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Peter Gelderloos on state formation and stateless societies

an interview conducted by Dissident Island Radio

Peter Gelderloos, Dissident Island Radio

July 7th 2017

So last week we had Peter Gelderloos in the studio; he's probably best known for his book 'How Non-Violence Protects the State'. He is currently touring social centres around Europe with his new book published earlier this year, called 'Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation'. We caught up with him while he was in town.

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Dissident Island Radio, Episode 196, July 7th 2017

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D.I. #1: So Peter, welcome to the show!

P.G.: Thanks a lot for having me.

D.I. #1: I guess my first question is, why would we learn about state formation? What value does it have to understand the development of states over time?

P.G.: Learning about where states came from, how they emerged, why they evolved and developed actually shows us quite a lot about how they function today. It puts certain things in perspective:

things that may seem to be advances or forms of progress can be more easily revealed as changes that the state goes through in order to increase its power. And well actually one of the things I was even surprised by in the research of this book is how many of the mechanisms that very early states used are still in use (albeit in another form) by modern states.

D.I. #1: In the book you recognise a few different definitions of the state that exist already, and also a few different theories of state-formation.

P.G.: Instead of using a single definition I thought it would be better to hold two definitions in tension. One is an anarchist definition which is primarily ethical and antagonistic; it defines our relation to the state as an antagonistic one, it chooses sides. And the other definition is structurally more precise; it's more an anthropological one that lists various criteria that a form of hierarchical social organisation needs in order to qualify as a state. And so using both of those two we can avail ourselves of more precision in understanding changes in hierarchical social organisation and also understand our relationship to those structures. As far as the different theories, there's a lot of different theories: the main ones that are taught in school (really that have no factual backing, they're totally out of the window as far as states evolving because we needed them or because they were beneficial or resulted from a social contract), all of that's total nonsense of course. There are other theories that are more prevalent in the Left or in the anarchist movement, which might include material determinism, environmental determinism, primitivism; each of which tend to name certain factors that cause states to form, and I think all those fail to explain many many cases or many pathways of state formation. They also tend towards a mechanistic view of human societies, when in fact a number of states arose where nascent elites (actually as a political choice and as a strategy) took advantage of certain opportunities that arose that wouldn't inevitably have created states. And, just the same

more parochial attitudes within the US Right they completely just torpedoed the UN. Which is funny, because it was kind of their own brainchild anyways... And now they're really suffering the consequences of that, that with these different crises going on one of the few possibilities for capitalist expansion (in maybe not the immediate future but the mid-term future) would be capitalist expansion into outer space: there is not really a platform for governance at that stage, and so they've definitely created some limitations for themselves for their expansion. But yeah without a doubt the landscape keeps on changing, and the fact of them not having a platform for stable governance at this larger scale that power has grown to, in the past would usually just mean another war between the global contenders, and that's certainly possible although they'll also realise that military power has grown to a different scale that would make such a war a little bit unwise, at least from a market and survival standpoint.

D.I. #1: Cool, and on that note thank you very much for coming to talk to us.

P.G.: Thanks for having me.

D.I. #1: And it's been great to have you on.

way, a lot of stateless societies are also the result of specific choices of people who reject being ruled.

D.I. #1: I'm kinda curious to go into that a little bit more...

P.G.: The classical one articulated by Engels is that states are just a tool of the owning class, and a product of class structure in society; a necessary instrument for governing the surplus and governing working populations. The problem with that is you can't have any significant material accumulation, any significant disparity in wealth in society, unless you already have a state; unless you already have mechanisms of coercion, mechanisms of spiritual production that alter a society's values so that they could actually conceivably consider it legitimate for some people to be wealthy and for some people to be starving. So you already need quite a few primarily political and spiritual structures in place before you can even really start these processes of material accumulation.

D.I. #1: So how would a theory or a concept of state-formation effect how we conceive of revolution?

