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# **Agrarian anarchism and authoritarian populism**

**towards a more (state-)critical 'critical agrarian  
studies'**

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## Abstract

This paper applies an anarchist lens to agrarian politics, seeking to expand and enhance inquiry in critical agrarian studies. Anarchism's relevance to agrarian processes is found in three general areas: (1) explicitly anarchist movements, both historical and contemporary; (2) theories that emerge from and shape these movements; and (3) implicit anarchism found in values, ethics, everyday practices, and in forms of social organization – or 'anarchistic' elements of human social life. Insights from anarchism are then applied to the problematique of the contemporary rise of 'authoritarian populism' and its relation to rural people and agrarian processes, focusing on the United States. Looking via an anarchist lens at this case foregrounds the state powers and logics that underpin authoritarian populist political projects but are created and reproduced by varying political actors; emphasizes the complex political identities of non-elite people, and the ways these can be directed towards either emancipatory or authoritarian directions based on resentments towards state power and identifications with grassroots, lived moral economies; and indicates the strategic need to prioritize ideological development among diverse peoples, in ways that provide for material needs and bolster lived moral economies. The paper concludes with implications for the theory and practice of emancipatory politics.

## Introduction

For the peasant, the state is a negative quantity, an evil, to be replaced in short shrift by their own "homemade" social order. That order, they believe, can run without the state, hence, peasants in rebellion are natural anarchists. – Eric Wolf in *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969, 295)

Throughout the rural world, capitalist ‘economic-development’ continues to exploit human and nonhuman resources, with the support of subnational, national, and international governments. Large-scale dams and ‘green’ infrastructures, plantation monocultures, urbanization, mining, and fossil fuel-seeking continue to reproduce the marginal status of rural people. Meanwhile, partially in reaction to this marginalization, electorates have turned to a variety of scapegoating nationalisms, bolstering the electoral success of certain neo-‘authoritarian populists’, like Trump, Modi, Erdogan, Bolsonaro and Duterte (see this journal’s recent forum on authoritarian populism). Rightwing achievement of state power has emphasized the seemingly central role of state control in any emancipatory political project. Further emphasizing that salience is the surging threat of climate change to economic (re)production and societal stability. A standard assumption is that climate change could only be meaningfully addressed via a strong state (Wainwright and Mann 2013); indeed, that humanity’s survival depends on the state – and who controls it.

In this paper, I make the claim that anarchism continues to be relevant to these issues, and to critical agrarian studies (CAS), even if both proponents and detractors of anarchism commonly understand anarchism as antithetical to any form of state. During the height of anarchist movement activity, it was most often self-described as ‘libertarian socialism’, distinguishing it from other socialisms of the time that believed it necessary to centralize coercive power in the course of making social change. When looked at in this way, anarchism seems ill suited to support sober assessment of current conditions in order to make positive change: how could anarchism aid emancipatory movements if those movements ‘must’ engage the state? Furthermore, what can anarchism offer those particularly interested in the *agrarian and rural* aspects of current conditions?

Regarding the latter question, in anarchism we see a parallel to the mistaken belief (found in some of the more determinist Marx-

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ist agrarian studies, committed to a 'historical materialist' science claimed to have predictive powers) that the peasantry would inevitably disappear: like the peasantry, anarchism has never died the death it was supposed to. It survives in existing social movements applying the label in action, in political theories that remain in circulation due to such movements, and (arguably) in social practices that reflect and produce anarchist ethos/ethics. Overtly anarchist movements continue to be disparaged, misunderstood, and attacked by almost every other political force in society – yet they continue to exist. Anarchism remains relevant in theory and practice to processes of human social organization, broadly, and to attempts to radically make society. Anarchism's relevance, in short, is found at three levels: as *movements*, *theories*, and in *anarchistic behaviors*.

Few researchers commonly leverage the above lenses on questions of rural agrarian change, the politics of development, or (more specifically) the contemporary moment of regressive authoritarian populist politics. Some notable exceptions exist upon which this work seeks to build (Scott 2012; Wald 2015; Ashwood 2018a; Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), but the anarchist lens is surely underutilized in CAS. This journal, for example, returns only 18 responses when searching for the keyword 'anarchism' (76 for 'anarchy'), compared with 263 for 'Marxism' (checked 25 February 2020). This is largely representative of Leftish critical social science as a whole, though some journals are expressly oriented to anarchist theory (e.g. *Anarchist Studies*) and others do exhibit greater inclusion (e.g. *ACME*, *Antipode* and *Journal of Political Ecology*). These trends may reflect the fact that anarchists reject the University-focused hierarchy of knowledge and have developed theory outside academia largely through (often anonymous) direct action; anarchist theory is less 'great thinker'-oriented and relies less on academic validation for its self-worth. In sum, anarchism remains relevant to political theory

and practice, even if it appears marginal in academia and politics at large (Gordon 2008).

In the remainder of the introduction, I outline a few examples of the movements, theories/values, and anarchistic elements of anarchism, before detailing each in its own section in order to continue making the case for anarchist critical agrarian studies. After describing what these three lenses offer CAS, I apply them to the case of authoritarian populism in the United States (US). Though I pull in geographically diverse examples to make the case for anarchist CAS, I often return to my focus of the US, in order to provide continuity and focus in the application of the lens to a single case. I conclude with some reflections on what an anarchist lens offers a view of contemporary agrarian movement organizing in the US.

### **Movements, theories/values, and anarchistic elements**

The hegemonic quantitative logic of political analysis – which anarchism rejects – makes it seem that overt anarchist movements have been weak, small, and ineffectual in comparison with right-wing and more mainstream left sectors (in parliamentary politics). Historically, as Carter (1971, 105) and others have reminded, anarchism can claim no definitive victories. Its ‘near misses’ are, however, quite important to world history: anarchism and anarchists played key roles in nineteenth-twentieth century development of socialism and socialist movements, e.g. in the Spanish Revolution (Gomez Casas 1986; Evans 2020); the Mexican Revolution (Wolf 1969); or in the contribution of Nestor Mahkno’s anarcho-peasant militias to the Ukrainian and Russian Revolutions (Wolf 1969; Palij 1976). Perhaps most crucially, anarchist ideas have spread from overtly anarchist movements to other modern era movements.<sup>1</sup> Anarchism’s influence has extended even to future non-anarchist state leadership, as in Dirlik’s (1991, 294–297) study of early twentieth-century

<sup>1</sup> See Epstein (1993), Cornell (2016) for studies referencing anarchist influence on US social movements.

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Loadenthal, M. 2017. *The Politics of Attack: Communiqués and Insurrectionary Violence*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. [Google Scholar]

eth century Chinese anarchist revolutionaries whose 'work-study' programs were attended by future Chinese state leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

Because common understanding is that anarchism has seen little success in formal politics, it is often a surprise to left activists and scholars that anarchism was a dominant, ascendant portion of revolutionary left movements at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This prevalence was largely due to anarchism's ideas and social forms spreading via illegalist, insurrectionary networks and 'anarcho-syndicalist' unions, particularly the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in the US in 1905 (van der Walt 2016; Cole, Struthers, and Zimmer 2018). While anarchism and syndicalism do not completely or simply overlap, anarcho-syndicalism is more accurately traced to anarchist than other socialist sectors (McKay 2012). Eventually suppressed and largely dismantled by state and private forces, especially during the period leading up to and through World War I, these movements spread over the globe including to Latin America, Europe, Asia, North America, and to a lesser degree Africa. Countries where nineteenth and twentieth century anarchist movements existed include: Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela, Jamaica, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa, India, China, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> For historical references, see: Graham (2005, 2009, 2012), Hirsch and van der Walt (2010), Schmidt (2013), Marshall (2010), Cappelletti (2018), Maxwell and Craib (2015), Porter (2011), Zaragoza Rovira (1996), Ramos, Rodrigues, and Samis (2003), CILEP (2011), Páez (1986), Hart (1978), Hirsch (2010), Shaffer (2000, 2013), Quail (2019), Berry (2009), Pernicone (1993), de Góes (2017), Voline (2019), Mbah and Igariwey (2001), van der Walt (2011, 2016), Dirlik (1991), Hwang (2017), Crump (1993), Cornell (2016).

