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The Anarchist Inclinations of North American Great Plains Tribes

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This is an excerpt from another essay originally published on September 8, 2018. It has been edited to better stand alone.

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In my research I have found that some sort of Anarchy was the common practice of the Great Plain Natives, though perhaps of a more collectivist nature rather than communist. Here Anarchy is to be understood as a society with a lack of a State, and a State is to be understood as a system of hierarchical authority that has the monopolized professional form of violence in order to sustain, maintain, and expand its power and territory.

My main source for this claim comes from *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, which is Wooden Leg's, a Northern Cheyenne born in 1858, account of his life as written down by Thomas B. Marquis and it is often referenced or supplemented by the latter with other first hand accounts and documentation regarding particular events for clarification. However, in the book, neither the words "Anarchy" or "Socialism" appear nor is there any earnest attempt to counterpose the Cheyenne way of life to the modern capitalist society of class struggle made so

I will now extensively quote Wooden Leg and contrast it with writings of Anarchists as well as my own analysis to support this claim.

He was a Northern Cheyenne who belonged to the Elk Warrior society of his tribe, one such society of three. The other two being the Crazy Dog Warriors and the Fox Warriors. To apply the universality of the Cheyenne way of life to other Great Plains Natives; Wooden Leg states that *“[t]he Sioux tribes had ways closely resembling those of the Cheyennes. We traveled and visited much with them, particularly with the Ogallalas, sometimes with the Minneconjoux”*. He goes on to say that,

“[t]he Sioux tribal governments were almost the same as ours [..]. Their warrior training by precept and by discipline was similar to our system. They fought their battles as a band of individuals, the same as we fought ours, and the same as was the way of all Indians I ever knew. They had war dances and medicine dances differing only a little from our ceremonies of this kind. So when white people learn the ways of the Cheyennes they have learned also a great deal of the ways of the Sioux and of other Indians in this part of the world.” p. 121-122

Let us begin;

When describing the type of governmental organization Wooden Leg states that *“[t]he warrior societies were the foundation of tribal government among the Cheyennes. That is, the members of the warrior societies elected the chiefs who governed the people. Every ten years the whole tribe would get together for the special purpose of choosing forty big chiefs. These forty then would select four past chiefs, or ‘old men’ chiefs, to serve as supreme advisers to them and to the tribe. There were not any hereditary chiefs among the Cheyennes.”* p. 56

“Each warrior society had a leading war chief and nine little war chiefs. So, there were many men who might claim the title of chief. All together there were seventy-four such officials, counting both the tribal rulers and the warrior society rulers.”

with all friendly people, even with avowed enemies if such should come peaceably and should be in want. A first principle of Indian conduct was: Be generous to all Indians.” p. 159

This is echoed in the last lines of the book, “I wish I could live again through some of the past days when it was the first thought of every prospering Indian to send out the call: “Hoh-oh-oh-oh, friends: Come. Come. Come. I have plenty of buffalo meat. I have coffee. I have sugar. I have tobacco. Come, friends, feast and smoke with me.” p. 384

Now compare that to Errico Malatesta’s statement that “in the wake of the revolution, it shall be a moral duty incumbent upon all to display love and respect for one’s fellow men, to protect the weak and the children, to work, to consider the interests of society in every individual action— in short, everything that science and experience has or may demonstrate useful to men.” –*Program and Organization of the International Working Men’s Association (1884)*

The parallels between both what *was* and *what is proposed* are undeniable.

I will conclude this by stating that this society is very much, in spirit, exemplary of the revolutionary society Anarchists strive for and that there was no formalized way for them to have gotten the blueprints for such society with from outside theorists. Rather, this was simply the organization that was born from their own independent decision-making. An organizational method with its own ethos that has expressed itself within humanity across time and space.

“The warrior chiefs had original authority only in their societies, each in his own special organization. By alternation, though, the tribal chiefs delegated governmental power to the warrior chiefs. That is, one group or another of the warrior chiefs and their followers were called upon to serve as active subordinate officials to carry out the orders promulgated by the big chiefs. Such warrior society group, when on this duty, were like the white man’s sheriffs, policemen, soldiers.” p. 57

Here it should be noted that at first glance this might seem as a State as any other, even simply by the use of the word “government”, but as Kropotkin writes in *The State: Its Historic Role*, “On the other hand the State has also been confused with Government. Since there can be no State without government, it has sometimes been said that what one must aim at is the absence of government and not the abolition of the State. However, it seems to me that State and government are two concepts of a different order. The State idea means something quite different from the idea of government. It not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies. It implies some new relationships between members of society which did not exist before the formation of the State. A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing has to be developed in order to subject some classes to the domination of others.” He elaborates, “The fact is that all animals, with the exception of some carnivores and birds of prey, and some species which are becoming extinct, live in societies... In every animal classification they are at the top of the ladder and there cannot be the slightest doubt that the first human beings with human attributes were already living in societies. Man did not create society; society existed before Man.”

