Federalism and the Left

Toward Community Power

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July 10, 2025

When a president so openly and unapologetically embraces fascism and white supremacy, it can be easy to get distracted, to focus on the man rather than the edifices of power. It can be tempting to mistake age-old features of the state's personality for attributes unique to certain rulers. One of the dangers of the Trump personality cult, which exists within both parties, is that it has made us miss the forest for the trees. We have been unable or unwilling to address the structural problems with our system of politics and economics. Understanding the historical role and purpose of the state demands that we step back from the personalities of the moment. Centralized political power exists to inaugurate inequality. Its purpose is to create categories of special rights and privileges that only a small group can enjoy or access. The ruling class holds the lands, the weapons, etc., and from this position comes permanent economic class subjugation.

We cannot move into the future under the false impression that all that is necessary is to get rid of Donald Trump or even the GOP; while these are important and necessary steps, they are very small ones in a much larger process. Many of the problems that present themselves through Donald Trump today are best understood as upshots of the structure of the country's political-economic system itself. As a recent article in Foreign Affairs notes, Donald Trump "inherited an ever-expanding national security apparatus that operates with little oversight." The president can act almost without limits on "anything even glancingly related to foreign policy or national security." As a society, we seem terrified to admit that these are symptoms of the inequalities associated with large and highly centralized institutions.

We have a historically dominant government that places an enormous, almost inconceivable amount of power in the executive branch; as within this hierarchical structure, a microscopically small group makes life-or-death decisions for hundreds of millions of people—in the case of the United States, for much of the world. We are clearly not in a position of real-world equality with our rulers. As the very small class wielding the state, they want to increase its power and scope, and to centralize this power in a small clique. This desire has always fallen into place within a broader positive-feedback process whereby capital and the state consolidate their power together.

What is needed are new and different tools to analyze and explain political outcomes, tools that deal directly with the attributes of the state that make it different and unique. The state is the site of intersection between three important historical trends that come to define it: (1) origination in war and conquest, (2) steady centralization of power, and (3) expanding size and

scale. Until we understand this interplay and its dynamics, we will be stuck with a politics that is fundamentally authoritarian, corrupt, and disconnected from real popular sovereignty. Each intervention and act of struggle must be situated within a broader framework.

The dominant refrains of the mainstream political conversation have done a serious disservice to our ability to understand real differences in political values and forms. The accepted framework tends to collapse a host of complex and varied philosophical positions into a fundamentally incoherent, self-contradictory, and confusing left-right political spectrum, equating "the left" with centralized state power and control, and "the right" with decentralization, federalism, or local autonomy. This framework falls well short of describing or explaining the real-world discourses in a number of critical ways. Its shallow binary obscures the rich and varied historical traditions of anarchism and libertarian socialism, which stand for both economic equality and radical political decentralization. Libertarians who are at once anti-capitalist and anti-statist fall into a space on the left that is almost always ignored by mainstream commentators and political candidates. Within the historical record, particularly during the twentieth century, the visible public profile of the socialist movement came to be dominated by Leninist parties or social-democratic parties, both of which deployed highly centralized and authoritarian approaches to politics and economics.

Though you wouldn't know it from the popular discourse, many major thinkers of the political left have advocated small-scale, decentralized social organization. Corners of the left have always expressed criticism of the state and of large and centralized institutional forms. In the history of political thought, we find several related strands of socialist (and proto-socialist) thought that turned sharply against the state. There had been pronounced anti-statist and libertarian features of many socialist forerunners. From the times of John Lilburne and Gerrard Winstanley to those of Thomas Paine and William Godwin, hints of the socialist movement to come later abounded. Much of the thought and action of various peasant uprisings had also naturally articulated a sensibility that was both egalitarian and strongly anti-state, both socialist and libertarian. What is remarkable, perhaps, is the endurance and reemergence of the fundamental distinction between cooperative and coercive social relations, moving across time and across ideological boundaries, influencing liberals, socialists, anarchists, and others who resist ready categorization. There was and remains a shared recognition of something essential, preceding and transcending emerging political dichotomies. There is a recognition of the difference between society and the state.

