

Leviathan's Body

Recovering Fredy Perlman's anarchist social theory

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Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
(De)Alienation as Practice	5
From Theory to Parody	9
Anarchist Practice and Maximalist Theory	14
Conclusion	17
References	17

Abstract

Fredy Perlman's anarchist maximalism had a formative influence on the movement's post-1960s revival, quite apart from his later and better-known critiques of domestication. Perlman's longneglected books, pamphlets and parodies from 1968–1972 show him championing an anti-vanguardist ethos of direct action and practical de-alienation, while working towards an original and distinctly anarchist social theory of domination. This article traces the influences of Isaak Rubin, C. Wright Mills, and possibly Henri Lefebvre and Peter Kropotkin, on Perlman's thought. Perlman's originality was to generalise a heterodox Marxian critique of social reproduction, including but exceeding productive relations. Thus, he explicitly sets the state in analytical parity with capital, theorising authority as a fetish distinct from exchange value. Implicitly, he points to other containers for alienated powers, including the family, religion and scholarship. Perlman's account of self- and community powers remains incomplete, however, eliding constitutive violence and inviting engagement with current intersectional approaches.

Keywords: Perlman, Fredy (1934–1985); alienation; New Left; power; the state

Introduction

Some Anarchists differ from Marxists only in being less informed. They would supplant the state with a network of computer centers, factories and mines coordinated 'by the workers themselves' or by an Anarchist union. They would not call this arrangement a State. The name-change would exorcize the beast.

(Perlman 1983:5)

The scholarly neglect of Fredy Perlman contrasts sharply with his posthumous legacy. Alongside Noam Chomsky and Murray Bookchin, Perlman was easily the most influential American anarchist writer of his generation, a 'prophet' whose 'penetrating vision cuts across and reveals the essential orderliness and limitedness of his [former two] peers' conceptions of anarchy' (Moore 1995:363). Perlman produced four book-length political works, over twenty articles and pamphlets, two novels, two plays, and (with his Detroit co-operative *Black & Red*) the first English translations of key texts including *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1970), *History of the Makhnovist Movement* (Arshinov 1974) and *The Wandering of Humanity* (Camatte 1975). His richly illustrated, selfprinted works were also a landmark in DIY visual culture, infusing underground aesthetics with its now-familiar mix of Dada, Surrealism and Situationism.

Nevertheless, outside the direct action movement Perlman remains virtually unknown. His work is the focus of a single academic study to date: Mark Huba's (2005) courageous PhD on spiritual politics in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan! (AHAL)* (Perlman 1983). While this mythopoeic opus occasionally resurfaces in discussions of anarcho-primitivism and technological overreach (el-Ojeili and Taylor 2020, Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), Perlman's abundant earlier work has received no sustained treatment. Lorraine Perlman's biography (1989), two graphic retrospectives (Blauvelt 2016, Aubert 2019), and several brief tributes and reviews exhaust the available literature (Poynton 2018, Tucker 2017, Artnoose 2014, Lee 2010, Cohen 2009, Black 2004, Watson 1997, Cafard 1996, Moore 1995).

The neglect is doubly puzzling in view of the last two decades' upswell of interest in all aspects of anarchism, radical aesthetics and the New Left. Even the recent semi-centennial of the French May 1968 uprising, of which Perlman co-wrote the first extended critique (Gregoire and Perlman 1969), did not occasion a revival of interest. To be sure, Perlman's iconoclastic, genrebending oeuvre is easier to approach experientially than analytically. Imaginative prose, blistering parody, and textual collage came to outweigh intellectual commentary in his work, as 'Fredy went from brilliant theoretician to singer, from political activist to intuitive rebel ... approaching those now forgotten archaic rhythms which beat deeply in us all' (Watson 1997:246). Perhaps the very richness and variety of Perlman's expression has stood in the way of critical appraisal, with no help from his own scorn towards academia. Whatever the reason, engagement with his rich output remains as rewarding as it is scarce.

This article focuses on Fredy Perlman's middle-period work (1968–1972), amid the political and intellectual debris of the sixties miscarried revolutions. Over a decade before his ideas were reshaped by rising concerns with genocide, femicide and ecocide, and by his encounter with the indigenous past of the Great Lakes, Perlman was already grappling with the obstinate reassertion of domination and representation through cycles of social upheaval, and with their durability in everyday life. In the process, he began to work towards an original and distinctly anarchist theory of domination as a totality, which could account for diverse human powers' alienation into the hierarchical institutions they reproduce, and by the same token make the case for direct action and immediacy in transformative struggle. Recovered from their diverse stylings, and from under the shadow of his later work, Perlman's essays in social theory can richly inform current anarchist discussions of power and liberation.

Perlman's starting point, which informs his entire body of work, is a critique of alienation as practice. Initially drawn from Marx via Isaak Illich Rubin, and later influenced by the Situationists and possibly Lefebvre, the key to this critique is the concept of fetishism, which stands for the inverted domination of social forms of alienated power over the individuals who reproduce them. Influenced by his activist experiences and by the anarchist histories he read and translated, and taking further selective cues from C. Wright Mills and possibly from Kropotkin, Perlman's breakthrough is to generalise this account of fetishism to include but exceed productive relations. Thus, he explicitly sets the state in analytical parity with capital, theorising authority as a fetish distinct from exchange value. Implicitly, he points to various other containers for alienated human powers, including the family, religion and scholarship. In further identifying direct action with the reclamation of alienated powers, Perlman adds sociological coherence to the anarchist case against representation and for collective autonomy in social struggles.

