurdish population here is quite large.

Matt Bowles: Before we go on with this, can you share a little bit more about that in terms of what's going on there right now? Just for folks that are not familiar with that situation?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, for a time, the Kurdish independence movement, the Kurdish Liberation movement in Turkey and, you know, in Kurdistan basically had a number of different, I guess you could say, vehicles of expression. And one of them was the PKK, which was a sort of Marxist-Leninist formation headed by this guy named Ocalan, who's now a political prisoner in Turkey. And at some point in prison, he

was a voracious reader and he read Murray Bookchin, who was an American anarchist, one of the last of the sort of like, major anarchist thinkers until David Graeber arrived on the scene, I guess.

And Bookchin's work was largely passed over in the United States and in Europe, I think, to some extent. And he was very bitter at the end of his life. I studied with him at his apartment because he was not able to leave the apartment twice. And he was a very, almost embarrassingly bitter man because he felt like he really had been denied his legacy. And he was sort of this ranting Danny DeVito sort of character who was very sadly bitter about this. But his work was read by Ocalan in prison. And Ocalan became very, very partial to the sort of reconstructive vision that Bookchin laid out in terms of how to organize communities democratically. What the priorities of that should be, how to move from anti authoritarianism in particular things and expand that to the general and the sort of strategy and the Vision for that. And so, Ocalan started taking that up.

And I only heard about this at Murray Bookchin's memorial and Murray Bookchin's sort of like disciples, I guess you could say. They were people who mentored me some in the early 2000s, like around the time that you and I were doing Palestine stuff. And they could be a bit sycophantic. And so, at his memorial, somebody mentioned that the Kurdish liberation movement was really taking up his ideas. And I was just like, is that really true? And so, like a few days later I started doing a little googling and it turned out it very much was true. And fast forward to today. There is this Barcelona esque experiment in Syria, Turkish borderland area, where this openly anti-authoritarian, self-organized, self-administered women's liberation, like all this stuff. And much in the same way that in the 30s, leftists from all over the world were flying to Spain and taking boats to Spain to fight Franco, you have probably the fiercest anti ISIS fighters that there are anarchists in Kurdistan.

And in fact, the U.S. even provided aid to some of these groups, which is really fucking dodgy. But like the U.S. military took them seriously enough to see them as basically a prong for defeating ISIS. And so, there's something very analogous about that, right? Like that there are people from all over the world going to Rojava to fight what they think is Islamofascism in the form of ISIS. But also, in the same way that, you know, there's this mythology about Spain where it was like, well, everybody was going to fight Franco, right? Like it was like this negation of fascism. And that was true. But what was just as true was that a lot of people were going there to fight for anarchism and to fight for socialism.

And in the same way, you know, people are going to Rojava because they want to defeat ISIS and they want to defeat Erdogan, and you know, they want to help support Kurdish liberation, but they're also going there because they feel like there's been a little pinhole poked in the status quo and they want to expand that and they want to fight on behalf of this vision of an anti-authoritarian, confederated, bottom-up society. And it's pretty fucking inspiring. I mean, we live in bleak times and so you can't really fault people for kind of throwing up their hands and being like, fuck it, I'm going to go fight ISIS in the desert. But like there's also something really beautiful about it and the things that people have come back from there talking about in the ways that it has transformed them is pretty impressive.

Matt Bowles: Can you now talk about the Palestinian led international solidarity movement and going all the way back to the early 2000s, how you came upon that, how you connected with that and ultimately the context for your trip to Palestine, which was your first trip?

Joshua Stephens: Yeah. So, as I understood it, the ISM was a Palestinian led effort to basically aid Palestinian self-organization in the vein of the first intifada by bringing in people. I think the first intifada is a

really good starting point for that conversation because the first intifada was this very horizontal, self-organized, very dynamic and primarily secular leftist sort of orientation in many cases, you know. Islamists had very little presence in the first intifada and it was incredibly successful precisely because of its contours and its inner workings. And Israel basically jailed or killed everybody. And when Israelis and Zionists talk about Hamas and it's like their favorite talking point is like, oh, but Hamas, it's like, well, Hamas was a marginal group in the first intifada.

They were barely on anyone's radar at that time. And if not but for the fact that, that you guys killed and jailed all of the secular leadership of that movement, there would never have been a vacuum for Hamas to sweep into. So, it's on your hands, like that this organization exists and thrives is on your hands. You created them. And I think that the vision of, you know, like Hueda and George and the people who launched the ISM was to bring in people who, if the Israeli military exacted violence on them, it would create an international and diplomatic crisis for them. And I think that that proved to be true in a lot of cases. You know, the death of Rachel Corey, the death of Tom Hurndall, the people who came in were incredibly effective in providing just enough space for Palestinians to be able to, to begin creating dynamic and sustainable forms of resistance. You see it primarily in the villages in the countryside, I think, or at least, you know, in the last 10 years or so in the areas where the wall was being constructed.

And the ISM's vision was let's bring people in from outside to accompany Palestinians in engaging in various forms of nonviolent resistance. And that's a beautiful vision and a really strategic one. And I imagine your experience was very similar, was that like what I think of most in terms of that encounter and that experience was the ways in which it clarified so much for me about what my orientation to politics was and was so deeply transformative in terms of how I relate to, related to the struggles that I was part of back home.