In their principled and evidence-based challenges to comfortable assumptions about the necessity of large-scale institutions—whether corporate or governmental—the ideas of decentralists on the radical left are more relevant and needed than ever. They are the only ideas that speak directly to the most fundamental problems in society, all of which are connected to the incentives associated with centralization and large scale. When many of the writers discussed below were working, there were fierce debates around the structural criticisms of capital and the state. There were active movements for radical reform in the areas of, for example, landholding and property rights, currency and exchange, and general state favoritism toward organized capital (often discussed as "class legislation"). Today, these fundamental questions about economic structure have largely disappeared from view in our political discourse. About a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, the neoliberal consensus has apparently settled all fundamental questions. The U.S. imperial system has become so naturalized, and thus invisible, that questioning it seems almost unthinkable to the political and cultural elite.

Decentralist thinkers like Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Leopold Kohr (1909–1994) attempted to draw us back from the inhuman abyss of state power. While they arise from different traditions, a key common thread is their approach to the questions of what the state is and where it came from. They want to revise the record and challenge the traditional idea that we have consented to being governed, and that we are participating in a valid social contract with government. In this view, we delegate certain powers to the state voluntarily. Hobbesian social contract theory created a nightmare incentive framework in claiming that the people are the author of all the state does. Anarchists and others similarly inclined to antiauthoritarian sentiments have been keen to point out that if we approach the state as a historical question rather than an object of armchair philosophy, we are unable to give credence to such a theory. They fall into a tradition of thinking often associated with what are called conquest theories of state formation; this school of thought finds the genesis of the state not in any kind of peaceful agreement, but in organized violence and subjugation. If the conquest theories are better recommended by the evidence from the past, they are nonetheless annoying to the ruling classes, which means they remain shockingly undervalued. Anarchists say that the way we have elaborated the state culturally is all wrong. A more complete understanding of the state in its historical and cultural dimensions and contexts is needed if we are to build up ways of life that are not based on punishing violence and hierarchy. Understanding the state in terms of conquest and institutionalized warfare clarifies its behaviors today, and it helps to show the many connections between past and present practices and tools of wealth extraction and control.

Charles Comte (1782–1837) and Charles Dunoyer (1786–1862) are examples of key radical liberal precursors to later ways of thinking about class struggle. Comte and Dunoyer followed from and developed the intellectual tradition of "industrialism," in the sense not of advancing a certain picture of industrial policy or factory life, but as a distinct social theory distinguishing two operative modes of organization. Their industrial system would revolve around industry as productive work, voluntary exchange, and genuine cooperation. Roughly its opposite is what they termed the "military" or "feudal" system, based on conquest, coercive hierarchies, theft and exploitation. The industrialist tradition favored the industrious to the indolent, the productive to the predatory. In this liberal precursor to socialist class analysis, the key distinction was between productive and unproductive activities, rather than centering one's relationship with the means of production. Yet it was an important stepping stone in that direction. They believed that the most crucial social division was between an industrial class of workers, farmers, artisans, and merchants and an idle ruling class, who fed themselves with the work of others by right of bloody conquest.

Later, in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), we find a markedly similar distinction between the state and commerce, where the latter is associated with contract and commutative justice. Proudhon argues that this occurs when "man and man declare themselves essentially producers, and abdicate all pretension to govern each other." He contrasts two different modes of justice: (1) his commutative justice, which he defines in terms of "the reign of contract, the industrial or economic system" (emphasis in original); and (2) distributive justice, which he describes as the reign of law, or in more concrete terms, feudal, governmental, or military rule. In his characteristically federalist opposition to the state, Proudhon distilled the structural critique: "Liberal today under a liberal government, it will tomorrow become the formidable engine of a usurping despot. It is a perpetual temptation to the executive power, a perpetual threat to the people's liberties.

No rights, individual or collective, can be sure of a future. Centralisation might, then, be called the disarming of a nation for the profit of its government." To paraphrase him, Proudhon sought the eventual and gradual dissolution of the governmental system within the economic system; his opposition to all forms of compulsory government led him to envision replacing it with administration, merely the coordination of people and processes according to agreements freely undertaken. For Proudhon, the state is inherently political and coercive, where administration could be conducted according to technical know-how and voluntary consent.