Ultimately, it is the ideas ('theories') developed through these struggles that have shaped and continue to shape social life and political change. These ideas most often were articulated by active movement organizers, who were also theorists. Anarchist ideas have in different times and places resulted in different kinds of effects – impacts not always deep, or positive. But in general, CAS has ignored or forgotten canonical anarchist theory, and even less has it addressed recent anarchist theory. In the next section, I outline elements of anarchist theory, describing its relevance to contemporary rural politics and overlaps with other CAS traditions. Though overtly anarchist movements from the past have largely been forgotten, and in almost all cases the movements have reduced in numbers and influence, and overt anarchist movements today are less massive than in their heyday, anarchist movements still exist (including in less visible, underground and informal forms). Addressing historical and contemporary manifestations of overtly anarchist social organization is the focus of section three.

CAS is also better off taking a more decolonial approach to rural politics, and instead of seeking to find overt Anarchism outside of European and settler-colonial contexts, looking for its interconnections with freedom struggles elsewhere, as in James Scott's discussions (2009) of anarchistic rural peoples in Southeast Asia or Maia Ramnath's (2011) study of India in *Decolonizing Anarchism*. Ramnath (2011, 7) distinguishes between 'small a anarchism' and the Western (or 'Capital-A') Anarchist tradition:

with a small a the word anarchism implies a set of assumptions and principles, a recurrent tendency or orientation—with the stress on movement in a direction, not a perfected condition—toward more dispersed and less concentrated power; less top-down hierarchy and more self-determination through bottom-up participation; liberty and equality seen as directly rather than inversely proportional; the nurtu-

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rance of individuality and diversity within a matrix of interconnectivity, mutuality, and accountability; and an expansive recognition of the various forms that power relations can take, and correspondingly, the various dimensions of emancipation. This tendency, when it becomes conscious, motivates people to oppose or subvert the structures that generate or sustain inequity, unfreedom, and injustice, and to promote or prefigure these structures that generate and sustain equity, freedom, and justice.

Africa may of all continents lack substantial anarchist historical presence, but as African activists have argued (Mbah and Igariwey 2001) anarchist values are reflected in its many pre-colonial traditions (some of which survive today). If we take Wolf's (1969) analysis of anarchistic resonances in peasantries seriously, the result is that CAS must consider anarchism as part of the CAS tool set. Addressing these more anarchistic elements of social organization in various contexts and their relation to agrarian change is the focus of section four.

## Anarchist theory

An anarchist objection to Marxism was that Marxism, with its preoccupation with the proletariat, had a blind spot towards the peasantry and ignored eighty percent of the world's population. – Arif Dirlik (1991, 238, referring to the early twentieth century context, when peasantries formed the bulk of human populations)

I begin by focusing on anarchist theory, since theory forms the baseline for engaging with 'the literature' in CAS. Table 1 gives an overview of theoretical positions among five CAS lenses: orthodox and agrarian Marxism, agrarian populism, social and individualist

anarchism. Anarchist theory was and is historically embedded in social movement experiences. Because of this, anarchism is weighted by its movement history – e.g. legacies of European ideologies and Eurocentric thinking – but it is also not static, being responsive to conditions and capacious in its internal diversity. Anarchist theory thus is best treated as open-ended and not quite fully definable. Yet in contrast to caricatures of it, anarchism is not bereft of theory. While male and European dominated (par for the nineteenth century course), its classical canon offers plenty to parse. The French philosophers Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, and Welsh philanthropist Robert Owen formed the earlier proto-anarchists, while Errico Malatesta, Peter Kropotkin, Michael Bakunin, Élisée Reclus, Emma Goldman, Max Stirner, Ricardo Flores Magón, Lucy Parsons, Alexander Herzen, Leo Tolstoy, Nestor Mahkno and Rudolf Rocker are some of the more well-known from anarchism’s heyday. Many less-known activist-agitators also have provided relevant theory in historical writings. Considering the breadth of anarchist thinking and positions, and these being diverse by nature, an essay like this can offer only a necessarily selective and truncated treatment of anarchist theory, in its barest of outlines. Accordingly, this essay introduces merely one of many potential perspectives on anarchist theory. Importantly, there exists a main division within anarchism between individualist and insurrectionary trends, and those sometimes described as ‘social’ anarchism. This essay focuses on the latter largely due to my own preferences and background; still, individualist anarchism should also be appreciated in CAS, especially given its particular influence on eco-anarchist and anti-civilizationist currents in environmentalist struggles worldwide (GA 2012; Seaweed 2013; Pellow 2014; Loadenthal 2017).

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CAS tradition → issue ↓	Orthodox marx- ism	Heterodox agrarian marx- ism	Radical agrarian pop- ulism (RAP)	Social anar- chism	Individualist/ insur- rec- tionary anar- chism
Unit of inquiry and inter- vention	Economic class conflict (work- ers/ capital- ists)	Economic class conflict, w / in- traclass nuances	Community farm house- hold	Class, com- munity, and in- dividual (de- pending on context)	Individual and its au- tonomously defined rela- tions
Class and class differ- entia- tion	- class as key to politics				
- Peas- ants as petty bour- geois/ com- modity producers	- Peas- ants as differ- entiated already, inter- secting w race,				

**Table 1.**

Anarchist theory flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, evolving and defining itself in dialogue and disagreement with other threads of revolutionary and left social thought, most notably Marxism (see Prichard et al. 2017). Anarchism shares with Marxism a fundamental concern for revolutionary change, though also like Marxism, it has developed more reformist aspects so as to fit with less revolutionary circumstances over time. Anarchism's theoretical relationship to Marxism is complex, both enmeshed and antagonistic. If the birth of CAS may be traced back to Marx's *Capital*, written under the influence of (and in debates with) Proudhon, and early Russian agrarian populists engaged with anarchist theories and sought counsel from Marx on the role of peasants in revolution (Gamblin 1999; Shanin 2018), we can see how drawing hard lines between lineages in CAS serves little but polemic value. Rather than continuing generations-long polemics, it seems preferable to start with a normative appreciation of both traditions and the importance of linking these in writing and action, as indicated in recent debates in geography and sociology (el-Ojeili 2014, 462; Harvey 2017; Springer 2017). Still, I touch upon some overlaps and divergences in CAS traditions, in order to better see what anarchism specifically has to offer.

### Positive and negative theory

Like Marxism, anarchism holds within its classical canon both theories about morally objectionable conditions in human society (what I call 'negative' theories) and what might be done to correct these (what I call 'positive' theories). The antagonistic elements of anarchist action, largely rooted in negative theory, have sometimes been divorced from its 'prefigurative' elements, rooted in positive theory, especially as proponents of the latter have sought to dis-

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tance themselves from anarchism's violent history. Yet for many theorists and activists, negative and positive are linked.

Western Anarchism's negative theory starts with its anticapitalism, identifying capitalism as an evil to be eradicated from human existence. Marx is still the standard bearer regarding analyses of capitalism. Anarchists *have* offered economic theories, but these have more often proposed economic solutions and alternatives (e.g. Knowles 2004), than deepened or challenged Marx's critique of capitalism. Alongside their shared critique of capitalism, anarchism shares with Marxism an opposition to organized religion (which nineteenth century theorists identified as co-constituting oppressive social conditions with capitalists and states; see Bakunin 1970). Where anarchism's negative theory differs from Marxism (though perhaps not from Marx himself<sup>3</sup>), or moves beyond Marxism, is its deeper anti-authoritarianism. Positioning a liberated society against *all* coercive human social relations, anarchists considered states by definition built on coercion, and thus were inherently anti-state. Rather than the vaguely defined 'withering away of the state' foretold in a (Marxist) post-revolutionary period, anarchists have long argued against theories of change that involve taking state power at *any* point, and have thus struggled against liberal and Marxist tendencies to do so. They predict that entry into power will only

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, scholars including Marxists like Joel Wainwright (2017; drawing on Karatani 2005) and Terry Eagleton (1999, 55–56) have noted that Marx exhibited anarchist sensibilities: 'Marx's final vision would thus seem somewhat anarchistic: that of a cooperative commonwealth made up of what he calls "free associations" of workers, who would extend democracy to the economic sphere while making a reality of it in the political one'. While Marx's anarchism may be true theoretically (as Thomas points out in *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* [1990, 2, 13–14, 21], Marx's critiques of the state confuse readers into thinking his disagreements with anarchists were merely tactical), anarchists tend to emphasize praxis over abstract theory, and would likely dispute any argument placing Marx's words against statism over his repeated actions to undermine anti-statist sections of the global socialist movement (see Eckhardt 2016).

serve to reproduce power (CrimethInc 2017; Anarchopac 2019), and have in some cases called for the end of ‘the hegemony of hegemony’ (Day 2005) – seeking no part in coercive political projects to construct totalizing power of any sort. They have insisted, instead, on a social revolution beginning here and now, whose goal is the elimination, not adoption, of political power. On the individualist-insurrectionary side, anarchists have even forgone any association with ‘the Left’, insisting that leftism reproduces a ‘reification and mediation’ of social revolt that undermines principles of self-organization (McQuinn 2009).