Perlman's work in the period studied here displays a mix of post-scarcity expectations and critiques of modernity, alongside sustained textual and graphic references to ancient and mythical themes. I must leave it to others to trace these themes to his 1980s critiques of domestication, patriarchy and progress. This is not to discount anarcho-primitivist political expression (el-Ojeili and Taylor 2020), let alone anarchist engagements with early humanity (Wengrow and Graeber 2015, Scott 2017) and critiques of technology (Firth and Robinson 2020). However, my central argument here is that Perlman's earlier and more lasting contribution to the anarchist revival of the last decades is to be found in his *maximalism* – Moore's term for an anarchist critique encompassing not only state and capital but the 'totality of power relations and the ensemble of control structures' (Moore 1998:9), coupled with anarchist practices 'committed to direct action' and experimental alternatives (13). Despite and because of its centrality to the anarchist

tradition, it was this maximalism which Perlman championed, not only against New Left vanguardists but also those anarchists focused on membership and propaganda rather than affinity and action. Perlman refused to call himself an anarchist, or any other -ist except 'cellist' (Perlman 1989:96). However, as we shall see, he often uses the terms 'anarchy' and 'anarchists' with ironic approval, as something feared by state officials and leftist organisers alike, and increasingly deploys an anarchist rather than Marxian political vocabulary. Inasmuch as maximalism has come to (re)define both anarchist practice and readings of the anarchist tradition, it is in large part thanks to Perlman and his followers.

Following a biographical sketch, sections 2–3 below trace the development of Perlman's ideas, with special attention to *Worker-Student Action Committees (WSAC)* and the *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*. Section 4 concludes the interpretative commentary, then moves to a substantive critique. This problematises Perlman's elision of violence in his account of self- and community powers, opening the way for engagement with current intersectional theories. In conclusion, avenues are suggested for further research on Perlman's rich but neglected work.

(De)Alienation as Practice

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Perlman and his family fled the Nazi invasion to Cochabamba, Bolivia and later settled in Kentucky. From 1959 to 1963 he studied at Columbia University and lived in Manhattan with his partner, Lorraine, becoming the printer for the Living Theatre and writing the anti-imperialist play *Plunder*. The couple then moved to Yugoslavia, where Perlman completed his doctorate on rural development policy at the University of Belgrade. Between 1966–69 Perlman taught at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, where the first *Black & Red* pamphlets were published. In May 1968, after teaching a two-week course on economic theory in Turin, he boarded the last train to Paris before the railway lines were closed, and was immediately engrossed in the heady scenes of the French uprising. Perlman soon afterward broke with academia and the couple settled in Detroit. They became part of a co-operative press that printed most of Perlman's works and translations under the imprint *Black and Red*. Perlman's articles in the Detroit paper *Fifth Estate* marked his turn towards ecofeminism and primitivism (Perlman 1979, 1982, 1984), capstoned by *Against His-story! Against Leviathan (AHAL)* and the unfinished novel *The Strait*. Perlman had lifelong health problems, and died following his second heart surgery in 1985 (Perlman 1989).

Perlman's accidental role at the epicentre of the Paris uprising was crucial to his political and intellectual development. In Paris, Perlman 'took part in a loosely-organized group of intellectuals, students and young workers who held discussions at the Sorbonne university's Censier classroom complex and who also tried to communicate their aspirations to auto workers who lived and worked in the Paris suburbs' (Perlman 1989:47). These Student-Worker Action Committees produced several leaflets, one of them calling for 'worker-student unity in the struggle 'to destroy this police system which oppresses all of us''; another promoted uncompromising internationalism and solidarity with foreign workers (Gregoire and Perlman 1969:14; cf. Gordon 2011). During this time he 'learned about ideas and histories which influenced him in the decade which followed: the texts of the Situationist International, anarchism and the Spanish Revolution, the council communists' (Perlman 1989:48). Inspired by the spectacle of the black and red flags

flying side by side over the Sorbonne and the Bourse, he would later make *Black & Red* a main artery for the French-English transmission of anarchist, left-communist and Situationist texts.

Perlman's reports from Paris, written as the events took place, became the first part of *Worker-Student Action Committees*. The further critical discussion was completed in Kalamazoo with Roger Gregoire visiting from Paris. The book is illustrated with many cartoons and graphics from the uprising. The authors located the exemplary nature of Censier occupation in its practical break with the social division of labour: it replaced the university's institutional norms with a selfmanaged structure of working groups and a general assembly; it transformed the building from an authoritative institutional enclosure for specialised knowledge into a site for self-directed creation, reflection and action; and it practically abolished the distinction between 'worker' and 'student' as personifications of social roles. Through this conscious 'process of political dis-alienation' (Gregoire and Perlman 1969:43), the participants for the first time realised their social power in practice.

In contrast, as the Communist Party-controlled unions rapidly move to control the strikes,

the occupied factories are not transformed into places for expression and learning; general assemblies are not formed; workers do not become conscious of their collective power, and they do not appropriate society's productive forces. The appropriation of social power by the working population would have meant the transformation of the entire society into a place for collective expression, a place for active, conscious, de-alienated creation. Such anarchy is averted. (67)

The book contains twelve further positive-ironic uses of 'anarchy' and 'anarchists'. The thrust of the critique, however, points to the Censier occupiers themselves (including the authors), who failed to carry over their practical and cognitive break with alienation to actions outside the occupied space: 'When the people who organized their activities inside an occupied university went to "the workers," either on the barricades, or in the factories, and when they said to "the workers": "YOU should take over YOUR factories," they showed a complete lack of awareness about what they were already doing in the ex-universities' (71, orig. caps.).