Later still, the sociologist Franz Oppenheimer (1864–1943) revived this idea and articulated a very similar distinction between society and state. For Oppenheimer, the true distinction is between two ways to acquire wealth, an "economic means" of productive activity and truly voluntary exchange, or a "political means" of conquest, theft, and exploitation. Oppenheimer argued that states did not originate historically through social contracts or any putatively natural process. Rather they were the institutionalization of violent conquest and subsequent subjugation. This creates what he called the "state idea"—the notion that some people have the right to live off the labor of others through systematic exploitation rather than productive work. The state, in this view, is essentially an institution for the economic exploitation of one group by another, legitimized through ideology and maintained through force.

American society in 2025 still exhibits this fundamental division between the extractive rulers and the productive ruled—this type of abusive relationship is the key to understanding the state. As Kropotkin wrote, "For the federal principle it must substitute the principle of submission and discipline. Such is the stuff of the State, for without this principle it ceases to be State." In addition to being accurate, the conquest paradigm provides lessons on why state power historically serves concentrating rather than distributing systems, democratic rhetoric notwithstanding. Much depends on how one approaches the state. In treating it as an object of veneration and worship, our society has placed the state beyond debate or interrogation. But understood as patterns of behaviors, it is easy to see why the state has not yet been put in the hands of the people: state power cannot be put in the hands or the service of the people because state power is necessarily and always removed from the people. The state exists for this reason, to separate people from power, to make them impotent. It runs contrary to genuine democracy.

One feature of the state's historical character is that it centralizes and absorbs all social functions and responsibilities, crowding out, excluding, and violating perceived rivals. Voluntary associations of all kinds of workers and craftspeople have always been the ultimate targets of the state. There can be no rivals. As Rousseau wrote, "So that the common will may be manifested, there must be no partial associations within the State." The celebrated Austrian-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber echoed Rousseau, but in criticizing the state:

In other words, there may not exist within the State any society which is constituted of various large and small associations; that is to say, a society with a truly social structure, in which the diversified spontaneous contacts of individuals for common purposes of co-operation and co-existence, i.e. the vital essence of society are represented.

Explaining Hobbes' "ultimate meaning," Buber draws on the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who, along with Max Weber and others, founded the German Sociological Association in 1909. The Hobbesian state, says Tönnies, is perfected only when it has the power to control "all the activities of its citizens, if all wills were directed in harmony with a single supreme will. So long as this has not come to pass, society still exists within the State." The completion of the state implies the annihilation of "the last vestige of society." Buber argues that Hobbes made the mistake of

seeing the state and civil society as "entirely identical," despite their origins in opposite principles. The creation of the kind of state power we know today required "a pulverized, structureless society, just as modern industrial capitalism at first tolerated only individuals without the right of association."

The state represents power over and above that which is administratively or socially necessary, excessive, abusive, unneeded power. This is what Buber terms the "political surplus." The size and power of the state demonstrate the strength of this theory of political surplus. Buber drew a famous distinction between "the political principle" and "the social principle." He argued that our "defective differentiation" between the social and the political "goes back to very ancient times" and hides the true character of the system. It hides, for example, that some are rulers and some are ruled, that some own wealth and employ others while some are poor and toil to enrich others. Buber saw that there was in the mainstream discourse a fundamental confusion between these two very different modes of social behavior: one mode is described by the plans and activities free people undertake on a voluntary and cooperative basis, without coercive hierarchies of power, to improve their lives in community with one another. This is the idea that society could administer itself—that people do not need rulers. The other idea is that of the political state, which is a separate, observable phenomenon only insofar as it holds and exercises, as Buber pointed out, more power than is necessary:

All forms of government have this in common: each possesses more power than is required by the given conditions; in fact, this excess in the capacity for making dispositions is actually what we understand by political power. The measure of this excess … represents the exact difference between administration and government" (emphasis added).

The state continues to grow in stature not based on its record of performance, but due to its position in the imagination and its cultural cachet. The political surplus has grown in a positive-feedback cycle, growing from itself in a way that appears to mirror capital's self-reproduction and self-growth. This is among the many reasons that the state is so necessary to capital and vice versa. Capital needs the state's countenance and its grants of permission, privilege and license. And the state continues to consume extraordinary currents of money, tying wealth and power as before.