The rejection of political/hegemonic thinking resonates with poststructuralist understanding of power and leads in a direction that sees and seeks to combat domination in myriad forms. Poststructuralist analyses see power as ‘diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitute[ing] agents rather than being deployed by them (Gaventa 2003, 3)’. Such perspectives are found in Escobar’s (1995) pioneering work on (post)development, and influential CAS scholarship since, and have been argued as resonant with anarchism (May 1994; Antliff and Hutchens 2007). A similar analysis underpins the ‘total liberation’ framework that Pellow (2014) describes based on his research with radical animal and earth liberation activists. According to Pellow (2014, 18–19), total liberation comprises ‘an ethic of justice and anti-oppression inclusive of humans, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems; anarchism; anticapitalism; and an embrace of direct action tactics’. In practice, total liberation trends address power as not simply about the state, but as actionable outside it, towards an ever-enlarging circle of concern, by confronting for instance unequal dominance *within* movements, anthropocentric speciesism, and the personal internalization of coercive institutions and practices (‘killing the cop in your head’).

The central contribution of anarchist positive theory is the fusion of means and ends. All actions to bring about revolutionary

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change, by this theory, should prefigure ways of human organization desired in a post-revolutionary world. This is based on a view of human nature where human misbehaviors are at best the result of stifling structures of power, or at worst ineradicable but able to be attenuated through social revolution. Contrary to strawman critiques, anarchists do not assume a perfect human nature, just as contemporary radical agrarian populists do not, contra Brass (2015), assume peasants as bearing an inherent and positive nature. Consistency of means and ends contributes to anarchism's use and promotion of self-organization, mutual aid and solidarity between actors, and a commitment to flatten all existing hierarchies, thus liberating 'better' human natures to emerge and take root. The seeds of future social relations are to be planted in the imperfect soil of today's societies.

Anarchism's practical theory calls for linking personal, communal, economic, and societal transformation through collective and prefigurative direct action that cultivates cultural commitment to mutual aid among non-elite communities, and which fully developed into counter-institutions, can provide a 'dual power'<sup>4</sup> situation that would undermine existing structures of power. If the 'social revolution' was during revolutionary times a call for complete overthrow of the established order, it also came to represent for Malatesta (2019) and others a more 'gradualist' approach that slowly lays the groundwork for revolutionary change to take place. There is no 'waiting' for the revolution, as it happens here-and-now; there are no shortcuts to revolution by enforcing anarchist ideology through coercive means, only continuous agitation and organizing among the oppressed classes (worker, peasant, and lumpenproletariat). More recent theorists

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<sup>4</sup> Lenin, Trotsky, and other Marxist-Leninists originated and promoted the strategy of dual power based on working class counter-institutions, but as a means towards state power, not (as in anarchism) as a means to replace it. Later libertarian socialists also turned its use and applicability from revolutionary to non-revolutionary contexts (see DSA-LSC 2019).

have also focused on the imperative of tackling inequalities *within* these groups, even if class rule and state power are major enemies (Dixon 2012), as seen in ‘total liberation’ and in anarchism’s overlaps with ecological, decolonial, feminist, and anti-racist thought.

Some anarchists have put forward what could be called an ‘agrarian theory of change’. Generally, such theories have been influenced by historical rural and agricultural communes (Dolgoft 1974), and ecological concerns, as in the ‘social ecology’ field popularized by Murray Bookchin (1982) and put into practice recently in the autonomous region of Rojava, a present-day experiment in overtly agrarian, revolutionary libertarian socialism (see Internationalist Commune 2018). Kropotkin’s ideas of agrarian socialism via ‘industrial-agricultural villages’ developed in *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (1899) and *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) may be most well-known. Anthropologist Brian Morris (2018, 89–102) distills Kropotkin’s agrarian work into four themes: (1) intensive production, cooperatively managed to continually improve soil health, (2) decentralization of industry and its (3) integration at a small scale with smaller-scale agriculture, and (4) the democratized combination of manual and intellectual labor in all work. Kropotkin was inspired by the productivity of various peasant-driven intensive agricultural systems across Europe, believing they showed the possibilities of redirecting production towards satisfying the needs of all, without the underlying conditions of class, money, or a state. In a way, localized food sovereignty was seen by Kropotkin (though not in these terms) as a precondition for the kind of classless, moneyless, stateless society of sharing that he and his contemporaries promoted. There are reflections of Kropotkin’s century old theories in later agrarian populist scholarship, exemplified by van der Ploeg (2008, 2013), whose research approach also considers agrarian possibilities through fieldwork among diverse global peasantries, and advocates ecological, cooperative intensification and the prioritization of producer autonomy

## Notes on contributors

**Antonio Roman-Alcalá** is an educator, researcher, and organizer based in California. He has been involved in US food movements primarily through urban farming and participatory democratic network organizing, and his research focuses on collaborative efforts to improve movement effectiveness. His recent projects include co-founding the Agroecology Research-Action Collective and convening ‘agroecology encounters’.

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## Correction Statement

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

from capital. Kropotkin's ideas remain helpful and relevant, for example in his advocacy of intensification and diversification of the countryside such that farmwork is integrated with artisan industrial production *and leisure*, farmwork therefore becoming more meaningful and less characterized by drudgery or overwork. In other ways, this classical theory is dated and would require updating to meaningfully engage contemporary conditions such as the strong integration of the global food economy, or the real demands of rural people for complex consumer goods.<sup>5</sup>

Although anarchism lacks a consistent and well-known 'agrarian theory of change', the elements of such a theory may be pieced together, and might involve: building autonomous rural counter-power on a material and social basis; craft and industrial producers allying with agrarian communes in mutual aid; federation across greater areas to integrate and socialize (means of) production; direct action against existing concentrations of power to expropriate the expropriators; all providing conditions for dual power sufficient to overthrow wage labor and state power. Consequentially, these elements sustain and advance emancipatory politics and social organization in anticipation of crisis moments and the eventual decline of business-as-usual (whether from climate change, pandemics, or war). While less 'social' anarchists would dispute the very idea of dual power as an aspiration, many adjacent Left traditions also endorse such elements. Situationists, autonomist Marxist, council communists, and 'communization' theorists like *The Invisible Committee* (2009) have shared affinities for non-vanguardist base building activities; most of these tendencies' modern manifestations also share a concern for subjectivity formation and the need for direct rather than mediated action (Clark 2019).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> These latter limitations are paralleled in contemporary critiques of agrarian populism (Bernstein 2014).

<sup>6</sup> What democratic self-determination actually looks like forms a central line of difference between these tendencies (CrimethInc 2017) – among differences too numerous to address here.

We might consider anarchism as utopian not because such a theoretically-based agenda is provably unrealistic, but because anarchism maintains perennial skepticism and thus offers only an ever-unfinished project. Classical anarchist theorists understood and acknowledged this (Malatesta 2019, 167–170). As Martin Buber (1949, 43) paraphrased Kropotkin:

when it comes to our real will for a “restructuring” of society, it is not a question of manipulating an abstract principle but only of the *direction* of realization willed; of the limits of realization possible in this direction in any given circumstances ...