In addressing the workers as a specialised sector of society, the occupiers reverted to accepting the dominant social division of labour. Instead of taking direct action on their own behalf, the occupiers chose to defer to the initiative of the factory workers: 'One of the favorite arguments of "anarchists" and "libertarians" at Censier was: "The workers must make their own decisions; we cannot substitute ourselves for them". This is a blind application of an anti-bureaucratic tactic to a situation where this tactic had no application at all' (89).

Since no assemblies were organised in the factories, such deference merely abandoned the field to the Communist unions, rather than autonomously confronting them. Perlman imagines a genuine revolutionary escalation, with thousands invading multiple factories and declaring them social property – not 'on behalf' of 'the workers' but as an act of collective power that transcends alienated social categories. Such an opportunity may have existed early on, but was lost as soon as the Action Committees defined their role in terms of outreach. Subsequent conflicts over institutionalisation, the antics of self-appointed leaders, and the final police clampdown were merely a drawn-out epilogue.

To contextualise this critique, we should turn back to trace Perlman's intellectual formation. Here, the catalyst is easily identified as Isaak Illich Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. Perlman co-translated this book in 1967 (via Serb-Croat) with his former Belgrade supervisor Miloš

Samardžija, adding an original preface (Rubin 1973; cf. Perlman 1970). From 1926 until his arrest in 1931, Rubin had been a Research Associate at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. Forced to implicate the Institute's director, David Ryazanov, in an alleged Menshevik conspiracy, Rubin's actual transgression was ideological (Boldyrev and Kragh 2015). Rubin's value-form approach to capital centred on the reification of abstract labour, and regarded commodity fetishism as the cornerstone of Marx's political economy. This not only ran contrary to Stalinist economism, but was also dangerously applicable to 'a state bureaucracy that purchases alienated labor and accumulates Capital in the name of Marx' (Perlman 1969a:17). Perlman bookended his preface with strident critiques of American college economics, where 'intellectual legislation' excludes political economy and renders Marx illegible (Perlman in Rubin 1973:x). His exposition centres on Rubin's argument that Marx does not discard the concept of alienation found in his early work. Instead, Marx's critique of political economy contains its further development as the theory of commodity fetishism. Rubin does not mention Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which were published in Russian by Ryazanov in 1927 but misidentified as 'Preparatory Work for *The Holy Family*' (Musto 2015:234). Perlman fills an important gap in Rubin's argument by quoting extensively from the *Manuscripts*. He argues that while there is 'no doubt that in 1844, Marx spoke of a human society and a human essence which could be rehabilitated, returned, or restored ... an unalienated, ideal, unhistorical man', after his break with Proudhon in 1859 'the conflict reappears on a new plane ... [not] between ideal and reality, but as a conflict between productive forces and social relations which are both parts of reality' (1973:xxi).

Perlman's accessible presentation of value-form theory, *The Reproduction of Daily Life* (Perlman 1969a), was widely read by New Left students (Cohen 2006:3ff.). Its central argument is that 'the deliberate alienation of living activity, which is perceived as necessary for survival by the members of capitalist society, itself reproduces the capitalist form within which alienation is necessary for survival' (Perlman 1969a:14). Perlman indicates his diachronic view at the very opening, using tribal and slave societies as first examples to illustrate how humans' daily activities 'reproduce the inhabitants, the social relations and the ideas of the society ... the *social form* of daily life' (Perlman 1969a:2; *orig. italics*). Under capitalism, daily activity reproduces wage labour and capital, and people 'reproduce the personifications of the dominant forms of activity under capitalism; they reproduce the wage-laborer and the capitalist' (7). Perlman borrows the term *personification* from Rubin's interpretation of Marx's passing comment in *Capital* v.3 (1966:866) that the capitalist and the landlord 'personify' capital and land. This, according to Rubin, points to the inverted domination of fetishes over the persons whose social relations they mediate, with the result that '*particular individuals are subsumed under the dominant type of production relations ... In this way, the apparent contraction between the 'reification of people' and the 'personification of things' is resolved in the dialectical, uninterrupted process of reproduction*' (Rubin 1973:23–25, *emph. in orig.*). On this reading, alienation is 'neither a feeling nor an idea' (Perlman 1969a:5); 'Men¹ do in fact relate to each other through things; the fetish is in fact the occasion for which they act collectively, and through which they reproduce their activity'. (8–9) To borrow terms from Norman Geras (1971), Perlman's account is clearly one of fetishism as real domination rather than as mystification and false consciousness – a 'constitutive account

¹ This is the last time I could find Perlman using 'man' and 'men' generically. Much more could be written on his increasing use of female pronouns and protagonists, and his later engagement with eco-feminism.

of fetishism in which human social relations constitute external and alien entities that dominate society' (O'Kane 2013:22).

The pamphlet's title echoes Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Lefebvre 2014). According to Lorraine Perlman (personal communication, 2.6.20), 'The book is not in our library and I don't remember Fredy reading it. But he certainly knew about it and the title of 'Reproduction' acknowledges the link'. Whether Perlman read Lefebvre or only Rubin and the Situationists, the similarities are instructive. Lefebvre starts from practical activity and the 'forms of appearance' it assumes under specific historical conditions. He thus views fetishism neither as a property of the fetishised object nor as an individual's epistemological error; instead it is a social category, both abstract and concrete, which in the process of social reproduction 'tends to function as an objectivity independent of men [*sic*] ... both a mode of existence of the social reality, an actual mode of consciousness and human life, and an appearance or illusion of human activity' (Lefebvre 2009a:80–1). Therefore, a break with alienated social reproduction implies not merely a cognitive break, but the deliberate practice of different social relations. This was the basis for Lefebvre's explicitly pro-anarchist support for *autogestion* (self-organisation), which along with its inherent anti-statism 'tends to restore primacy to use value. It 'is' the use value of human beings in their practical relations', valorising them 'against the world of the commodity' and pointing to a radical contestation of both capital and the state (Lefebvre 2009b:148).