Matt Bowles: What were some of those experiences that you had? Can you kind of take us through the on the ground experience, what that was like? And then what were ultimately the reflections and lessons that you left with?

Joshua Stephens: Well, that action that we did at the Burmese Embassy in 98, that was the first direct action that I was involved in that was, like, worthy of an Ocean's Eleven montage of, like, heist planning. Like, there was a real sophistication to how it was planned and how it was organized. And there was a George Clooney kind of character at the front of the room that was like, what do you guys want to do? Okay, this is how we do it. You know, like, basically the role that I played in SUSTAIN, where it was just kind of like, what do you guys want to do? And people said, we want to do this. And I'd say, okay, well, you can do it this way or this way. And in the meetings, which were in the basement of the AU Chapel, because the space was provided by Joe Eldridge, this guy who I'd never seen or heard of before, was a trainer from the Ruckus Society, which was an organization started by former Green Peace action organizers to train people in direct action. And he was sort of this consulting engineer on our action.

And he told us there are little things, like, if you're going to occupy an office, say, like, say you're going to storm into a shareholder meeting and disrupt it by occupying it, the one thing you don't do is you don't block the doors, because then when the cops come, you get charged with kidnapping, which is a whole other sport, right? And so, like, if you don't have people with the expertise to say, like, these are the constraints. These are the things you have to think about. These are the things that are going to happen and the things that you plan for and the resources at your disposal and what have you, you're just kind of throwing spaghetti at the wall as organizers, right? And the thing I really remember that was really

formative for me was, you know, we knew we were going to put these bike locks around our necks, and you buy a bike lock, a U lock like that, it usually has two keys that come with it.

And we're like, so what we're going to do is we're going to put these locks around our necks and lock ourselves to the entrance, and then we're going to have somebody with a pair of pliers on site who will crush these keys so that the police know that we can't just be unlocked, right? And I was like, great, sounds awesome. And he was like, and then there's going to be somebody on site who has the second set of keys. And I was like, why? We don't want to be let out. We want to fucking stay there. And he was just like, because what if they don't cut you out? Like what if they don't arrest you? How do you get out? How do you end the action? And the thing he said after that has stayed with me since, which was, why aren't you prepared to win? Why are you not planning for a scenario in which you win?

And in so many organizing environments that I've been part of, people have really not ever entertained that. And I think that's why Seattle took a lot of people by surprise as well. Like it left people really disoriented. They were just not prepared. They really just thought they were going to go out there and get their asses kicked. And it was just going to be this symbolic thing. And the same sort of thing went into what we were doing in the ISM, which was, you know, to be in the ISM, you have to go through two consecutive 12 hour days of training before you can go into the field. And some of that is cultural stuff and how to behave and whatnot in this society and how to defer to the leadership of Palestinians and all these other sorts of things. But a lot of it was just a more geographically and context specific version of the training that I got from Ruckus.

It was consensus process and affinity group organization and how to make decisions about what you're going to do in an action and all the sorts things of stuff. And then probably the most meaningful distinction was and here are the things that the Israeli military are going to use on you. And if concussion grenade lands next to you should plug your ears, close your eyes and open your mouth. Because if you don't open your mouth, your eyes might blow out of your head and serious shit. And the same sort of thing was present there where it was really granular considerations about strategy and about what is and isn't on the table.

And you know, one of the things that stuck with me was they were sort of saying if you become sexually or romantically involved with anyone while you are here, you will take yourself out of the movement immediately because A, that's not what we're here to do, but B, if you are involved with someone and the shit hits the fan or you find yourselves in a dangerous or escalated situation, you are much more prone to make bad decisions in that moment and make undisciplined decisions in that moment. And I just thought, how brilliant they take themselves so seriously. They're like, look, people are humans. These things happen. But if it happens, it's not for here you take yourself out. And I thought that sort of discipline and that sort of seriousness about what they were doing was really instructive.

And additionally, the lack of controversy or ambiguity about what dealing with racial and ethnic power disparities and relationships looks like in that context. As an outsider to that movement, it's not my struggle. I don't get to decide what the terms of it are. I don't get to decide how it is executed or how it's done or whatever. And it was just so cut and dry and clear that, like, my orientation was one of solidarity. And that was it. I was there to do what was asked of me to do, provided it didn't massively conflict with my ethics or something. But I trusted the people that I worked with, and I didn't expect that they were going to ask me to do anything ethically compromising. And when I returned to the States, I really began to take stock of, like, I'm a white guy who passes for straight, who passes for middle class, who by all measures is

effectively in a relationship where I'm of the dominant in almost every case. You know, maybe the only is, you know, as a worker and having a boss, that's probably the only exception, right?

And so, what does it mean to be political? What does it mean to be engaged in struggle? And in that context, like, well, if I'm of the dominant in 99% of the relations in my life, then that means that my only relationship to politics is one of solidarity, which means that if it's not something I'm being asked to do, if it's not something that actually directly, meaningfully benefits people who are not of the dominant, it doesn't count as political. Like, it's just masturbatory, right? And I was no longer entertaining ambiguity about that or sitting on the fence about that. When I came back, I was very much just like, this isn't controversial. You're either on the train or you're not. And that all came from that experience in the ism.

Matt Bowles: All right, we are going to pause the interview here and call that the end of part one. Be sure to tune in next week to hear part two of my interview with Joshua Stevens. Good night, everybody.