The idea of directionality rather than purity underlies the least dogmatic of anarchist theory, even as it maintains utopian aspirations. Monica White, whose 2018 book covers the cooperative agrarian traditions of African-Americans seeking liberation, emphasizes this dynamic as well, noting that

autonomy is in fact an ideal and is always a matter of degree ... the economic autonomy that cooperatives seek is a process, a continuum that moves from complete dependence on an oppressive structure to independence. Arguably, in a global economy, independence is always partial and is extremely difficult to accomplish; however, progress toward it can be leveraged for power and self-determination. (11)

Anarchism may be attacked as unrealistically based on an untenable belief in a solidary human nature, but in practice anarchist theories can be and have been applied in very practical ways.

Yet, anarchism challenges some conventional concerns in CAS theorizing and Left strategizing. For instance, it theoretically challenges agrarian populism’s homogenization of ‘community’ and Marxism’s overly-economistic analyses of it, while strategically it disputes seeking to ‘solve’ AP via parties or politicians. An anarchist lens recognizes the leadership of Othered groups in existing agrarian change efforts and *supports rather than criticizes* their occasionally state-critical perspective. Redneck Revolt’s anarchist approach urges CAS to not ignore rural white non-elites in developing an emancipatory imagination in the rural US.

Anarchism makes imperative certain previously underappreciated inquiries, such as looking into the real anti-state motivations of non-elite people; or the impact of direct action, dual power institutions, and long-term ideological base-building efforts on state politics – even when such efforts are *not* state-oriented. These inquiries parallel political projects that anarchism promotes: building decentralized capacity (rural and urban, reproductive, productive, and discursive), towards subsistence or socialism, and in anticipation of societal breakdown; directly attacking infrastructures of oppressive, ecocidal capitalist extraction; linking communities through prefigurative efforts; and in the processes of horizontal self-organization, countering and undermining the Othering that is key to AP power. Arguably, the tendency towards Othering is inherent to capitalism (Patel and Moore 2017); anarchism’s theoretical attention to *all* hierarchies keeps this tendency in view, while anarchism’s preferred practices of rooted, place- and culture-based solidarity and mutual aid undermines it, far more than does majoritarian electoralism. Perhaps most importantly, what this paper has claimed about CAS – that it needs to recognize and appreciate anarchist(ic) positions – could be applied to the Left itself: state-focused reformers are not benefited by ignoring or throwing anarchism and anarchists aside.

## Conclusion

Considering the problems of state power (for ecological and justice-focused political projects) and the effective ways in which AP has enrolled some non-elites via a contradictory anti-state ideology, the anarchist lens suggests shifting strategy away from states and towards ideological development and grassroots capacity. Rather than reproducing the Right's successful strategy in total, which would be unrealistic for a less-resourced and structurally disadvantaged Left (and would involve concentrated effort on taking state power), an anarchist approach would parallel the Right only in emphasizing social-ideological development. Rather than an imposition from without, anarchist ideologies develop (and commitments deepen) through projects – like Redneck Revolt – that use direct action and mutual aid to provide for material needs, disrupt and oppose injustice, and bolster moral economies at the grassroots level. Differently from the ways that community spaces, ideological consent-building, and group identity are leveraged on the Right, such actions take place among diverse peoples, in ways that counter forms of Othering while building active solidarity. For example, in 2019, a group of anarchist transgender activists worked with coal miners in Kentucky, supporting the organization of a blockade of coal trains to demand withheld wages (Korman 2019).

Taking on anarchist insights does not entail a dogmatic refusal to engage the state; it means expecting disappointing results from leftist government, understanding disillusionment with states and its link to the rightward turn of electorates, and recognizing that any transition to AP is made possible by existing logics of capitalist state power. Anarchism, as an insurrectionary and revolution-oriented *philosophy*, provides few easy answers to *realpolitik* questions. The rejection of (state) hegemony as an organizing principle to mobilize social actors behind a political project is bound to leave some theorists and activists unsatisfied.

## Movements

On this more concrete level, it is often underappreciated how wide and how significant anarchist movements were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Schmidt's (2013, 65) assessment of anarchism's 'second wave' (1895–1923), sometimes seen as its golden age, much was achieved, including

the fostering of a deeply-entrenched tradition of rank-and-file labour militancy and a global proletarian counter-culture that eschewed bourgeois patronage, the establishment of near-universal labour protections, such as the eight-hour working day and worker's compensation, a substantial contribution to the virtual annihilation of absolute monarchism, and the mounting of the most serious challenge to clerical control of education across the world.

During this period, anarchism also engaged peasants and rural people, whose role in revolutionary politics was largely neglected by Marxist theorists and activists before the 1917 Russian Revolution, based on their interpretation of Marx's position as anti-peasant. This neglect underappreciated peasantries, even though Marx himself late in life took the position that peasants could be socialist revolutionaries and socialist revolutions could take place in agrarian societies like Russia (described well by his letter to Vera Zasulich in 1881; see Shanin 2018).<sup>7</sup> Anarchism, especially via syndicalism, engaged both industrial and agrarian workers and was important in anti-colonial struggles (Hirsch and van der Walt 2010), arguably forming the 'first and most extensive

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<sup>7</sup> In not seeking to strawman-critique Marxism from its history, we should recognize that peasant involvement in socialist revolutions through the twentieth century (among other developments) led Marxists by midcentury to less proletarian/industrial-class centric analyses and proposals (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018, 855 ).

global transnational social movement' (Castañeda and Feu 2019, 2). Even the demonstrably anti-anarchist E.J. Hobsbawm (1973, 61) admitted that

in 1905–14 the marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical marxism.

Considering its wide social and geographic reach, it is difficult to establish anarchism's real political effects, partly because of the difficulty in tracing straightforwardly cause-and-effect in non-linear complex politics, but also because *diffuse* influence is not the same as *no* influence, as Carter (1971, 109–110) concludes in her study of *The Political Theory of Anarchism*. Indeed, studies have drawn attention to the relevance of anarchist organizing to future developments in politics with national significance, including Korea, China, Mexico, and the United States (respectively, Hwang 2017; Dirlik 1991; Hodges 1995, and Cornell 2016). The retrospective perception that organized anarchists accomplished little can be explained in part by the relative dominance of Marxist-nationalist movements within the Left since the early 1920s, and the fact that these movements established nation-states inspired by Marxist doctrine. Turn of the century anarchism also included its 'propaganda of the deed' adherents, who among other activities assassinated political and economic elites and robbed banks (e.g. Abidor 2019). The popular association of anarchism with these violent manifestations, combined with anti-anarchist action by capitalists and socialists with access to state power and widespread anti-communist propaganda, has also greatly obscured anarchist history and its varied and cumulative impacts.

2017), as lawyers defending direct action participants (Pellow 2014, 251), and via prefigurative direct actions that force state concessions, such as when an anarchist-inflected occupation of public land generated new food producing space and food sovereignty literacy and forced state agencies to co-manage land with local communities and activists (Roman-Alcalá 2018). More broadly, autonomy-oriented urban farms and cooperative food projects directly produce food and build bridges across various anti-oppressive struggles and rural/urban divides, strengthening intersectional analysis and action – which is sometimes later deployed in addressing state politics (Wilson 2013; Sbicca 2018).

In emphasizing 'politics from below' to generate agroecological transitions, Giraldo and McCune (2019, 803) suggest movements should construct 'their own institutions and mak[e] use of the State when and only when such use concretely strengthens grassroots processes of emancipation, autonomy and self-determination'. The methods of 'dialogue, local struggles, and leadership building (Giraldo and McCune 2019, 805)' these authors endorse are the soil anarchists amend and till. Agrarian populism and Marxism also endorse grassroots-focused methods *in theory*. In practice, however, many movements inspired these frameworks end up concentrating effort on electoral processes and 'the long march through the institutions', and in doing so, experience redirection of energies, demobilization, absorption, and disillusionment (Oikonomakis 2020). Tilzey (2019) and Andrade (2019) demonstrate that active demobilization efforts and corruption of the Left-in-power can contribute to later resurgent authoritarianism and electoral turns to the right, indicating the strategic miscalculation of fighting AP with Left populism.