Returning to the Action Committees, we can now see how Perlman concretely applies this approach to assess them in terms of their (limited) practical break with alienation. In doing so, he is effectively using value-form theory to formulate the hallmark anarchist principle of unity between means and ends. While such unity can equally be framed in terms of virtuous practice (Franks 2020) or path dependency (Gordon 2018), Perlman ties it to a specific explanatory account of social reproduction. On this view, de-alienation is at the same time the overall aim of social transformation *and* the essential quality of practices in its furtherance. While based on a heterodox reading of Marx, and notwithstanding Perlman's criticism of the 'anarchists' and 'libertarians' at the occupied Censier, his argument promotes the same ethos of direct action which anarchists associate with terms like prefigurative politics or concrete utopia.

Importantly, we also begin to see Perlman generalising fetishism beyond value-form categories. Early on in *WSAC*, he explicitly distinguishes between four forms of alienation and the divisions they sustain (39–40, my paraphrased summary):

1. Alienation of political power by all members of society, and its appropriation through election, inheritance or conquest, by a specialised ruling class (division into rulers and ruled);
2. Sale of productive labour by producers and its purchase by capitalists (bosses and workers);
3. Alienation of reflective activity to a specialised corps of 'intellect workers' (thinkers and doers, students and workers); and
4. Alienation of creative activity to 'artists' (creators and spectators).

The account does nothing to assign analytical primacy to component (2), and thereby points away from the orthodox Marxist privileging of production and proletarian agency. It could be said that, for Perlman, since de-alienated practice cannot be grounded in the fetishised social categories which it no longer reproduces, during revolutionary transformation both ex-students

and ex-workers are equally members of a class in self-abolition (cf. Proletarios Revolucionarios 2020).

From Theory to Parody

Direct action was also central to the first *Black & Red* pamphlets, published by the Perlman in Kalamazoo. Issue 2, a critical report from the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago (Perlman 1968a), commends the Yippies' occupation of a public park: by 'organizing their own activities without orders or permission, without compromise or negotiation', they 'acted out' their freedom in reclaiming public space and thereby 'ceased to recognize the legitimacy of the state' – drawing out its violence. In contrast, the failures of student organising are lampooned in Issue 4, *We Called a Strike and No One Came* (Perlman 1968b). At the printing press, Perlman began to discover many new graphic possibilities, and his work would now rapidly move away from conventional textual formats. *Strike* is a case in point: a 46-page A5 collage-comic, with speech bubbles coming from the mouths of figures in renaissance paintings, grotesque sculptures, and white men in suits.

This 'Allegorical Epic with Footnotes' (1) is loosely inspired by *Paradise Lost*, and narrates a botched student organising effort as the latest round in a cosmic struggle between Satan and God. Satan's avatars discover that God means to re-establish his slipping power by abandoning Christianity and appropriating Satan's gift of Reason; he will 'herd men into rationally organized institutions where each does the work established by Authority' (5). Failing that, he will bring about Doomsday. God, portrayed as Clark Kent and Superman, then introduces his own essence as 'the social relation of Authority and Submission ... any relation between Rulers and Ruled' (10). He promises to disrupt the plans of Satan's followers, who 'on the verge of absolute negation, of freedom ... will only use this freedom to enslave themselves anew' (12). As it transpires, the new SDS chapter draws a circus of hippies, liberals and Leninists. They call a strike but dismiss the avatars' proposals for concrete actions in preparation, and on Doomsday end up marching through the administration building yelling 'Strike! Strike!'. God concludes:

Even thine own avatars...could barely pass from the word to the deed. And as for the rest ... I have 'til now kept from them the knowledge of their power ... Yet am I not satisfied. For well do I know that My Time draws to a close. Well do I know that the elimination of scarcity foreshadows the elimination of Authority. Well do I know that I cannot long continue to keep man ignorant. (45)

This sense of technological optimism sits alongside the comic's immersive mythological framing, predating *AHAL* by 15 years. *Strike!* is much more playful, but also significant in terms of Perlman's political language and affinities. He uses comical archaisms (God to Satan: 'Thou grooveth, but thou diggeth me not') but also the archaism of capitalising nouns to highlight key concepts such as Authority, Submission, Reason, Bureaucracy, Power, Scarcity, Fear, Law and

Order – all associated with the anarchist lexicon. Also striking is God's grotesque restatement of the Ten Commandments under four headings: Religion (unquestioning acceptance, normalised hypocrisy, no depiction of a sense of community); The State (ageism, killing of 'enemies'); Private Property (sexual privation, minority ownership, dominant regimes of truth); and The Family (women as property; slavish deprivation). The Sabbath is omitted and the tenth commandment

is split in two. Like the keywords he capitalises, and like the example from *WSAC*, these four institutional headings are plainly divorced from Marx's analytical prioritisation of productive relations, which even *heterodoxoi* like Rubin and Lefebvre preserve.