This is supplemented by Emma Goldman when she contrasts these concepts of society and the State, “We are often accused of a desire to annihilate society, we are constantly called the enemies of organised society...That is not so. The State is not

a social organisation; it is an organisation born of despotism and maintained by force, and imposed by force on the masses." The International Anarchist Congress (1907).

What Wooden Leg here describes is certainly government, but to call it a *State* is simply, undeniably, *incorrect*.

For one, Wooden Leg clearly states that these warrior chiefs' limitations to their rule, and a tribe was normally comprised of various warrior societies so it follows that these organizations acted more akin to extended families following each other rather than under the forced singular action of an elite. And in further elaborating the characteristic of big chiefs and what he calls policemen and soldiers, he states that "[p]romotion in public life followed the line from private member of a warrior society to little chief of the same, then to leading chief, then to big chief of the tribe, finally to old man chief. Of course, all of the tribal and old men chiefs were members of one or another of the warrior societies. It often occurred that in time of battle or in organized great hunting expeditions a tribal big chief or an old man chief had, during such time, the low standing of a mere private person subordinate to the rule of the warrior chiefs." p. 57

And it is that last particular line that turns completely bars it from being labeled as a State within Anarchist framework. In order for this to be considered a State, to be considered as a group of individuals with the monopoly on violence, they would not under any circumstances be subjugated to external authority of others. However this was in fact a recurring practice as exemplified by the following recollection, "Ordinarily there was shift of the delegated authority by regular rotation, but such change in regular order was not always the case. The conclave of big chiefs decided which society should have it. A society might be appointed to act for one day, two days, three days, any stated length of time, or they might be appointed to serve during the continuation of some certain event. At any time their appointment might be revoked by the big chiefs and another society named in their stead. Anyhow, some one or other warrior

big chiefs guide and make important decisions and plans, but these are executed collectively and in an agreeable manner for all.

Now to assess if there's exploitation among them.

We've already seen that hunting big game was delegated among the three warrior societies, it was unwarranted to participate in a hunt if you weren't part of the particular warrior society. This, however, isn't a definite exclusion from the wealth obtained. As I said before, they were of a collectivist streak, and to that end they shared their wealth among family and the whole of the tribe. He doesn't provide many examples so I will just post the quotes.

"Our way was to build a bonfire and call the chiefs. No oath of any kind was taken. It was supposed the truth would be told without special promise. Perhaps that was not the case with the Crows. I have heard of another Crow custom different from the Cheyenne way. I have been told that when a Crow stole a horse or found any article it was expected of him that he give it away. It was considered not right for him to keep it. A Cheyenne might present a stolen horse or a found article to a relative or a friend, but it was regarded as entirely fair and proper for him to keep it for himself if he chose to do so." p. 90-91

"As Cheyennes came to us from the agency they brought coffee, sugar and tobacco. Other articles were brought, but these were the most desired. The luxuries were distributed among friends, small quantities here and there. Someone and another then would go to the front of his tepee, call out the names of special friends and invite: 'I have tobacco. Come and smoke with me.' Or: 'I have coffee and sugar. Come and feast with me.' Sioux might make such gifts to Cheyennes or Cheyennes might provide them to the Sioux. Or, members of the two sets of Indians might invite each other to smoke or to eat. Usually, though, the givings and the invitings were within tribal bounds. Yet every Indian who might prosper in any way was expected to hold himself always willing to share and desirous of sharing his prosperity with his fellows,

accordance with maintaining social cohesion but not at the cost of tolerating injustice. There's no system, such as a prison complex, that alienates and maintains the alienation of the individual in an antisocial manner. Is it any surprise then that Kropotkin says elsewhere that "[p]eoples without political organisation" by which he means collectivist aboriginals and indigenous folks, *"and therefore less depraved than ourselves, have perfectly understood that the man who is called 'criminal' is simply unfortunate; that the remedy is not to flog him, to chain him up, or to kill him on the scaffold or in prison, but to relieve him by the most brotherly care, by treatment based on equality, by the usages of life amongst honest men."*? (Law and Authority, 1886)

For the most part, Wooden Leg describes the roles of the big chiefs as leaders who would act as judges and chosen for their honesty and level-headedness and reputation for good decisions and this was always considered an honor. This sort of organization doesn't have the coercive nature that a State does, it is not a State.