Left populist states, and how failures of the Left-in-power can contribute to surges in AP (Giunta 2014; Andrade 2019; Tilzey 2019).<sup>15</sup> CAS scholars have come to conclusions that share affinities with anarchism, seemingly converging on a deeper pessimism about state-based change, and a valorization of social movement autonomy – longstanding tenets in theory *and* practice of anarchism.<sup>16</sup> Marxists Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017, 434) admit that social movements ‘[g]aining access to the state did not end up yielding more concrete results than building autonomy from below and outside the state’. Still, their anarchistic suggestions to prevent state political influence on movements remain focused on improving movements’ relations *with political parties*, rather than how or why movements might avoid, subvert, or build alternatives to state politics. The assumption of state strategies remains. The lost potential of CAS scholarship, unfortunately, is that it mostly dismisses anarchism as purist (or ignores it), even when it is not in practice, and it assumes rather than investigates the effects of nonstate strategies on the state. For example, Tilzey (2019) belittles ‘autonomism as a doctrine’, [which] ‘assumes that real change can occur “without taking power”’ and concludes that (improved) future success relies on movements ‘confronting’ the state. Yet anarchist theory (like postructuralism) denies that ‘power’ resides straightforwardly or only in state institutions. And autonomists/anarchists *do* confront (and thus affect) the state: directly, indirectly, and as participants in non-anarchist projects. US anarchists confront states through their substantial involvement in antifascist and prison abolition movements (Bray

<sup>15</sup> Especially considering the relative weakness and lack of autonomy among US agrarian movements compared with global counterparts, it is questionable how much a Sanders presidency could have accomplished.

<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, there remain orthodox Marxists who continue to favor attention to economic structure, class (de)composition, and class control over the state, over the ideological and grassroots concerns common to anarchism and agrarian populism (Bernstein 2014; Jessop 2015).

The second half of the twentieth century saw a relative retreat of overtly anarchist organizing globally, compared with the many other kinds of social movements that gained traction. These included revolutionary nationalist types of movements, sometimes influenced by various forms of Marxism, and movements addressing discrete issues, or seeking reforms or redress for one or another oppressed sector of society. Still, that era did see anarchism continue as an overt label taken on by some social actors, as seen in notable figures from the US ‘New Left’ like Paul Goodman, Erich Fromm, and Noam Chomsky. Historical research shows that anarchists were influential on, and influenced by, pivotal midcentury US movements (Cornell 2016; see also Tanenbaum 2016 for the case of anarcho-feminism). Meanwhile, what Dana Williams (2017) calls ‘anarchist franchise organizations’ (most originating in the US) have spread anarchist theory and practice globally. Williams’ 2017 book analyzes anarchist movements sociologically, showing how anarchist-initiated local projects like *Food Not Bombs*, *Needle Exchange*, and *Homes Not Jails* operate as ‘franchises’: organizing ideas that spread organically and translocally. Often, these efforts are linked to subcultures like punk music (Donaghey 2013), and in part due to this link have spread to locations as diverse as Burma, Indonesia, and Brazil.

Anarchism as transnational and cultural forces thus interact with local organizing in many contexts, including the US, touching people both rural and urban. One notable and recent US example of this is anarchism’s influence on the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 (Bray 2013; Graeber 2013; Hammond 2015), which in turn more broadly influenced US politics (Stewart 2019). Those arrested protesting Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2017 included many active anarchist organizers (Jaffe 2017). Recent class struggles, including teacher strikes in North Carolina and other typically ‘rural’ and ‘conservative’ states and the founding of the first fast food union at Burgerville in Portland, Oregon were organized in part by the IWW and members of the *Black Rose/Rosa Negra Fed-*

*eration*, a federation of anarchist groups that develops movement analysis and platforms for national action. There are also anarchist leanings to the Black Socialists of America, founded in 2017 (BSA 2019). With a growing following of 77,000 on Twitter, Black Socialists of America and its politics are not insignificant to the US political context, and not new: Black anarchism has a lineage of practice and theory from Lucy Parsons to Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin, Ashanti Alston and Kuwasi Balagoon. Also relevant is the active presence of indigenous anarchists among a broader resurgence in indigenous organizing and visibility, especially after 2016's Standing Rock oil pipeline protest. Such formations include both social and insurrectionary tendencies, such as community organizer and filmmaker Klee Benally and once-imprisoned earth liberation activist Rod Coronado (IAF-FAI, n.d.; Pellow 2014, 140–142; Táala Hooghan 2019). The anarchism-indigeneity overlap also has a lineage, as in Ward Churchill's (2003) 'indigenist' philosophy that opposed 'colonialist' Marxism and showed affinities with anarchist thinking. Indigenous anarchist activist-thinkers like Aragorn! (2005) have pointed to this overlap, though it is not a simple or conflict-free one (Barker and Pickerill 2012).

Overt anarchism can also be found in post-disaster solidarity work, such as the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans, which mobilized post-hurricane Katrina to provide recovery infrastructure while consciously building non-state political affinities among those involved (crow 2014), or Occupy Sandy, which emerged out of the decentralized networks developed during Occupy Wall Street. In other disaster responses, it is rather anarchistic behaviors that manifest without overtly political motivations. In her 2009 study on 'the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster', Rebecca Solnit describes the 'immediate aftermath of 9/11' in New York City, as a

moment of mutual aid and altruism but also a moment  
of participatory democracy ... People decided to do

US movements are ambivalent towards the state, and additionally pressed to engage states in times of political regression.

The US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) attempts to be driven by its grassroots base, using internal direct democratic processes as its main form of political decision-making in 'assemblies' very similar to LVC's. USFSA is also explicitly anti-capitalist, and more focused on building movements through gatherings and direct actions than working to make change through policy. Also based largely in the US, the 'People's Agroecology Process' seeks to develop political analysis and technical skills among diverse communities via a grassroots-led democratic network which has not directly addressed policy. Though not explicitly anarchist, this effort matches many of the political leanings of agrarian populism, but without any governmental affiliations, or agrarian populism's associated politics of state developmentalism. National-level groups oriented more towards policy, like the HEAL Food Alliance, Family Farm Defenders, National Family Farm Coalition, and Rural Coalition, all emphasize bottom-up processes of policy development and internal education to support grassroots work. Some leaders from these groups argue structural critiques that use agrarian populist and Marxist frames of analysis. Other leaders have proclaimed anarchist affinities in my fieldwork, but continue to address policy as a need to confront 'what is there': opportunities to gain greater state support and threats of even more regressive policies. That these movements focus on policy should come as no surprise, given the real threats of state-imposed harm, the mostly unquestioned hegemony of liberal-statist thinking, the legacy of environmental movements' reformist inclinations (Pellow 2014, 256), and the realities of nonprofit funding, where funders seek 'deliverables' over the kinds of grassroots, base building work prioritized in anarchism.

Considering the (burst) bubble of enthusiasm for Bernie Sanders' 2020 candidacy, US movements may want to heed lessons from CAS scholarship on failed efforts towards food sovereignty in



revenues can support agroecological transitions. Prominent LVC members are associated with the rise of rhetorically pro-peasant, Left populist governments in Latin America. Anarchism's theories point in a similar direction to agrarian populism's emphasis on the grassroots and its 'solidarity from below' (Calvário, Desmarais, and Azkarraga 2019), but without the eventuality of state/policy intervention, and with a clearer rejection of state-reinforced commodity markets as anything emancipatory. With the notable exception of its anticivilizationist trends, anarchism generally lacks agrarian populism's anti-urban bias (as critiqued by Bernstein 2010, 122). Though LVC is rhetorically anti-capitalist, orthodox Marxists like Bernstein tend to see LVC as *too* agrarian populist and not Marxist enough.<sup>13</sup>

Progressive US agrarian movements contain examples that parallel LVC's organizing patterns and discourses, combining Marxian critiques of capitalism, agrarian populist ideologies and practices, and anarchistic elements.<sup>14</sup> These movements often align with anarchism's grassroots-prefigurative orientation, inspired by communalist visions of future localized regional food systems, but are diverse and even contradictory regarding its anti-state critique – sometimes engaging in reformist law-making and attempts to seek state power. Like LVC and other global agrarian movements,

<sup>13</sup> To his credit, Bernstein (2018, 1146) still insists Marxists engage rather than dismiss 'the most progressive' agrarian populism(s). In addition to Bernstein's perennial focus on differentiation within peasantries – pointing out (2010, 120–122) that 'any unity of "the people of the land" cannot be assumed' – he insists that movements should look at historically specific (class) conditions and build up from there, mirroring anarchism's attention to intracommunity hierarchy and its hallmark claim that any useful movement must be built endogenously.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that these movements are not comparable, in terms of massiveness, or political context. Information in this section comes mainly from participatory fieldwork among these movements. See [usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org](http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org), [whyhunger.org/category/blog/towards-a-peoples-agroecology/](http://whyhunger.org/category/blog/towards-a-peoples-agroecology/), [healfoodalliance.org](http://healfoodalliance.org), [familyfarmers.org](http://familyfarmers.org), [nffc.net](http://nffc.net) and [ruralco.org](http://ruralco.org).

something, banded together – usually with strangers – and made it happen. It was anarchy in Kropotkin's sense of self-determination rather than of chaos. It was also typical of what happens in disaster, when institutions fail and civil society succeeds. It demonstrated that both the will and the ability to make a vibrant society in the absence of authority can exist, at least briefly. (226)

Considering the ongoing dispossessions of non-elite people following 'natural' disasters, and the intensification of such processes with ever-increasing extreme climate events, the role of anarchism in responses to disaster should receive more attention than it does. Reflecting on the anarchist theory of change described earlier, and on histories of Rojava, Spain, and Ukraine wherein anarchist(ic) territorial control expanded in times of state crisis, we might posit that anarchism is instinctually 'crisis-ready'.