Instead, we find Perlman increasingly aligning himself with anarchist accounts of class and domination – specifically those ‘oligarchical’ accounts (my term) whereby several groups concentrate different forms of power through distinctive, if related, institutional structures, none of which enjoys analytical primacy over the rest. Thus Malatesta argues that, in addition to the owning class, the history of conquest and exploitation has also given rise to ‘a special class (government)’, which legalises and protects property but also ‘uses the powers at its disposal to create privileges for itself and to subject, if it can, the owning class itself as well’; and ‘another privileged class (the clergy)’ which ‘as well as serving the interest of the owning class, serves its own; (1899/2014:280). Consider also Kropotkin’s account of the State as ‘The power which was created for the purpose of welding together the interests of the landlord, the judge, the warrior, and the priest’ (Kropotkin 1903:ch.10) – qualitatively distinct concentrations of power which preceded capitalism. The

Perlman’s library contains a read but unmarked copy of the 1969 Freedom Press edition of Kropotkin’s selected works. According to Lorraine (pers.comm. 26.09.20), ‘we may have bought it when we were in London that year ... So I guess my answer would be: ‘It’s likely he read it’. Even if he didn’t the parallels are relevant’.

Perlman’s interest in non-Marxist theories of class and domination is further evident in his last scholarly work, a critique of his former teacher C. Wright Mills titled *The Incoherence of the Intellectual* (1969). Early on, Perlman praises the young Mills for attempting to grasp domination at its root: ‘Mills did not read [Franz] Neumann’s dissection of the Nazi Behemoth as a description of a distant enemy: ‘The analysis of Behemoth casts light upon capitalism in democracies ... he [Neumann] locates the enemy with a 500 watt glare. And Nazi is only one of his names ... Behemoth is everywhere united’. (Perlman 1969b quoting Mills 1942:177).²

However, Perlman argued, throughout his ensuing career ‘Mills the independent revolutionary continues to coexist with Mills the academic cynic’. Thus, ‘Weberian leaders and the leaderless Wobblies occupied separate compartments in Mills’ mind ... [and] never directly confronted each other’ (1969a:np). Alongside his astute critiques of post-war American society, argues Perlman, Mills continued to publish works in positivist sociology which muddle the analysis of these same issues – betraying Mills’s limited understanding of alienation as disaffection, rather than as the daily activities through which people in fact ‘alienate their power to shape their environment’ (1969a:n.p.).

In *Incoherence* we find Perlman engaging with the non-Marxist political sociologies of

Mills’s two contradictory masters, Max Weber and Thorsten Veblen. Perlman finds Mills ‘reverent, ‘objective,’ and uncritical’ towards Weber’s scientism and his appeal to charismatic leadership. Again, Perlman argues, Mills fails to identify alienation as the link between ‘Marx’s emphasis upon the wage worker as being “separated” from the means of production’ and Weber’s view that the ‘modern soldier is equally “separated” from the means of violence; the scientist from the means of enquiry, and the civil servant from the means of administration’ (Mills 2009:88). Yet if

² This compellingly suggests Neumann’s title, and not only Hobbes’s, as inspiration for Perlman’s later choice of ‘Leviathan’. Mills’s statement clearly resonates in the early pages of *AHAL!* where Perlman, strongly impacted by Solzhenitsyn, deliberately erases the distinctions between modern consumer societies, neolithic slave states and the Soviet gulag system

alienation is properly accounted for, this Weberian insight reveals its value. Perlman may well have quoted Mills's further statement that Weber's thereby 'rounds out' Marx's analysis with a 'political and military materialism', and that therefore 'military and religious, political and juridical institutional systems' should be analysed on par with 'the economic order' (85) – thus dislodging productive relations from their analytical primacy in Marx.

In contrast to Weber, Perlman held Thorsten Veblen in high esteem (Perlman 1989:43). Mills (1962:35) had called Veblen 'the best social scientist America has produced, who probably ... was at heart an anarchist and syndicalist', and grouped him with the Wobblies. However, writes Perlman, in *The Power Elite* Mills 'completely obfuscates' Veblen's ethics, and excludes the possibility of transformative social change:

According to [Mills's] files elites make history, and consequently Mills addresses himself to the people characterized by Veblen as 'the noble and the priestly classes, together with much of their retinue,' the 'intellectuals, artists, ministers, scholars, and scientists' ...fragmentary men whose social positions rest on their service to power (1969a:n.p.)

This is again to highlight Perlman's interest in non-Marxist sociologies of class – in this case, Veblen's institutional account which is not ultimately indexed to productive relations. These elements would come closest to a synthesis in the final work considered here, the *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*.

Published under the pseudonym Michael Velli, the *Manual* ostensibly advocates the 'modern model of revolution', namely 'revolutionary organizational ideology, leadership and the struggle for State power' (Perlman 1972, 11). It is the Perlman's most richly illustrated work. The menacing cover features a Balinese fanged dancer and Gothic fonts, anticipating his use of Blake's devouring monster on the cover of *AHAL*. The first chapter ('Generation of Revolutionaries') features nine full-page surrealist collages, in which tanks ride the tiers of Breugel's *Tower of Babel*, a motley religious procession traverses a wall of televisions, and Matisse's *Dance* revolves amid fiery riots at the Capitol. In the second chapter ('Rise to Leadership'), the historiated initial of each of the 62 paragraphs portrays a 'Great Leader', running backwards from the likes of Castro, Dmitrov and

Lenin to Robespierre, Henry VIII, Ceasar, and finally Sargon of Akkad (a key character in *AHAL*). Images of machinery, restaurant food, wasteland and mass murder illustrate the third chapter ('Seizure of State Power').

