

Anarchism and Pandemics

William Gillis

April 4, 2020

Anarchists face the question:

*Without nations and states wouldn't a free society be especially ravaged by pandemics?
Who would enforce quarantines without rebuilding a centralized institution of violence?*

It's a fair question.

Anarchism isn't about a finite goal, but an unending vector pointed towards increasing liberation. We're not in the habit of "good enough" compromises, we want *everything*. However it's always worth talking about prescriptive or aspirational visions to shake out what is and isn't possible with freedom. "How might we solve this without depending upon the state or relationships of domination?" is always a useful question.

And anarchists should take pause and consider the situation with fearless honesty. While freedom solves many problems very well, there is no law of the universe that it will inherently solve *every* conceivable problem better than alternatives.

No ideology or society will do everything with perfect efficiency. There is no reason to suspect, for instance, that an anarchistic society would be great at industrialized genocide. It is also possible that there are some *legitimate* issues that a state would solve quicker than a free society. Organized and centralized violence is a blunt and destructive tool — but there occasionally problems for which blunt and destructive means excel.

As anti-statists it is our assertion that the inherent *downsides* to the existence of a state vastly outweigh any such positives. These downsides are manifold and many of them are inclined to make a pandemic situation worse.

The nationstate is founded on the twin evils of hierarchy and separation. Nationstates slice up the world's population into separate prisons and impose hierarchies within them.

- This division is self-reinforcing and creates inefficiencies. The nationstate system disincentivizes global collaboration, instead encouraging rivalry as power loci see each other as threats. Nations are disinclined to communicate the entire truth quickly to one another, they are also game theoretically incentivized to exploit many situations of relative weakness. Unlike individual humans who have opportunities for reflective and adaptive agency,

states are ossified masses built upon the suppression of human agency –an institution inherently dependent upon selfish domination is far less capable of defecting from that strategy and truly selflessly collaborating. While some small privileged nationstates relatively removed from fierce geopolitical pressures as well as some larger nationstates attempting to build soft power *may* donate some resources to other nations, there are harsh limits to overall collaboration.

- States must secure the continued existence of their constituent power structures against their own populations. This means lying to their populations and coercing them in ways that prioritizes the maintenance of power over the best interests of the population. These interests partially coincide – a state entirely devoid of population ceases to be – but in no sense do they perfectly overlap. States and their attendant ecosystem of reinforcing power structures frequently have interests that conflict with minimizing the net life lost. Further, even if a state’s long-run survival is entangled with the survival of its population, the desperate psychology of domination bends towards short-term and limited thinking. Rulers are inclined to strategies – thanks to their struggle for power, remove from more rounded experience, and the precarity of the structures they depend upon – that are otherwise out of step with collective survival. And states tend to secure their existence by shaping a broader hierarchical society that pushes this kind of thinking on all scales – eg precarious wage laborers are conditioned into short-term and zero-sum thinking.
- Since a state has a local monopoly on violence it must also calculate overall solutions and impose them sweepingly without a lot of nuance or attentiveness. To maintain its own existence a state cannot fully decentralize many tasks related to the collecting and processing of information. This leaves states relatively disconnected and sluggish. And because states actively work to suppress internal competition there aren’t robust ecologies of social projects and protocols by which a population can pick up the slack. The state atrophies civil society and constrains or enslaves what organizations are allowed.

To summarize: States are sluggish and hamfisted, their hierarchies inherently create incentive structures where power (whether a politician, ruling party, ruling class, or geopolitical contra other nations) interferes with most efficiently saving the population.

Conversely it’s worth noting freedom is quite good at communication, adaptation, and resiliency – societal virtues of significant value in a pandemic.

- The mistake that became Twitter aside, Anarchists are good at building communication networks. In the absence of centralized coercive institutions, societies fall back on more decentralized bottom-up means of networking and reporting. Social freedom inherently implies freedom of information, not just through the absence of censors but via emergent network topologies that avoid centralized logjams. And thus different social mores, norms, habits, associations, and protocols are forced to emerge to fluidly handle news, tracking, alerts, etc. This means critical information doesn’t flow through state monitors or media institutions, but eventually becomes much more natively handled in a decentralized and specifics-attentive way that robustly filters out deception. Rather than relying on dishonest states, or tentatively trying to figure things out in their shadow, a truly decentralized society routes critical information more efficiently.

- Beyond communicating the details of the crisis, anarchists use *information* instead of violence wherever possible to solve social problems. We don't brutally *imprison* dangerous people — we collaborate in watching them and alerting other community members to the risk they pose. This sousveillance is facilitated by information technologies, but it is a continuation of the shame and reputation dynamics that stateless Indigenous societies have long used. "Dave was in contact with someone who tested positive" is a crucial bit of information to relay to the mutual friend who would otherwise have invited him over. Decentralized communication is a matter of granting informed agency to individuals, and it's also the most natural way to apply social pressures towards net positive ends. Where a purely selfish individual might otherwise defect in everyday prisoners dilemmas, the old lady watching him go out in the pandemic from her kitchen window and shouting down that she knows his mom and friends is far more effective at instilling prosocial, positive-sum results and less brutal than a truncheoned gang of pigs beating random joggers.
- Our present society is suffering severe epistemic breakdown. The centralized hierarchical institutions imposed upon us that once held a tight monopoly on claims to knowledge and expertise are clearly rotten, but these zombified dinosaurs continue lumbering even as the flesh falls from their bones. A chaos of conspiracies, grifters, and bubbles of delusion have proliferated because robust antibodies and verification systems haven't had time to grow from the bottom up. But the other half of this is on academia and how it has withdrawn and signed pacts with the existing rulers. When scientific experts aren't captured servants of power — marginal in number, socially isolated, and subverted by the needs of power — more people begin to listen to them. To be truly free science needs to not just be open in the sense of technically operating in the public domain, it must be accessible, rather than walled off in expensive academic ponzi schemes.
- Economic, technological, and infrastructural adaptation is relatively quite hard in a divided, hierarchical and centralized society. To serve the need for control much is ossified into rigid forms and traditions, as well as capturing oversight and twisting it towards the interests of those with power. The freer the people the quicker the processes of discovery, invention, and implementation.