P.G.: When we study state-formation we see that it's not by any means a smooth or linear process: there are many cases of states that have fallen apart due to their own incompetence or that have been overthrown by their own populations, by the resistance of neighbouring societies... And so we see that in fact in the past there have been a great many processes that today we might refer to as "revolution", a great many times when societies have rejected or overthrown states. And so the states that exist today (and especially the modern state): these are models that contain an institutional memory of having reimposed their authority over a society and within a society that had already learned to reject state power. So these are more intelligent models of the state that know how to co-opt resistance; of if state power collapses in our lifetimes, if in any region of the globe we're able to reject state authority, overcome state authority (and that's something that's actually happening with increasing frequency in the last decade) then until that process goes global, until every last vestige of the state is destroyed

everywhere, then there will be attempts to reimpose state authority. And those attempts at least in broad terms will probably follow some of the patterns of ways in has happened so many times in the past.

D.I. #1: And what do you identify as being some of these norms or practices that allow that to happen; things that we should be aware of, maybe dismantle in advance, or be aware of in the aftermath and ensure that they don't exercise their power that they have?

P.G.: Nascent elites where they're trying to bring back state authority (or, this is also the case with states that are colonising stateless societies) pretty much always encourage patriarchal dynamics. Patriarchy tends to be a very useful level for elites to build more hierarchy in society, and also to mobilise and militarise a part of the population that they mean to rule in order to support their aims. So in the case of the modern state, after the Western Roman Empire collapsed much of western Europe was stateless for centuries; and then the feudal states that arose after that (generally as a result of German warrior classes conquering some other population), those states were very very weak in comparison with the Roman Empire and other earlier states, and of course much weaker than the modern state that eventually rose in the last 500 – give or take – years. And a major part of the process (and there were of course lots of different simultaneous processes, for example conflict against the Catholic Church, expansion of trade networks and so forth), but one of the very important processes in this was a very very vehement regeneration of patriarchal relations. A lot of what's referred to as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (and then the witch hunts that accompanied the earlier periods of the Renaissance and the end of the Middle Ages) was a reinstitution of the very patriarchal relationships that had been strong during the Roman Empire but that were very weak during the Middle Ages. It also seems that the Greek city states like Athens and so forth, they re-emerged co-opting anti-authoritarian values that may very well have emerged

promises if they understand that all those promises still require us to be governed and subjugated, and to be the passive recipients of whatever solution those responsible for destroying society and destroying the planet have decided to offer us.

D.I. #2: So in that contemporary context you're talking about where people are losing faith in the state: there's also a dynamic where what's known as neo-liberalism is taking the state apart from the inside, it's potentially... I mean, do you think that is a new phase in state development, or do you think that's just part of a natural cycle that's been going on since the beginning of the state.

P.G.: I would disagree that neo-liberalism is taking the state apart from the inside. I think it's just changing management structures. I don't think states have lost their authorities; and, aside from that, corporations are state corollaries, they're bureaucratic structures that only exist the concession of state-run infrastructures and state regulation and so forth. So no, I don't see any cycle of states getting stronger and getting weaker: I think their general push is to constantly increase their own power.

D.I. #2: But there's new characteristics being taken on: like one of the things that you said that characterises a state is that for, example, it's territory-based; and now corporations have the ability to exist across borders and across the globe if they so wish. So that's a new way of exercising that same management structure in a parallel way, so and in terms of the way people interact as well, you had things like the internet which have broken down borders on a very low level at the same time; so I mean are we operating on a different landscape, or is it the same as what we would have been dealing with before?

P.G.: Yeah, definitely the landscape is changing. But one interesting thing is, it would have made sense probably for the United States after the end of the Cold War to encourage the United Nations (or some other global government structure in which it would have, if not a controlling say, a very large stake): but because of