No less striking is the *Manual*'s use of textual collage. While the first, theoretical chapter is wholly original, the programmatic second chapter is a prank of egregious plagiarism, sequencing hundreds of unattributed quotations from contemporary articles in *New Left Notes*, *National Guardian*, *The Movement*, *Red Papers* and similar outlets. Threaded through these are quotes from three other sources: Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*, Michels's *The Iron Law of Oligarchy*, and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. In the scenarios narrated in chapter 3, Lenin and Mao often speak from the mouths of party officials and lackeys. Only in the second edition was a list of references added, explaining that Velli had 're-constituted the project which unifies these widely dispersed statements' and 'placed them into the single Thought of which each of these ideas is a mere fragment' (263).

Crucially, a third thread in the text – also italicised in the second edition – consists of key sentences from the first chapter that reappear in the next two. Prefixed to blocs of authoritarian

quotations, they recast the latter as a twisted appreciation of the first chapter's original analysis. Hence, I would like to argue that Velli's 'modern model' 'is not merely a parodic mirror of authoritarian trends in the New Left, but the grotesque inversion of Perlman's genuine social analysis; Velli cynically instrumentalises an accurate understanding of fetishised power to develop his totalitarian programme. Chapter 1's consistency with Perlman's evolving ideas, and the powerful case it would otherwise make for anarchist strategies of de-alienation, make this reading compelling. Beneath the irony, we find Perlman advancing a strikingly original critique of authority and the state.

In fact, the *Manual* moves to account for capital and alienated labour only after an account of the state, 'by far the most important' among 'the personifications, embodiments, representatives of society's estranged powers': 'The State is the personification of the power of community, the estranged power of individuals to decide collectively the methods, means and purpose of their social activity. It is the specific office of the State to use all available means to ensure that the power of community remains estranged' (17).

Unlike productive power, whose alienated form of appearance is commodities or money, social or community power is alienated into offices bearing socially legitimated authority. Perlman construes authority as a separate, first-order category of fetish, invested with normative rather than exchange value:

By accepting the legitimacy of an office to wield a specific social power, individuals abdicate their own power over that part of social life ... the office to which the power is abdicated becomes an 'authority' which has the 'right' to wield that power; an individual who does not abdicate the power becomes a 'criminal' who has no 'right' to wield it; all others are obedient, 'good,' and 'law-abiding citizens' to the extent that they exert no power over that part of social activity. (18)

Perlman goes no further to work out the substance of social- or community power absent authority, an issue I take up below. For the moment, I would like to argue that in placing an account of community power, authority-fetishism and the state prior to his account of productive power, commodity-fetishism and capital, Perlman clearly aims to set them in analytical parity. Further evidence is provided by dyadic statements about humans 'abdicating their power of community to the State and their productive power to Capital'(19); 'wielding the estranged human powers represented by money and wielded by offices'(29); and living in a society where 'estranged power of community – the State, government – is experienced as the only real community. Estranged productive power – Capital, money – is experienced as the only real productive agent' (29).

This points away from any view of the state as auxiliary to productive relations, whatever relative autonomy it may possess. Instead, the state is a first-order domain of alienated power, an institutional container that cannot be reduced to its role in enforcing owner-worker relations. Moreover, while Perlman continues to use the term 'personification' to denote the subsumption of individuals by dominant social forms, he explicitly dissociates the fetish of authority from the Marxian material base:

complete types, perfect embodiments of the ruling behavior, can be found in activities which are physically separated from society's productive forces, which are geographically quarantined: the activities of artists, independent 'professionals', full-

time political organizers, and particularly the activities of members of the political and educational hierarchies (25).

Perlman goes further to argue that the state, as a domain for estranged power, is not only older than capital but also poised to succeed it in dominance over production. This portrays capitalism as a 'brief digression from the normal histories of civilizations' (35). As evinced by the examples of colonialism, Meiji Japan, the USSR, and post-colonial socialist states, it 'becomes possible to institute the central relations of Capital accumulation directly by means of State power, without recapitulating the historical development of capitalism' (42). In the West, the 'seizure and consolidation of the estranged power of community, the State, has become the form of development of productive forces in conditions where earlier forms of Capital accumulation ceased to perform their historical task' (43).

For the sake of stability and order, the development of productive forces must be controlled, obstructed, reversed. The cornucopia of technological progress ceases to give rise to hopes and increasingly spreads vague fears. Behind the productive forces slouches a rough beast, its hour come round at last, ready to loose mere anarchy upon the world. (36)

Hence, the role of the vanguard is not to promote a transition to communism, but to *interrupt* it – instating a totalitarian state which then takes over the production process itself, along with all aspects of life. The anarchist reading of the vanguard party as a totalitarian state-in-waiting is thereby cynically embraced in Chapter 2, describing how the organisation and its leader should appropriate the militants' estranged self-powers.

The problem, however, is that workers in advanced capitalist countries are the ones least inclined to follow party militants. In their daily contact with the means of production, modern workers 'are expected to be simultaneously automatic and imaginative, simultaneously obedient and creative' (240). This drives their anarchic ferment, manifest in 'absenteeism, sabotage, wild-cat strikes, occupations of productive plants, and even attempts to dismantle the entire social order...a growing resistance to State power...refusal to alienate productive activity...rejection of specialization' (239; cf. Zerzan 1988). Thus, Chapter 3 narrates the misadventures of party organisers who offer their leadership to insurgent workers and communities who are already reclaiming their self-powers, passages acclaimed as 'comic skits in the finest tradition of Sid Caesarism and Groucho Marxism' (Black 2004). Hence Velli's brazen stratagem: when '*a revolutionary upsurge takes place the revolutionary leaders must take power at once – otherwise a wave of real anarchy may become stronger than we are*' (137, italics quoting Lenin 1917:234). Twisting Perlman's analysis, Velli writes that state power should be seized:

when people are on the verge of independence, when they reach the frontier ... and temporarily recoil. It is the moment when all the official authorities have been *sprung into the air*, but when society's individuals have not yet actively appropriated the powers they had vested in the deposed authorities' (184; italics quoting Marx and Engels 1848).

