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Mutualism and the State

Kevin Carson

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Pierre Ducasse has some kind words for mutualism as a form of social and economic organization. He goes on to add:

However, I still believe that all trends of anarchism underestimate the necessary roles of the State. Even in a grass-root, cooperative economy, we would still need to offer public services like health and education, redistribute some income, regulate the market, protect common good like the environment, apply macroeconomic policies. Nothing can convince me that these aspects can be held by any other organization than the State. Unless anybody could provide historical examples...

Unfortunately, historical examples are pretty thin on the ground. Since the rise of the state five thousand (give or take) years ago, that portion of humankind organized on the basis of city life, division of labor, and complex forms of production has, for all intents and purposes, lived universally under the government of territorial states. Of course, that same portion

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of humanity has also lived in exploitative class societies. Think there could be a connection? Anyone who points to the lack of historical precedents for an advanced society living without a state as evidence of its impracticality, it seems, is hoist on his own petard. One can argue on identical grounds that, because it has never existed hitherto, a complex society *cannot* exist in which the producing classes are not milked like cattle for the support of parasitic ruling classes.

To take Ducasse's objections individually, however, there is no logical reason that any of the functions he mentions requires a state. The supposed necessity for a state to remedy diverse evils, indeed, is to a large extent the direct result of conditions created by the state in the first place. Without the state's current redistribution of income from producers to landlords, capitalists and bureaucrats, the polarization of income that prompts calls for "progressive" redistribution wouldn't have arisen to begin with. And in a society without extremes of wealth and destitution, the vast majority of people would have the means to organize their own health and education services. Besides that, in a society where producers kept their full product and lived in decentralized, organic communities and extended families, social networks would likely exist to provide charitably for those few who were genuinely incapable of producing for themselves. As Joe Peacott argued in "Individualism and Inequality,"

...economic inequality would not have the same significance in a non-capitalist anarchist society that it does in today's societies.

The differences in wealth that arise in an individualist community would likely be relatively small. Without the ability to profit from the labor of others, generate interest from providing credit, or extort rent from letting out land or property, individuals would not be capable of generating the huge

quantities of assets that people can in a capitalist system. Furthermore, the anarchist with more things does not have them at the expense of another, since they are the result of the owner's own effort. If someone with less wealth wishes to have more, they can work more, harder, or better. There is no injustice in one person working 12 hours a day and six days a week in order to buy a boat, while another chooses to work three eight hour days a week and is content with a less extravagant lifestyle. If one can generate income only by hard work, there is an upper limit to the number and kind of things one can buy and own.

More important, though, than the actual amount of economic inequality between individuals is whether the person who has more wealth thereby acquires more power or advantage over others. In a statist world, one can buy political favors with one's money and influence government action affecting oneself and others. This would not be an option in an anarchist society since there would be no government or other political structure through which individuals or groups could coerce others and use their greater wealth to further aggrandize themselves through political means, as happens in a society of rulers and subjects...

As for those who produce little or nothing because of some disability, there are other means of providing for the less fortunate than communal economic arrangements. There is a long tradition of groups of individuals taking care of sick, injured, and otherwise incapacitated people through voluntary organizations from friendly societies to cooperatives of various sorts to trade unions. People

who value private property are no less benevolent than those who favor free collectives, and would figure out any number of ways to care for those in need of assistance from others.

Although there is no example of a stateless society in historic times, there are many examples of exploited and impoverished workers, even left with only a fraction of their labor-product, nevertheless managing to carry out mutual aid on a monumental scale through voluntary associations of various sorts. The working classes' self-organized "welfare state" has been described, variously, by Kropotkin, Colin Ward, E.P. Thompson, and David Beito. Imagine what they could do in a society where labor kept its full product!

The same principle goes for regulation of the market. The evils that call for regulation are mainly creations of the state itself. The state, by subsidizing the centralization of the economy in large corporations, has promoted demographic mobility and social atomization to pathological levels. Without such centralizing tendencies, a much larger portion of production and exchange would take place in decentralized markets regulated by custom and face-to-face relations. The boom-bust cycle that macroeconomic policy is adopted to regulate, likewise, results from the state's policies. The smaller and more decentralized the market, the more stable and predictable it is from the standpoint of those participating in it; as commodity markets become larger and more anonymous, the harder it is for producers to tie their output to the stable consumption patterns of a market known to them personally. And the pattern of overproduction- underconsumption that causes the business cycle, likewise, is a result of the divorce of labor from consumption. Because the state transfers a part of labor's product to parasitic classes, as J.A. Hobson described it a century ago, levels of output are divorced from consumption. When labor fully in-

the state lost its defining characteristics. The state would cease to impose its services on unwilling consumers, or to assess taxes on those not willingly relying on its services; and it would cease to prevent non-members from establishing their own voluntary arrangements to provide the same services. But aside from its loss of the power to initiate force for the “general welfare” of the community, and to collect taxes from the populace at large, the successor organizations might well perform their functions in ways reminiscent of the old state. Mutual defense associations might continue to serve a majority of the community who willingly purchased their services, even operating on the basis of a jury system and posse comitatus, and to enforce libertarian law and safety codes against those whose actions threatened or harmed the membership. They would coexist with smaller protection agencies organized in competition with them, with neighborhood watch groups, and individuals who preferred to rely entirely on their own ability to defend their homes. The only cases in which they could act against non-members would be when their membership was harmed or genuinely threatened.