and prisons and all of these non-voluntary forms of influence; but by definition a state can't annihilate its entire population, and so they require these common belief systems. And that's something that always requires... I mean, there's always been this paradox for anarchists that states, we've always criticised them for being coercive and imposing their will, and at the same time recognise that people on one level or another choose to submit to states. And I think that latter is the religious level of the state that still functions; anyone at any moment can choose to reject the dominant belief system and that would deprive the state of one of its most important and oldest levers for, like I said, getting people in line. In recent years I would say anarchists and other anti-authoritarians have actually influenced the belief systems of society; for example nowadays 'politician' is an insult, 'nobody trusts a politician': that's relatively new. That's something I think of the last decades that's come up. And for a long time it was just radical minorities making that argument, but unfortunately we've often watered-down our own arguments so we haven't spoken out against obedience to authority. And in fact doing that today, just like speaking against politicians in the '50s would seem like you were being highly unfair, 'trashing the reputations of these upstanding civic servants when it's really just a few bad apples' or whatnot... nowadays when you criticize obedience to authority in all forms then that sounds like you're being a bit petulant. But it's always hard at the beginning; and if we keep getting to the root of it and criticize the very relationship of governing and being governed then who knows, maybe in a few decades that value could also be undermined, and that would certainly give us a great advantage in the crises to come. Because the sure thing is that there's going to be a lot more candidates claiming to not represent the political mainstream, new political parties popping up making promises to bring back the good old days or to find the adequate scapegoat, or to bring back welfare, and whatever else. And it will be a lot more difficult for people to believe in those

as a result of the popular rebellions against these large empires like the Mycenaean state, Babylon and Egypt that had fallen apart during the Bronze Age collapse. So the new emerging Greek states latched on to these anti-authoritarian values of political freedom, equality and so forth: but it was a patriarchal vision of equality and freedom and that was a vital ingredient to the militarism and ultimately slavery that was at the basis of the power of those Greek city-states. So getting rid of patriarchy I think would be one of the most important elements of any process like that. And also another thing would be fighting the emergence of central points in society, any central point in which decision-making is more legitimate and in which all of society's decisions have to be legitimated or validated; and this will probably initially happen under the guise of direct democracy. It will take, quite possibly, the form of an assembly. But if it's one assembly – even if everyone can supposedly participate – if it's one assembly through which all of a society's supposedly legitimate decisions have to pass, then we're already dealing with a very fundamental political alienation from which state power can re-emerge. Both because there is no one central space in which everyone is equally advantaged, and because people with certain abilities, with certain powers, find it generally easy to dominate those spaces; and that division between... because really, humans are making decisions at every moment of our lives, every human space is a decision-making space. So we have to think about what kinds of activities, what kinds of powers, are marginalized, invisibilized and suppressed when we recognise the predominance of a central assembly. It's often in informal spaces in society (the historically more 'feminine' spaces in society and so forth) that are marginalized and suppressed so that you can have this central decision-making point in society.

D.I. #1: Where do you see the locus of power in a non-state or non-hierarchical society or community?

P.G.: As dispersed, diffuse and decentralised as possible. And a lot of historically stateless societies are organised in that way. They

have high connectivity, there's an extreme amount of communication between different communities, between different nuclei. Communication in every sense of the word, but also in terms of kinship relations; they often have kinship systems in which pretty much everyone can be said to be related to everyone else and therefore also call in favours from everyone else and rely on the solidarity or the hospitality of everyone else in their society. And just the spreading of information, the sharing of decisions made. Within these chaotic networks actually decision-making tends to be quite intelligent (and this has emerged in studies of ants and honey bees but also studies of human populations, that even though there's no central point that's the privileged vantage from which all the decision-making can be charted and tracked, if each individual in this society has a high flow of information about what decisions everyone else is making then they tend to be able to make the most intelligent decisions and also they tend to be able to make the decisions that flow together with the decisions of other communities, other nuclei and so forth). And most importantly there's no one privileged place to stand, there's no one high ground where an elite can pose itself as a political choke-point and influence the decision-making of the entire society.

D.I. #1: What kind of practices do stateless societies have that allow them to resist colonisation better than hierarchical societies are able to?