Anarchist Practice and Maximalist Theory

So far, we have seen how Perlman's encounter with anarchism not only informed his anti-authoritarian politics, but also enriched his social theory. In between the lines of his parodic critiques of vanguardist politics, Perlman was developing an account of domination as a totality, casting fetishism as a general dynamic with explanatory force towards several domains of estranged powers: notably the state and capital but also, implicitly, the family and religious and intellectual institutions. Exceeding Marxian materialism, Perlman suggests a differentiated account of *power* as the basis for social critique – reflecting not only his critical debt to Veblen and Mills, but also his growing engagement with anarchism, whose ideological core concepts he increasingly employs (cf. Franks, Jun & Williams, 2018). At stake here is Perlman's generalisation of Marx's key insight on alienation as practice, with labour no longer the explanatory cornerstone but only a special case of *power*, whose diverse forms are alienated through interlinking regimes of domination and the institutions that reproduce them.

Perlman would never offer a more systematic account of his political sociology, and the conceptual apparatus of power, alienation and personification echoes but faintly in his later work. Indeed, as Huba (2005) convincingly argues, the spiritual politics of *AHAL* is framed by a quasi-Manichean dualism. While the initial description of Leviathan makes plain its reliance on human operators, it is also portrayed as a terrifying alien power, unstoppable in its race towards planetary conquest and extinction. For all its force, this one-directional, overpowering account – chiefly indebted to Jacques Camatte's concept of the 'flight of Capital' (cf. El-Ojeili 2014) – moves away from Perlman's earlier approach to fetishistic reproduction and its potential dissolution in practice. As a result, the question of social transformation is re-posed across the impassable strait between humanity's Edenic origins and the wasteland of civilisation. Perlman ends up identifying revolutionary rupture with ecstatic rapture, an escape from domestication into wildness.

Black (2004) thus finds in the *Manual* 'not much anticipation of the critique of civilization' in *AHAL* and *The Strait*. This is certainly the case regarding technological progress. Echoing God's concerns in *Strike*, Velli warns that independent workers who 'sow the seeds of anarchy' would 'spread with the continuing development of the productive forces' (1974:249–250). Yet already in the *Manual* this post-scarcity teleology is set up to be interrupted by the authoritarian vanguard, allowing the state to resurge in its archaic form. Indeed, the *Manual* already shows Perlman's long view of hierarchical civilisation, and in particular his focus on the state's ancient and inherent tendency to colonise and territorialise – another possible debt to Kropotkin's writings on the Russian Empire and early-modern state formation in Europe (cf. Kinna 2016: ch.4; Ince 2012). I would also suggest that the abundance of ancient and mythical themes in the *Manual* are Perlman's indication of the diachronic generality of his social critique, valid across time just as it is valid synchronically across the totality of institutional concentrations of alienated human powers. Finally, the central theme of capitulation to estranged powers returns to drive the narrative of *AHAL*, where a succession of anarchic rebellions are upstaged by *coups d'état*, while indigenous peoples take up the logic of domination even as they resist invasion.

In general, there is more continuity than disjuncture between Perlman's earlier and later work than some of his primitivist followers might suggest. By the same token, however, his influence on contemporary anarchism should by no means be limited to primitivist currents. While his later writings were part of the Detroit paper *Fifth Estate*'s turn towards a critique of

the megamachine (Millett 2018; cf. Watson 1981), Perlman's earlier works and translations had far broader impact. The maximalist critique of domination across regimes and institutions, and the coupling of revolutionary politics with a commitment to collective and individual dis-alienation, successfully reflected the intersecting grassroots mobilisations of the 80s and 90s, and became the discursive boundary between anarchism and the Marxist and liberal left. By the time the alter-global movement was in full swing, 'post-left' anarchists had also turned this critique on anarchist platformism, syndicalism and social ecology (Black 1998, Moore 2016, Jarach 1999, Landstreicher 2002), raising tensions that endure to this day. Therefore, although critiques of domestication do remain central to eco-anarchism and total liberation agendas, these build on Perlman's earlier and more basic articulation of anarchist maximalism as such, which is at the core of the recent decades' anarchist revival.

So much for a contextual interpretation of Perlman's work. In the rest of this section, I would like to shift to a more analytical approach, and problematise Perlman's model of power and how it ends up eliding constitutive violence. Returning to the dual model in the *Manual*, we find two distinctive forms of power (productive and community) with two distinctive fetishised forms (commodities and offices), representing two distinctive values (exchange and legitimation) and thus part of two analytically distinctive domains (capital and state). In both cases, it is daily practical activity (work and obedience) which reproduces these powers' estrangement, abdication or alienation. One problem with this account is its incompleteness. While neatly constructing the above parallel, it remains silent on which (other) powers are alienated in the reproduction of the family and religious/intellectual institutions – both of which seem to require equal consideration on Perlman's view. Hence, it offers no grounds for a first-order analysis of either patriarchy or ideological production.

More significantly, however, there is a basic conceptual problem in Perlman's account. While productive power is alienated through the labour process, what he says is alienated into the state is community power, 'the power of individuals to decide collectively the methods, means and purpose of their social activity' (1972: 17). However, in Perlman's terminology, productive power is a *self-power* which the individual continues to wield in practice, even if it is alienated as wage labour, *corvée* or slavery. In contrast, community power is (trivially) wielded by a group, and completely ceases to be exercised once replaced with obedience. Perlman is not very precise here – Velli says state power should be seized 'during the brief moment after the population has expropriated the ruling classes' but before it 'gains confidence in its own self-powers' (184)– the term self-powers now applied collectively, becoming indistinct from community power. Yet the discrepancy goes deeper. Consider that, absent alienation, the 'methods, means and purpose' of social activity determined through community power would also cover how *productive* power is organised and allocated. Hence, community power is abdicated just as much in the case of wage labour as it is in the case of legitimated obedience.