There is, therefore, no reason that a libertarian law code, enforced by the juries of a local defense association, could not prohibit and punish pollution or other harmful acts, without taking on the nature of a “state.”

ternalizes both the costs and benefits of production, its output will reflect its judgment of its own consumption needs.

As for the environment, most pollution takes place at present because the state protects polluters from internalizing the cost of their own malfeasance. Much (if not most) pollution is committed either by the government itself, or on government land by politically connected corporations given preferential access to that land with minimal oversight. In addition, the power of local juries to enforce the common law of public and private nuisances has been preempted and supplanted by a much weaker regulatory state. Those corporate hog farms might find it much harder to operate if the residents of a county, acting through the free jury of their local defense association, could impose heavy civil damages on it for fouling their wells and stinking up the surrounding area. I expect that such damages would be much more severe than the fines imposed by the EPA.

To sum up: in virtually every case Ducasse mentions, the problem is currently made worse by the state. So we can say, perhaps half-facetiously, that even if abolishing the state would not solve income inequality, pollution, the healthcare and education crises, it is at least a step in the right direction.

In the comment thread, Larry Gambone adds that the abolition of the state is a long-term goal, and a direction in which to move:

...few, if any anarchists these days believe the state will be abolished in one go. In fact, the complete abolition of the state is an ideal and is therefore something that might not ever come about – the anarchist is someone who seeks to minimize statism and maximize voluntary, cooperative, self-managed and communitarian efforts and doesn't really worry too much about the distant ideal.

As Gustav Landauer argued (see Larry's article on him), the gradual abolition of the state and its replacement by voluntary associations is something to be done one step at a time, as it becomes feasible.

Martin Buber, using Landauer's conceptions, explains how the State "overdetermines" the amount of coercion in a society. People living together at a given time and in a given space are only to a certain degree capable, of their own free will, of living together rightly; ...the degree of incapacity for a voluntary right order determines the degree of legitimate compulsion. Nevertheless the de facto extent of the State always exceeds more or less — and mostly very much exceeds — the sort of State that would emerge from the degree of legitimate compulsion. This constant difference (which results in what I call "the excessive State") between the State in principle and the State in fact is explained by the historical circumstance that accumulated power does not abdicate except under necessity. It resists any adaptation to the increasing capacity for voluntary order so long as this increase fails to exert sufficiently vigorous pressure on the power accumulated...

As voluntary associations take over the work of the state, workers have an ever-greater portion of their labor-product available for their own cooperative social services, and the populace recovers habits of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid atrophied under centuries of social atomization at the hands of the state, it will be possible to scale back the state's functions incrementally.

Pierre Ducasse, in response, denied that the abolition of the state could be even an ultimate goal or an ideal. "In any society,

we need central institutions of power: and I'm still waiting to be convinced otherwise. The question is what kind of State we want, not if we want a State at all."

I'm not sure how Pierre defines the state, or whether his definition coincides with that common among individualist anarchists: an organization which claims the sole right of defining and regulating legitimate force in a particular territory, and of initiating force against non-aggressors for the purpose of promoting the general welfare. (Or, as Poul Anderson described it, an organization that reserves the right to kill you if you disobey its commands.)

But we should be careful to distinguish the state from voluntary associations for mutual defense. The state, uniquely, is characterized by its claimed legal authority to initiate force on behalf of "society." But it is the inalienable right of every individual to take necessary action to defend himself against aggression; and whatever is morally legitimate for the individual acting alone is likewise legitimate for any number of individuals, cooperating voluntarily. The only thing that such associations may not do legitimately is initiate force against third parties "for their own good," or force them to pay for services they did not request. The individual, in the last resort, is the final judge of his own needs for self-defense. He has the right to take use whatever defensive force is necessary, for example, to prevent negligent or dangerous behavior on the part of his neighbor that puts him at risk. For example, the individual has the right to intervene to prevent a neighbor from polluting his groundwater, or using noxious chemicals that drift across their common property line. And since such intervention is legitimate for the individual, it is legitimate for individuals associated for mutual defense to act in concert to prohibit pollution by third parties that presents a genuine threat to their safety and welfare.

Such voluntary associations, as Benjamin Tucker envisioned them, would be successor organizations that remained when