Functionally and structurally, Buber's politics look similar to anarchism, advancing a decentralized framework of governance and social administration, in which independent local bodies would federalize with one another based on common needs and not to gather power at a distance. The emphasis on federalism and decentralism is common to many anarchist thinkers and it appears alongside and in conversation with the distinction between society and the state. Unlike the anarchists, Martin Buber does not see the need to abolish the political surplus completely. That is, he stops just short of calling for the end of the state. But he shares their sense that community life generally, the provision of public services, and the stewardship of the land and shared resources are far too important to be left to the state and its friends, and thus divorced from the will of the people. From its beginnings and through every unique instantiation, the state has been the practical, social embodiment of removed or alienated decision-making power, of the notion that some people should make decisions for themselves, but others should be ruled arbitrarily by some other individual or group.

Buber's concept of political surplus explains in part why even the most well-intentioned and well-funded state projects are perceived as ineffective, alienating, and obtrusive. They attempt to substitute, using compulsive force, bureaucratic management and administration for the kinds of

direct and personal relationships and voluntary associations that are at the core of healthy and well-functioning community life. For Buber, the state is a source, the chief source, of social and cultural uniformity, centralizing power and influence. While he does not join the anarchists in calling for an end to the state, his thinking on political power does depart significantly from today's mainstream. Buber articulated a vision of decentralized and truly community-based forms of governance, with personal responsibility, dialogue, and community engagement as socially important.

There is an important connection between the idea of the political surplus and the ideas of Leopold Kohr. The argument at the center of Kohr's The Breakdown of Nations is that excessive institutional size is the main driver of political and economic instability and social strife. Kohr believed that the concentration of power at certain sizes and scales would lead to problems regardless of the formal designation of the political and economic system—that is, both capitalist and socialist states would produce these problems and contradictions once the necessary conditions were met through institutional scale. Kohr appreciated what few political "experts" can see today, that as a practical matter, the size and power of the state overwhelm and drown out ideology; he argued "that everything works on the small scale," that the conversation about socialism and capitalism abstracts from real-world considerations of power and entirely misses the point.

Kohr theorized that when the state achieves a certain size and power, it undergoes a kind of phase transition. The character of the system changes qualitatively, exhibiting new properties not observed at the smaller scales. At the same time, increasing size means that we can no longer see inside the machinery; its internal structure and dynamics are hidden from our view. This opacity is incompatible with a self-governing and democratic society where the people are truly sovereign. Present-day state size and capacity lead to a contradiction: the legitimacy of a democratic government exists, if it does at all, in the informed consent of the governed. At these scales, it is impossible for us to consent to the system, even if we wanted to. We don't understand it. It would be impossible to either give informed consent or to participate.

Analogies to the physical world help elucidate Kohr's size theories about the state. As a sphere gets larger, both its surface area and its volume grow, but not at the same rate. The sphere's volume growth outpaces the expansion of its surface area. At a smaller scale, society is like a smaller sphere with a higher surface-to-volume ratio, where it remains possible for more of its members to remain in direct contact with one another. They solve problems in a different way because they are self-directed and confront issues close to their communities, where they have high degrees of local and specific knowledge. Power in the sense of agency is diffused throughout the system. Power in the sense of domination leaks out almost entirely, as society and the administration of social life replace the state. The leaders of large states are far removed from everyday life, insulated from it, with extremely limited and biased information. Local issues and needs are easy to ignore because they are invisible and, in a true sense, unknowable to such distant elites. At these larger scales, the state apparatus can be even less sensitive to the needs of the people, more absorbed in the project of expanding the power of its influence by stretching its rigid bureaucracies into every corner of life.

Kohr's emphasis on size also gives us new points of entry to the question of the state's origins. Liberal economists have, at least on paper, been able to notice the connection between warmaking and political and economic centralization. Kohr cites the economist Henry Calvert Simons, called the "Crown Prince of the Chicago School," for the argument,

War is a collectivizing process, and large-scale collectivism is inherently warlike. If not militarist by national tradition, highly centralized states must become so by the very necessity of sustaining at home an inordinate, "unnatural" power concentration, by the threat of their governmental mobilization as felt by other nations, and by their almost inevitable transformation of commercial intercourse into organized economic warfare among great economic-political blocs. There can be no real peace or solid world order in a world of a few great, centralized powers.