At issue is Perlman's substitution of a second-order, coordinative and collective form of power for what should be another first-order, constitutive self-power corresponding to the state. This raises the question: which 'specific social power' (18), other than productive power, does the state contain in its alienated form? Otherwise we are left without a first-order form of power which could be regulated through community power, but which today is alienated specifically as state authority, on par with productive power's alienation as commodities and money. Velli's argument that the state is poised to take over from capital in administering production seems

almost designed to make this problem go away. Compelling as it may have been with the Soviet Union still in existence, this argument only weakens the model's definition.

The answer – which should have perhaps been obvious to Perlman – is that authority specifically masks not the capacity to organise life (which commodities do as well), but the capacity to kill and injure. While State power is always entangled with the productive process, its distinct content lies not in its coordinative functions but in the violent force that underwrites its commands. Perlman, who is keen to emphasise daily reproduction, ends up side-lining violence from its constitutive role:

Although many of the commands of a personification are enforced by violent means, the granting of legitimacy is not the result of coercion. If the power of a personification rested on violence alone, the personification would not need to be legitimate to realize its commands... Violence accompanies the power wielded by a personification, but does not make the personification legitimate. (18)

Indeed, violence does not produce legitimation. But it also does more than to 'accompany' it – violence is the institutionalised physical force that underwrites obedience, and which emerges in the face of resistance to coercive threats – as the Yippies had exposed. However, by working backwards from powers' fetishised forms, Perlman effectively confuses empirical frequency with analytical order. While legitimation is the most common source of obedience, it is not its ultimate guarantee.

This is not just an anarchist and a Weberian insight; even Engels (in a moment of candour) defines the State as 'the institution of a public force which is no longer immediately identical with the people's own organization of themselves as an armed power ... Officials now present themselves as organs of society standing above society ... representatives of a power which estranges them from society' (1972; pp. 229–230). Within the synthesis Perlman seems to be reaching for, the dyad of productive and community power makes much less sense than one of productive and destructive (or violent) power, regulated either through community power or their respective processes of alienation. Both represent 'an individual's self-powers' (31), regardless of whether the individual wields them within the context of a self-directed community or as part of their function in an alienated process. To the productive-violent dyad we can now add a second, regulative dimension, ranging from full community power to full capture by fetishised social forms.

While this analytical correction may strengthen the conceptual coherence of Perlman's account, the dyadic structure itself is clearly limited: both in scope, failing to account for gender, religion etc.; and in over-definition, its neatness obscuring the entanglements between the powers and institutions it describes. Nevertheless, the discussion above already demonstrates the possibility of treating Perlman's ideological expression as substantive groundwork for a distinctly anarchist political sociology. Directly promoting anti-representational practice, his approach provides anarchists with the rudiments of their own consistent lens through which to analyse institutional concentrations of power, and the regimes of domination that intersect through them. It thus does the double work of explaining the dynamics of power and providing the rationale for a politics of direct action. Crucially, Perlman does not assign analytical primacy to any of these institutions and regimes, thereby inviting synthesis with newer theories of intersectional, reproductive and state power (Pritchard 2021, Angulo 2019, Laursen 2021) as well as decolonial and total liberation agendas (Black Seed 2021; Nocella et al. 2015). Whether such a synthesis can truly inform social struggles remains an open question.

Conclusion

Fredy Perlman's work remains richly available for study. Long due recognition as a nova in the anarchist cynosure is long overdue, this article has only skimmed the surface of his voluminous and varied output. At this time, Lorraine Perlman is preparing the second, unfinished volume of *The Strait* for publication. A great deal remains to be written about Perlman's literary treatment of revolutionary politics and loyalties in *Letters of Insurgents*; about his subsequent engagements with ecofeminist and decolonial critiques; about his conflicted relationship with his Jewish heritage and the Holocaust; and about his rapidly shifting visual language. Perlman's archives, to which I have not had access, may provide new insights into all of these.

Perlman's creative talents were so diverse, and his expressive fount so individual, that he found no reason to specialise. One after another he would master a scholarly discipline or a genre of expression and move on to something else. Had he lived longer he may have found his way back to a more systematic account of his social theory, but given his personal and intellectual transformation this is doubtful.

The hopeful euphoria Fredy felt in 1968 dissipated during ensuing decades, and his eager wish to participate in a collective effort to abolish repressive social institutions went unrealized. His search for an appropriate agency for social change was also unsuccessful. He nevertheless remained committed to these goals both in his personal life and in intellectual projects. He examined, with sympathy and attention, attempts of a variety of resisters; and used his impulses for craftsmanship to produce attractive publications hoping, through them, to communicate with... (in [*Letters of Insurgents* character] Sophia's words) 'his likes'. (Perlman 1989:139)

Today, Perlman's earlier work communicates his sustained concern with our daily reproduction of complex regimes of domination, but also his continued faith in the power of mass uprisings to open the way for community and mutual aid. Both are crucial themes, which should remain in our focus as the planetary collapse continues to unfold. Late as we may be to avoid the biospheric implications of climate change, ecosystem loss and toxic contamination, we can still fight to face these implications within free human societies, based on equality and solidarity.

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