## Anarchistic social organization

Human values and actions can overlap with anarchist ethics and principles of human organization – such as mutual aid, decentralized self-organization, direct democracy, horizontal noncoercive relations, critique of hierarchy, and freedom *with* equality – even when such values/actions are not directly traceable to overt anarchism.<sup>8</sup> Anarchism's principles and theories can be found in specif-

<sup>8</sup> Likely some would object to an expansion of research on anarchism into anarchistic realms. Lucien van der Walt (2016, 86) argues that anarchism should *not* be seen as human impulses or as 'simple "anti-statism"', but should instead be seen as a specific political tradition of the struggling working classes since capitalism's rise (specifically, libertarian socialism and anarcho-syndicalism). I disagree that there should be one way to treat anarchism – for research that can take many tacks, at least. And we gain more by dissecting 'impure' forms of politics than by dismissing them as inadequately faithful to hard or historical definitions.

ically rural and agrarian contexts, and in social contexts surrounding issues of food, land, and the politics of ‘development’. Anarchistic elements to analyze could include those within interpersonal and community social relations, within forms of action to push back against unjust power, and as anarchist/ic critiques are absorbed into existing state/capitalist institutions. Because such incidences are arguably more common than overt anarchist movements globally, the *anarchistic* lens may be the most fruitful area of the three for CAS. It also offers much more theory to chew on, as in the widely taken up concept of ‘moral economy’ (Thompson 1971; Maghimbi, Kimambo, and Sugimura 2011; Galt 2013; Carlisle 2015), or James Scott’s (1992) idea that below-the-radar grassroots ‘infrapolitics’ can be as impactful as overt political action. If anarchist responses emerge anywhere where essential, universal human dignity faces impositions of oppressive authority (Holloway 2013), an attention to how anarchistic practices and values/ethics can emerge, and their impacts, can help CAS scholars understand the dynamics of rural continuity and change.

E.P. Thompson, James Scott, and other scholars have analyzed communities, often rural, and how they secure a subsistence and livelihood through ‘moral economies’ that do not abide by, and sometimes directly confront, hierarchical and capitalist logics. These include relations of solidarity in production and reproduction within villages and local communities, but also forms of collective action such as riots that challenge economic structures via moral claims (Thompson 1966; Randall and Charlesworth 2000). Scott’s first book (1976) describes the resilient presence of a ‘subsistence ethic’ among Southeast Asian peasantries, which would not accept community member deprivation due to incursions of capitalist markets. Scott’s works continued to elaborate the ways peasants manifest moral economies in negotiation with, but often pitted against, forces of state, capital, and local social hierarchies (1985). Along the research journey, Scott developed an appreciation for the resonances with anarchism in the region’s

verse social movements. Anarchism can thus improve CAS’s analysis of movements, seeing their internal functioning and external approach in relation to anarchist(ic) theory and movements. Rather than narrowing the field, anarchism can synergize with other CAS traditions, as indicated by recent convergence among Marxian and agrarian populist analysis with anarchist(ic) ideas (see below). In agrarian movement practice, similarly, we find influences from and resonances with all traditions. Rather than claiming anarchism as *necessarily strategically superior* or *theoretically thoroughly distinct (or consistent)*, I am suggesting simply that anarchism can bolster existing CAS. That said, I *do* conclude with anarchism-informed strategic suggestions, based on a short analysis of transnational and US agrarian movements and existing CAS strategizing vis-à-vis state power.

The transnational agrarian movement La Vía Campesina (LVC) came together in the early 1990s to horizontally deliberate on common causes, engage in direct action to counter spaces of political/economic power, and construct principled alternatives, like ‘food sovereignty’, while maintaining relative autonomy from states, funders, and political parties (Desmarais 2007). Not overtly anarchist, LVC resonates with many anarchist ideas and practices. Rather than claiming LVC for one tradition or another, we can simply note the many traditions at play in it. LVC largely reflects agrarian populist traditions intellectually<sup>12</sup> and in mobilization. Radical agrarian populist scholars similarly to anarchists favor socialism ‘broadly defined’ (Borras 2020, 4), grassroots ideological development – as in the farmer-to-farmer methods discussed by Val et al. (2019) – and community/farmer autonomy, central to van der Ploeg’s (2008) argument on peasantries. Still, agrarian populism also considers how peasants might be inserted into existing markets, how states might support these economies, and how state

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<sup>12</sup> See the work of Peter Rosset, Annette Desmarais, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, and Phil McMichael as representations of this tradition.

and its (corrupted) political project, Left populist responses may fail to meet people where they are, and fall on deaf ears.

Importantly, it is not only rural whites who hold negative perceptions of the state and its support for extractive, unequal relations. Many members of society, in particular those from groups who have historically been ‘Othered’, exhibit state skepticism. Indigenous, African-American, and Latinx/migrant histories of attempted genocide by the state, enslavement, and chronic exploitation may all hold relevance for questions of state-orientation and ‘stateless’ moral economies. According to environmental justice scholars Pellow (2016) and Pulido (2017), the state is almost always at the center of environmental injustices, and it behooves theorists of social change to take a more skeptical view of the prospects of emancipatory politics via the state. Similar skepticism of the state is found among ‘afro-pessimist’ (Samudzi and Anderson 2018), Black ecosocialist (Akuno 2018), ‘Afrikan anarchist’ (Meyer and Kersplebedeb 2019) and indigenous scholars and activists (Alfred 2005; Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2011; Coulthard 2014).

Movements and their participants are to varying degrees ‘faithful’ to anarchist theories. Some social sectors and movements are directly inspired by anarchist thinking, while others are simply anarchistic in inclination. In my fieldwork, some US agrarian movement activists expressed strong doubt about prospects of transformation via state policy, influenced by experiences growing up in long-neglected farmworker communities. These same activists sometimes still engaged policy: people’s ideas are dynamic; ideologies are not neatly bound. Anarchists at times participate in reformist labor organizing, in ‘social enterprises’ and businesses, and even in electoral and state-focused organizing. There are negative and positive aspects to this flexibility, but an important lesson for CAS is that attention to anarchist influence cannot be limited to visibly anarchist organizations, and must look additionally to anarchistic forms and individual anarchist participation in wider and di-

people, resulting in his 2009 *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* and 2012s *Two Cheers for Anarchism*. Like Graeber’s (2005) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, *Two Cheers* offers ‘fragments’ of theories and directions regarding the use of anarchist ideas in peasant studies. Scott (2012, xii) lays the groundwork for this paper’s argument; namely that

if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle. It will also become apparent that anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or anarchist philosophy.