After all, given Bakunin's analysis that, *"If there is a State, there must be domination of one class by another and, as a result, slavery; the State without slavery is unthinkable — and this is why we are the enemies of the State."* He later goes on to say, *"A strong State can have only one solid foundation: military and bureaucratic centralization. The fundamental difference between a monarchy and even the most democratic republic is that in the monarchy the bureaucrats oppress and rob the people for the benefit of the privileged in the name of the King, and to fill their own coffers; while in the republic the people are robbed and oppressed in the same way for the benefit of the same classes, in the name of 'the will of the people' (and to fill the coffers of the democratic bureaucrats)."* -Statism and Anarchy (1873)

We have seen that there's no such centralization with the rotating of executive authority, ebb and flow of and authority among the different societies working in collaboration of one another, this is decentralized but coordinated government; the

band was on duty at all times to put into execution the will of the big chiefs." p. 60

And the role of these big chiefs was, as previously mentioned, that of "advisers" rather than societal organizers. In fact, in *Social Anthropology of North American Tribes (1937)*, Fred Eggan writes of the Chiricahua Apache, another Great Plains tribe, that, *"The local groups do have leaders who in literature have been called 'chiefs' — a term which is misleading if it is used, as it often is, to indicate absolute or a large measure of control over a group of subjects."* He explains, *"It is difficult to see why these men should be called by any title more suggestive of power than 'leader' or 'adviser'. What strong ascendancy they obtained was secured largely after white contact. The white man came into Chiricahua country seeking 'chiefs' with whom to treat. The Indians did the best they could and directed them to the leaders of the local groups. Then the Chiricahua found, to their great discomfort, that the white officials assumed what no Apache would admit — that any agreement with the leader was binding on that whole group."* He ends that paragraph reflecting, *"The picture of Apache leadership, rank, and status under aboriginal conditions is quite different [from those of white society]."*

For another, Anarchists have, in common with all revolutionary socialists, argued that people ought to have the access to weapons and be armed, and this particular kind of organization of rotating authority, there is a collaboration between the warrior societies to promote the well-being of every individual in an established friendly manner. This is further supported by *"The effort at all times was to carry out well whatever governmental task was placed upon the warriors, either on the hunts, at the camps, during a journey, in time of battle or under any conditions where they were vested with authority. The three societies competed against each other for efficiency in governmental action as well as in all other affairs appertaining to respectable manhood. There was competition also within each society, every*

ambitious member trying to outdo his fellows in all worthy activities.” p. 62-63

This is an example of what Anarchists call mutual-aid societies, where division of labor is for the benefit of all even in competition within each other.

Furthermore, the concept of “execution of will of the big chiefs” is to be addressed as this seems at first glance to be directly contradictory to Anarchist principles. Wooden Leg gives a detailed example of exactly how such an organizational method works in action:

“Perhaps at some time the Crazy Dog warriors might be acting as the policemen at this particular place of camping. Perhaps the four old men chiefs might determine that a general buffalo hunt ought to be entered upon...The big chiefs then considered which warrior society should conduct the camp movement. Perhaps they agreed upon the Fox warriors...The next morning, as all were preparing for the move, the Fox warriors assembled out forward in the direction of the intended movement...The Crazy Dog warriors, who had been policemen in the camp, now went off duty and became merely Cheyenne individuals.” p. 60-61

In regards to law and crime, the most serious of these is the killing of a man, and that “[n]o policeman warrior nor anyone else lawfully could kill a Cheyenne.” (p. 97) However their approach to such a crime is very much along anarchist lines. Anarchists have always sought to abolish prisons because, “Prisons do not moralize their inmates; they do not deter them from crime.” (Are Prisons Necessary). Kropotkin analyses the situation, “liberty and fraternal care have proved the best cure on our side...They will prove also the best cure on the other boundary of the same borderland. Progress is in that direction.”

So let’s asses the direction;

“The killing of any Cheyenne was the most serious offense against our tribal laws. The punishment was prompt. A council of the big chiefs and the warrior chiefs was called at once. The case was inquired into. If guilt was evident, the offender began

without delay the payment of his penalty. Sometimes action was taken without the council being assembled, the situation being so clear that unanimity of feeling was expressed either for or against the person charged with the crime. The defendant was not permitted to be present at the trial council. When the decision was rendered he was notified at his lodge by the warrior policemen. If found guilty they proceeded at once to put into effect the regular fixed and standard punishment...

Banishment for four years was the main penalty. It had to be entered upon that same day. If the offender protested or dallied, he might suffer the additional infliction of being whipped, of having his horses killed or his tepee destroyed. If he acceded willingly, he was allowed to take along his possessions. In any case, he had to go. His wife or his children might go with him or remain with the tribe, as they might choose. If he had a medicine pipe, that sacred object regularly possessed by every adult male Cheyenne, his very first act of entrance upon the banishment was the smashing to fragments of this most revered talisman. Everything else he owned he might take along with him. But he must not have the devotional medicine pipe.” p. 102-103

“When the four years ended, the absolved man came back and took temporary abode in the lodge of relatives. Soon he set up his own lodge. He was admitted then to the principal rights, privileges and immunities of a recognized member of the tribe. But to this rehabilitation there were some important exceptions. For one, he never thereafter was allowed to have a medicine pipe nor to take part in any smoking circle. He was tolerated in personal presence there, if he chose thus to place himself, but as the pipe was being moved along from one to another it always went on past him, just as if he were not there at all. Nobody abused him. They simply ignored him. Hence, he ordinarily kept entirely away from such gatherings.” p. 105

There are no prisons and there’s some nascent form of rehabilitation which can surely have been improved upon but there nonetheless. Even in punishment, the principles are in