P.G.: Well this is something that anarchist anthropologist James C. Scott goes into a lot, and there's really a whole range of practices that include everything from agricultural practices to religious beliefs to kinship forms. So I mentioned kinship relations in which everyone is thought to be everyone else's relative, and in fact some anarchist subcultures also approach this ideal by taking all the importance out of kinship relations and spreading ideas of solidarity. The idea of solidarity isn't limited by kinship, race or nationality or anything like that, it's meant to be universal (or at least, everyone on this side of the social war), and you can definitely get closer

as a supermarket of social models from which we can just go shopping around for the best model, because that would also be another manifestation of a typically colonial relationship. And also I think it's a beautiful dream, a great idea, for anarchists to try to create the most liberated society ever – of course not to impose that on the entire planet as some ideal model but for ourselves and with the thought that if it works out then maybe we'll inspire other people and other people will also adopt parts of what we develop. Of course if we try to make the most liberated society in the history of the world we'll probably fail, since that's kind of a high goal... but I think it's not necessarily a bad thing to fail in the pursuit of lofty goals.

D.I. #1: What do you see as being the vulnerabilities of existing states at the moment, if that's kind of a high goal that we're aiming towards?

P.G.: I would say that the complex of states and capitalism (within the world system basically engineered by the United States and its allies after World War II) is facing a number of very serious crises. Pretty much every state involved is suffering some kind of legitimacy crisis, some of them quite strong. Capitalism is in the throes of the latest of its cyclical crises of accumulation, and there's also a very major ecological crisis; and that means that a lot of people are having trouble believing in the state: and people are also seeing that the state isn't actually as powerful as it pretends to be, that now might be a good time to push and if everybody pushes at once then the whole thing will come toppling down. One thing that struck me as I was researching the formation of early states (and also later states) is how important shared belief systems are to states, how religion was very very important in the formation of the first states, and in one form or another it remains important, even in modern states today that claim to be secular but that still generate these shared mythical belief systems and that work on those as a level to influence the population and to keep the population in line. Of course states also have guns

well, it basically faces the need to either evolve or die. Because that that point... I mean, there's many hierarchies that are participatory, there are many hierarchical societies in which people are relatively free, there's cycles over hundreds of years between more or less hierarchy, they're constantly changing, but there's not this amassment of coercive violence that forcibly governs people. One society crosses that threshold, when the elite (the structures of centralised power) have basically drawn an antagonist relationship with the rest of society and neighbouring societies and that constantly creates resistance and conflict to such a degree that any state that remains still would be overthrown. And so they get into these evolutionary dynamics where they have to constantly develop stronger forms of control. And I think that that is a very real dynamic in history, and I think it's one that validates or confirms the anarchist intuition, the anarchist argument going back a long time: that you can never trust a state, that states will always be our enemies, that states will always require the enslavement (in one form or another) of society.

D.I. #2: But by the same virtue, it's not necessarily true that a stateless society would reflect anarchist ideals or what you would consider as a just society: I mean, statelessness by itself is not the be-all and end-all. There's a lot of other things that need to be achieved, no?

P.G.: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, it was stateless societies on different continents that created states. Out of the hierarchies that they already had. A lot of stateless societies are patriarchal, a lot of stateless societies engage in wanton warfare against their neighbours; and speaking for myself as someone brought up in Western society, I can't just copy some non-Western society as my ideal social model. On the other hand, I think it's very good that people brought up in Western society to realise that they can learn from other societies; that we need to break with this Eurocentric constraint that the only things that are valid are the things developed by Western civilisation. We should not by any means treat history

to that ideal just by increasing anarchist practices of hospitality; which are better in some places, worse in others. Agriculture: so, not monocultures basically, the planting of very diversified crops in more of a forest garden, more of an ecosystemic approach. Pastoralism also tends to be a choice of populations that are fleeing from or resisting states. Religious practices: you have cases where stateless populations will keep gods, they'll keep pantheons of gods, but the character of those gods will change: whereas the gods will be imperfect, they'll be objects of ridicule, they'll be jealous, nasty, treacherous beings: and that actually is a way sometimes that stateless societies preserve memory of the state on an imaginary plane, by telling stories about gods (and really the object isn't to worship the gods but to constantly escape the attention of the gods). So the gods stand in for these authority figures. Other spiritual systems will be without any gods at all (without personified deities that need to be worshiped) but a more spirit-based system in which nature itself and natural processes are seen as living things and they're respected. And so that's important: on the one hand it's a very accessible spirituality, it's not one that's controlled by priests, it's not one that's manifested in distant gods but it's one that's all around, all-embracing, and that also can be useful for teaching existing in balance with nature rather than engaging in the kind of exploitative practices that states inevitably engage in. Shifting ethnicities; where people don't have fixed ethnicities but can consider themselves part of many different groups. Stateless groups are much more likely to be multi-lingual, to speak multiple languages... And then just to have cultures of authority-hating. In fact a really common practice in stateless societies is assassination; any kind of community leader who... I mean, in pretty much every human society that I've come across there are positions of leadership, and I know that's something that we anarchists grapple with a lot because we don't like leadership, we don't want leadership. But we still like anyone else deal with informal hierarchies. A lot of stateless societies recognise certain leadership roles, but the people who