Scott describes the state as a consummate simplifier and destroyer of vernaculars – vernaculars being linked to the uniqueness of place-based cultures, and the rebellions generated by impositions against them (Scott 1998, 2012). Governmental and elite actions and non-elites’ attitudes towards these action are key factors in the development of rural rebellions, and such attitudes towards the state can be seen as anarchistic, even if they are not overtly anarchist. In this way, and in echoes of Wolf (1969), Scott develops a theory of peasants as ‘natural anarchists’. Importantly for CAS at large, Graeber (2005, 45–46) suggests anthropology has proven that there is no rupture between pre-historic and modern societies in terms of human nature and habits. Accordingly, it is nonsensical to approach peasants and indigenous people analytically any differently than modern, urbanized people. Peasants might be ‘natural anarchists’, but so might be other sectors of society. O’Hearn and Grubačić (2018) make this clear in the inclusion of solitary confinement prisoners

alongside Mexico's Zapatistas and Russia's Cossacks in their study of 'exilic' spaces, or spaces of exit from the capital-state nexus, in which moral economies are foundational. Building on moral economy approaches, such studies can advance understanding of the possibilities and limits of both 'structural' and 'geographic' escape as means to emancipation.

While anarchism finds resonance in traditional and modern ways of rural and food-related life, and in critiques that rural people make of the state and capital, it is also important to recognize the internal contradiction in moral economy approaches. Anthropology has shown that there is no 'noble savage'; indigenous people, rural people, peasants are still people – contradictory, imperfect. In some cases, they gravitate towards the market, or enter the state. Graeber and Wengrow (2018) offer synthesized archaeological evidence showing hunter-gatherer societies shifted internal social relations between egalitarianism and hierarchy in yearly cycles, indicating the dynamism of non-agricultural societies (as opposed to conventional narratives that claim hunter-gatherers as inherently egalitarian and agricultural societies as inherently hierarchical). This non-fixedness of hierarchical social organization through history might provide comfort (for anarchists) in knowing that people have fought off state forms for eons (a point also made by Clastres 1989; Barclay 1996; Scott 2017), but equally it is discomfiting in knowing that even 'prehistoric' hunter-gatherers have had forms of ritualized authority, indicating a likelihood that hierarchies will never disappear completely. Graeber and Wengrow also allude to but do not address the suggestion that generational and gender oppression are perhaps more fundamental and pernicious forms of human inequality. As such, the anarchist critique also provides a sobering reminder that family and community are likely the *oldest* sites in human social organization for hierarchies and unjust structures. This results in the contradiction that anarchism thus has something to say about *all* human societies, but it doesn't necessarily provide answers

that breeds complicity. I offer a counter explanation by taking at face value the state's historical and still persistent exploitation of rural people and places in order to centralize profit. (Ashwood 2018a, ix)

Like William, Michel Foucault sees legal doctrines as a tool used by the elite to maintain control over those on the margins of society. For those excluded from the wealth of for-profit democracy, the deliverance of justice is not abstract. Rather, justice relies on, in Foucault's description, 'their own experience, that of the injuries they have suffered, that of the way in which they have been wronged, in which they have been oppressed.' For the rebel, the delivery of justice, rather than being entrusted to the state and its many apparatuses, is carried out directly by those avenging grievances. For William, retribution for wrongs came through what I call 'direct justice,' not the justice of the state, but the justice of a community responding outside of bureaucracy to personal oppression. In some senses similar to David Graeber's notion of direct democracy, direct justice is determined by the collective moral economy of the people and delivered accordingly. A justice of anarchy rendered against an oppressive, for-profit democratic state. (ibid, 151–152)

Ashwood's informants included the kind of rural whites who have been effectively enrolled in national AP politics, who Red-neck Revolt has been actively recruiting to anarchist politics. Ashwood (2018b, 3–4) argues that there is a 'lack of genuine stateless representation on the political stage ... In the meantime, the opportunity grows for the exploitation of the stateless position by self-titled populists who have elite, pro-state agendas, but are well versed in stateless rhetoric'. By placing itself in defense of the state

Revolt's (n.d.) 'principles' indicate their anarchist perspective (emphasis original):

WE STAND AGAINST THE NATION-STATE AND ITS FORCES WHICH PROTECT THE BOSSES AND THE RICH ... we do not seek to merely replace one set of politicians for another. We know that our answers will always come from a community level, where every person should be allowed to participate in making the decisions that affect their lives. We believe in community power and community rights over the rights of any government body.

Redneck Revolt's very existence indicates CAS should pay attention to explicitly anarchist movements in the dialectic of AP and emancipatory alternatives, as it represents a struggle to undermine white supremacy and acceptance of capitalism among non-elite populations, and to develop a left rural politics in opposition to AP. Rural sociologist Loka Ashwood is one of the few scholars who has leveraged an anarchist lens on US rural politics. Ashwood's book length study (2018a) and article (2018b) look at rural communities in Georgia dealing with economic and environmental injustices relating to nearby nuclear power plants. In doing so, she finds that 'stateless' and 'anti-state' perspectives are widely held among the rural people she interviewed. One of her main informants,

William, like his black and white Burke Country Neighbors, harbors a deep-seated distrust of the government. Scholars typically understand politics like Williams's as conservative, with complementary variants of social and fiscal. Some call such politics contradictory, resting on a moral code that violates rural economic interests. Others call such views dead set against progress, stymied in a culture of poverty

regarding what to *do* about this. Still, anarchistic readings of moral economy provide CAS valuable analytical tools – which, along with anarchist theory and movement lenses, I next apply to US authoritarian populism.

## **An anarchist reading of US authoritarian populism**

In this section, I address 'populism' at large, and the particular relevance of 'authoritarian populism' (hereafter AP) to the US context, showing how an anarchist lens can help better understand contemporary rural and agrarian politics and the challenges of making emancipatory change. In the case of tackling US AP, the anarchist lens does this by foregrounding the ways that state powers and logics underpin AP political projects, even as these powers are created or reproduced under so-called 'liberal' and 'socialist' administrations; and by emphasizing the complex political identities of non-elite people, and the ways these can be directed towards either emancipatory or authoritarian directions based on resentments towards state power and identifications with grassroots, lived moral economies. Taken together with anarchism's positive theory and recent scholarship on the limitations of Left populist states, the section's analysis of existing agrarian and rural organizing indicates the strategic need to prioritize grassroots social-ideological development, in ways that counter forms of Othering while providing for material needs and bolstering lived moral economies.

### **Populism, US rightwing AP, and the inherently authoritarian state**

Populism is well known as a slippery and capacious concept in scholarship (Panizza 2005, 1), and has been described variously

by research as ‘an ideology, strategy, discourse or political logic’ (Moffitt 2016, 5). Laclau’s influential theorizing (2005) contends that populist power builds through active identification against a common enemy, resulting in a new definition of ‘the people’. This certainly overlaps with anarchism, which opposes various forms of elitist hierarchy and promotes collective action that constructs new identities and affinities in antagonism. ‘Left’ populism decries elite economic and political power and seeks expanded justice and democracy, but deviates from anarchism insofar as it abides Mouffe’s (2018, 39–57) insistence that a Left populist strategy is inherently a state-focused project rooted in contesting and replacing hegemony (rather than one that entails a fundamental rupture with the existing liberal state). Grattan (2018) attempts to combine approaches, appreciating anarchistic, destabilizing, and disruptive forces in the US lineage of ‘aspirational democratic populism’, but also suggesting the eventual need to centralize and institutionalize such forces. While anarchism and contemporary Left populism overlap at times, they maintain fundamentally different orientations towards states, institutionalization, and hegemony.

Building on the Gramscian Marxist Stuart Hall (1985), we can propose that populism should be distinguished from movements that pursue ‘popular’ politics, and include anarchism only in the latter. As Hall (1985, 118) put it, we can ‘distinguish the genuine mobilization of popular demands and discontents from a “populist” mobilization which, at a certain point in its trajectory, flips over or is recuperated into a statist-led political leadership’. Populism can be thought of as a political strategy appealing to real or imagined *voting citizen majorities*, in order to achieve political-institutional power. In contradistinction, anarchists prioritize direct forms of action and decision-making, and the primacy of individuals and communities as decision-makers, over politics of representation through voting and other means, and against representative institutions and ostensibly democratic nation-states as actors. From

in the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville that killed a counter-protestor, and his pardoning of Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was indicted for racist corruption, remind us how law and discourse are wielded for statist political projects. The use of laws to enforce hegemony (including a *lack* of enforcement of laws against those promoting the hegemonic position) is not limited to AP, but forms a crucial tactic in the wielding of power when an AP political project is ascendant or hegemonic.