Kohr accepts the principles of voluntary cooperation, mutual aid, and federalism, but he claims that these kinds of social practice can only flourish within appropriately scaled communities and institutions. Kohr would say that the authoritarian principle triumphs not because it is truly superior, but because large scale invariably favors centralized, hierarchical organization regardless of the original intentions of the people involved. He also believed that the committed maintenance of small scale would act "as an automatic stabilizer," with each polity having retained too much power and autonomy to be eaten up by the others.

In Kohr's thought are several important parallels to that of the famous aristocrat-turned-anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who said, "State is synonymous with war." Kropotkin deliberately placed himself at odds with the mainstream interpretation of the pathway into modernity, treating the medieval period not as the dark age we often find in standard historiography, but as a period of the relatively organic flourishing of federalist principles and small-group autonomy. He was keenly interested in the medieval communes, guilds, and free cities that emerged across Europe. Kropotkin drew a contrast between these more horizontal modes of organization and what he termed the Roman principle. For Kropotkin, Rome's imperial legacy was its model of political and economic organization, which emphasized centralized authority, hierarchical command structure, and consolidated territorial control through uniform laws imposed from above. Kropotkin believed that decentralized free association, where groups retain autonomy and self-governance within a balanced and pluralistic system, produces a different kind of society and different kinds of people and social consequences. Such a society orients us toward different values: equality, freedom, solidarity, and community.

Kropotkin sees the modern period as representing the "double indoctrination, of the Roman jurist and the priest." This dual spirit of authoritarianism, he argues, replaces the commune's ideal of free initiative and association with "the spirit of discipline, and pyramidal authoritarian organization." The medieval communes as we find them in Kropotkin represent both a robust "affirmation of the individual" and a dynamic "negation of the unitarian, centralizing Roman outlook." Kropotkin sees centralized state power and bureaucracy as stultifying social life and as enabling the violence and parasitism of a new ruling class.

He finds the state at the center of the centuries-long transition into modernity that witnesses the gradual disappearance of alternatives or rivals to centralized government power. If Kropotkin has been criticized for presenting an overly sanguine picture of the social organizations of the medieval period, he nonetheless articulates a set of important observations about the rise of the state and its growing role in social and economic life. Kropotkin said that he wanted to present a study of the state "in its essence," arguing that "the question of the State" divided socialists more than any other. Kropotkin sees centralized political power as historically inseparable from and giving rise to the domination and functional enslavement of the poor. He recognizes that the power of capital is sourced in the power of the state. Challenging the myth that the decentralized communal system of the Middle Ages died a "natural death," Kropotkin recounted the massive

transfers of land as real property was "simply taken over by the nobility and the clergy under the aegis of the State."

Thinking about this transformation process through the lens of Buber's political surplus throws a flood of light on our current situation. Buber's idea of the political surplus deserves to be far more influential today. As a social and cultural fixation, the political surplus takes on a life of its own and ensures the growth of the state. The state succeeds not through a record of demonstrated effectiveness, but via cultural momentum and self-reinforcing accumulation of power. We seem to have lost the ability to even imagine a world without some special group arbitrarily ruling over everyone, so they interpret the absence of the state as chaos. In fact, the violence, disorder, and chaos are outside your window today. We live in a sick, disordered society that cannot imagine peace and order without finding them in their opposites.

Americans of both parties or no parties are bound to be horrified at the direction fascism takes in the years to come. We are not ready to defeat it because we haven't understood it. Authoritarianism is in the nature of large and hierarchical institutions; it is defeated when they are dismantled and replaced. The international relations scholar and anarchist Alex Prichard wrote that federalism is a way of seeing the world as much as a theory about how to reorganize it. It presupposes a certain ethical value, "the rejection of formal hierarchies and centres of power." Unless and until we rediscover this value, we will be stuck with authoritarian rule and its inequalities.

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Retrieved on July 10, 2025 from https://dsdamato.substack.com/p/federalism-and-the-left

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