fill those roles in some ways tend to be under-privileged or over-exploited; whatever work that they have to do as a leader for or on behalf of the community is in addition to whatever work that they have to do working their fields and so forth. So they get no material compensation for it, they have to work even harder, people are at any time free to ignore them, or to just kick them out, to abandon them, to put someone else in that position...

D.I. #1: What would be the impetus for taking on such a role?

P.G.: A sense of responsibility to the community. Because often it's a role of conflict resolution, or mediation, things like that. It's often older people who take on those roles (and the explanation there is that the different conflicting parties would potentially all be their grandchildren, and so they are motivated to try to mend those fractures.

D.I. #1: I guess it sounds like a commitment to the value of the community, that inspires you to take on a bit more of a heavy role.

P.G.: Honestly, what inspires... I maybe this will be like a weird comparison, anarchists with community leaders, but what inspires anarchists to do everything that we do; which is completely unpaid, and certainly thankless, and often repressed and punished, in addition to whatever wage work we have to do in order to pay the rent. But getting back to that really briefly another aspect is that there tend to be different kinds of non-compatible leadership that are recognised. So maybe conflict-resolution role, or someone who coordinates between different communities, a more spiritual leadership role, and so forth. This would be the frequent case in a lot of stateless societies. But any person who's seen to be power-hungry, to want to amass more power; there's a common practice of assassination in stateless communities, where they'll just kill the person who does that. And that I think tends to be a pretty good tool for preventing the emergence of strong hierarchies.

D.I. #2: I'm curious about this binary notion of state/non-state. Because what you've just described there could legitimately describe states that exist in the world today, so what you've described

to me: it just sounds like Lebanon, basically where you have a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society, a strong tradition of assassinating leaders: it's basically a non-functioning state. So I'm wondering how useful that binary between state and non-state is: and do you actually see it that way or do you see it as a kind of spectrum upon which there's highly-functioning states (for example maybe the U.K.) and then completely non-functioning states, which are still states, and then that passes into maybe a non-state spectrum there?

P.G.: Well the models that I was describing, I was taking it for granted that these were within decentralised communities that are generally autonomous in terms of their subsistence and so forth. I haven't gone into all the different criteria that are actually implicated in the definition of states because that would take about 20 minutes or half an hour, but that include a certain minimum levels of bureaucratic hierarchy and so forth. So a case like Lebanon definitely qualify as a state under all those other criteria, but then also within the multi-ethnic state different ethnicities tend to be pitted against one another, so actually ethnic identity is reinforced rather than dissolved. So what I was talking about is each individual will be multi-ethnic rather than an entire state population. States very frequently encourage nationalism, they encourage separation of ethnic identities. I think 'state' is a very useful category for analysis for a variety of reasons: of course it's not just as simple as state and non-state because there are many hierarchical non-state societies and in the past 100 years on the planet non-hierarchical, non-state societies have definitely been in the minority. But I think it's definitely a useful distinction because in general this whole idea of linear evolution I think is completely flawed: societies don't develop in one direct, they don't follow one pathway, it's not just a growth from less to more complex or anything like that, I think that's completely false. But I think that you really can make the strong argument that once a society that's hierarchical crosses the threshold to state-formation then it does enter into this stream of...