### **Rethinking rural positionalities, agrarian movements, and anarchism-informed emancipatory strategies**

The anarchist lens complicates typical and simplified accounts of rural non-elite positionalities and their resulting (electoral) politics. Importantly, while a state- and election-focused politics emphasizes the voting habits of individuals and classes, focusing instead (as anarchism does) on moral economies of everyday life and ideologies developed through relationship and lived experience encourages a more nuanced and hopeful reading of rural political possibilities (Gaventa 2019, 448). At times, so-called ‘conservatives’ harbor anti-state ideologies, which the mainstream Left ignores or disparages. In contrast, the movement ‘Redneck Revolt’ shows that anarchists are mobilizing such ideologies to oppose authoritarian populism in the rural US. Redneck Revolt evolved out of local chapters of the ‘John Brown Gun Club’, anarchist-organized anti-racist spaces for weapons training and mobilization for self-defense and to protect marginalized groups during demonstrations. Formed in 2016, Redneck Revolt purposefully reaches out to poor, rural whites, who are often the first recruits to authoritarian populist politics. Redneck Revolt tables at gun shows, purposefully seeking to counter-recruit from anti-‘big government’ paramilitary formations like the ‘3%ers’ (who often display white nationalist leanings), while also supporting counter-protests against white supremacist rallies. Redneck

Obama, coercive state functions were exhibited in police violence deployed in 2016 against indigenous anti-fossil fuel pipeline ‘water protectors’ at Standing Rock. Obama also deepened the government’s commitment to domestic surveillance (utilized against internal threats from eco-anarchists, indigenous water protectors, and other rural political actors) and avoided accountability by aggressively prosecuting whistleblowers. Just like every other US president, Obama continued military attacks on foreign soils, and promoted ecologically destructive economic growth.<sup>11</sup> Through the anarchist critique of authority and hierarchy we might better recognize how (authoritarian) populism is rooted in existing forms and structures of power, to understand the particular (Trump) *as continuity within a lineage* (of statist politics more broadly).

US AP relies (just like states in general) on legal structures as tools of coercion and to reproduce consent among the governed. It uses ostensibly democratic elections to achieve and justify its power, but undermines voting rights to consolidate power. It emphasizes ‘law and order’ when attacking political enemies, and ignores the law when convenient. AP’s use of coercive violence cannot be seen as only a state enterprise, however. It also relies on collaboration between state and societal forces (including non-elite factions), as seen with law enforcement officials and grassroots white supremacists collaborating at Trump rallies and white supremacist gatherings (e.g. Wilson 2017). As the popular protest chant goes, ‘Cops and Klan go hand-in-hand’ (Anonymous 2018). Trump’s argument that there were ‘good people’ involved

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producing an “other”, in this case a labor force that can be viewed as undeserving of the rights and benefits afforded citizen workers and that can be scapegoated during periods of economic downturn’.

<sup>11</sup> Though Marxists have a long history of recognizing the state’s incessant push for growth, this has not led to necessarily anti-state politics (e.g. Saed 2019). This puts eco-anarchist positions, often involving the decentralized solutions supported by climate resilience theorists, more closely in dialogue with the resonance of ‘degrowth’ thinking within CAS (Davidson 2009; Gerber 2020).

an agrarian anarchist perspective, populist politics undermine popular politics by leading non-elites toward a fundamentally dysfunctional state politics, which legitimizes an irreformable system that continues to prop up extractive agriculture, demobilizes movements during moments of state concessions, and reduces energy and emphasis towards grassroots alternative forms of organizing and institution building towards autonomy and dual power. And as discussed further below, (populist) legitimization of *any* state power reproduces the foundation upon which more authoritarian future administrations can act. Anarchist theories easily predict the slide from Left populism to AP and the betrayal of agrarian movements by their leaders who gain state power – as seen in Ecuador and Bolivia (Tilzey 2019). Without claiming Left and Right forms as equivalent, across the spectrum of state politics we find populist ways of achieving and maintaining political power and authoritarian ways of wielding power. CAS has more so focused on the problematic of xenophobic, racist, and gender regressive (i.e. ‘rightwing’) forms of AP (Bello 2018; Scoones et al. 2018; Borrás 2020). However, emancipatory politics should be informed by considering populism’s inherent alienation of collective power into the state, and the state’s inherently authoritarian nature, and thus approach rightwing AP as derivatives of this general pattern. Given these premises, and the constraints of state/capital capture, which reabsorbs subaltern agency into the existing hegemony, a Left populist emancipatory strategy (a la Mouffe 2018) constitutes a fool’s errand. I return to these strategic considerations after discussing US rightwing AP.

The rise of Donald Trump has relied on authoritarian and populist rhetoric (Booth 2017; Campbell 2017), characterized by islamophobia, racial resentment, and nativism. Trump’s words and acts thus continue a longstanding rightwing US tradition of Othering, which pits some non-elites against ‘Othered’ groups by dehumanizing the latter (Montenegro de Wit et al. 2019). The electoral success of Trump, via this Othering tradition, can be

traced back to a decades-long rightwing ideological project, which utilized business-elite-funded think tanks, churches, universities, and media (particularly cable television news and talk radio), to successfully enroll large numbers of people in a shared ideological ‘common sense’ that involves elements of white supremacy, xenophobia, anticommunism, and free market idealism (Diamond 1995; Berlet and Lyons 2000; Phillips-Fein 2009; Berlet and Sunshine 2019). At a 2018 conference on AP and the rural world,<sup>9</sup> participants from the US noted how the Left had abandoned religion and its institutions (churches), leaving them to act as grassroots centers for rural rightwing ideological development. Similarly, it was noted that talk radio is so widely listened to by many non-elites, yet is overwhelmingly dominated by rightwing politics. Rightwing ideological projects have successfully enrolled rural whites who have negative experiences and perceptions of government, generating resentment at government and undeserving Others (notably, migrant workers and racialized urbanites) – resentments exacerbated by the ‘hollowing out’ of the rural economy and declining social cohesion over the last half century of neoliberal policy (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018; Edelman 2019).

In addition to the demonization of Others, the US rightwing’s ideological project also generated buy-in to a contradictory state power relation that characterizes rightwing AP, described originally by Hall (1985). Hall’s original analysis of AP discussed the rightwing surge in British politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to Hall (1985, 117–118), this surge took up ‘strategic elements of popular opinion’ concerned about the direction of the existing state, to craft an

“anti-statist” strategy, [which] incidentally, is not one which refuses to operate through the state; it is one

<sup>9</sup> Part of the ‘Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative’ (ERPI); see <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/hosted-iss/emancipatory-rural-politics-initiative>.

which conceives a more limited state role, and which advances through the attempt, ideologically, to represent itself as anti-statist, for the purposes of populist mobilization.

Furthermore, ‘this highly contradictory strategy ... [was] “anti-statist” in its ideological self-representation *and* highly state-centralist and dirigiste in many of its strategic operations’ (ibid). We can see obvious reflections of this politics in Trump’s anti-state rhetoric on the campaign trail, and his post-election mobilization of various state powers for the continuity of elite domination and interests. Notably for CAS, this ‘contradictory’ politics also imprints in decades-long US policy efforts to deregulate agrichemical corporations while passing ‘Ag-Gag’ laws to prevent organizing efforts against agribusiness harms, or to remove price floors for commodity crops, while subsidizing corn commodities through pro-ethanol policies.

Authoritarianism in politics is characterized by coercive force, whether threatened or used, the ideologies that justify such use of force, the insulation of elite power from non-elite influence (Bruff 2014, 115), and the active production of citizens ‘indifferent to veracity and accountability in government and to political freedom and equality among the citizenry’ (Brown 2006, 690). Insofar as states create, maintain, and enforce existing hierarchies with coercive force, they are built on and reproduce authoritarian premises and tactics (Malatesta 2019, 45). Even relatively ‘free’ social democracies rely on prisons, coercive taxation, physical borders and territorial control; and on power lorded over a state’s denizens by politicians and police. State maintenance of hierarchy continues regardless of political party: for example, under Democratic US President Barack Obama more undocumented immigrants were deported from the country than under any prior president.<sup>10</sup> Under

<sup>10</sup> As Brown and Getz (2008, 1186) note: ‘Historically, immigration policy has served as a mechanism, not only for managing labor flow, but for actively