There will always be exceptions. What we are talking about is inclinations to behavior. A free society — particularly a young one with insufficiently developed liberatory infrastructure or habits of organization — might seize up unproductively. A state — particularly one relatively insulated by happenstance from the vicissitudes of its power — might act quickly, openly, and largely for the sake of human life.

In the face of COVID-19 there have been a wide array of responses. A rebel network under siege in Chiapas may not be able to rapidly produce their own ventilators. A technocratic quasi client state like South Korea may see institutional alignment with quick and honest mass testing. These are however statistical exceptions to easily trackable general tendencies.

On the whole COVID-19 has been a dark parable of the dysfunction of power structures and the advantages of freedom.

In a free society the experts issuing initial warnings wouldn't be silenced and suppressed.

In a free society tracking the movement of the infected wouldn't be left to impossibly disconnected and overwhelmed central authorities.

In a free society the production changes needed to quickly build things like testing kits, ventilators, and respirators wouldn't be impaired by closed borders, intellectual property law, as well as rigid and centralized production chains, to give just a few examples.

In a free society the research needed to cure diseases wouldn't be impaired by intellectual property and national secrecy.

In a free society robust bottom-up community safety nets and general economic fluidity would make disruptions easier to weather.

In a free society experts wouldn't be widely distrusted because they wouldn't be systematically enslaved under the boot of self-interested authorities.

In a free society where people are used to the responsibility of personal decisionmaking and have grown accustomed to evaluating risks, experts wouldn't feel the need to transparently lie about things like masks "for the greater good" — nor would people be barred from participating in trials and experimentation.

In a free society enforcement of social distancing wouldn't be arbitrarily and brutally handled by state planners and police, but instead use social pressure via shame and reputation.

Freedom of association isn't just a matter of the fluidity and breadth of our connections, it means having *agency* in who we associate with, it means taking responsibility, rather than having those hard choices taken from us.

Reactionaries like Ben Shapiro think that borders are magic blankets that protect from everything. In response to COVID-19 Shapiro wrote "if we had no countries, we'd all be dead today or in the very near future. Every major country has shut its borders." Similar absurd proclamations are without end in reactionary circles. The state, the nation, are seen as comforting simplicities that inherently wipe away all complexity and danger. If only we had stronger states/borders there'd be no bad things to fear.

Much could be written about this psychology of mewling bootlicking, but I want to focus on the broad notion that borders protect us from pandemics.

It's worth emphasizing from the start that strong borders are a relatively recent invention. No state in history has had non-porous borders. Even massive constructions like Hadrian's Wall and the Great Walls of China were geared towards impeding armies, not absolutely stopping the movement of individuals. While walls are used by states to better enslave their own captive populations, no political border in history has prevented the eventual transmission of pandemics. Absolutist "strong borders" like the USSR tried in vain to completely erect are a science fiction concept, an abstract aspiration — at least as much as anarchist prescriptions. People and materials always slip through. (And we'll always help them.)

Borders at best buy a given nation a little longer to watch a pandemic overwhelm their neighbors before it overwhelms them. With new surveillance and militarization technologies it may well be possible to establish "strong borders" capable of entirely and permanently sealing out a pandemic (that's not air or water borne), but the costs are immense authoritarianism as well as the societal suffering and dysfunction that comes from such. Borders infringe upon freedom to untold degrees and inflict catastrophic social dysfunction.

One might protest "isn't the whole point supposed to be slowing the spread of the virus?" But *productive slowing* isn't measured in relation to the solar rotations, but in relation to the creation of infrastructure, treatments, and cures. It does you no good to slow the arrival of a plague a few months if you don't get anywhere developing and deploying what you need in that time.

The critical processes are scientific and economic, and anything that slows them effectively speeds up the transmission rate. Nothing else matters besides the race between those processes. Borders impede both economic and scientific processes.

A large nation like the US has a large border — and thus a particularly porous border that is very expensive to seal. But in the other direction — as you approach the fascist dream of a patchwork of micronations — you have less economic and scientific capacity on your own. In particular sealing a small nation's borders means curtailing the very same trade necessary for a flourishing and dynamic economy.

Self-sufficiency, internally closed supply chains, localized production, etc, *do* have benefits for resiliency, but they have serious consequences for efficiency. On the far end of this, if we follow certain contemporary fascists' suggestions and retreat to closed ethnotribes of around 150 people, not only is that tribe not going to have full hospital facilities when a pandemic eventually strikes — it's not going to have hospital facilities *at all*, for anything. Such inefficiencies end up killing a hell of a lot more in the long run than a pandemic.

There's an inherent tradeoff here: the more trade a nation tolerates the faster it's possible to mobilize and coordinate rapid production of the equipment, facilities, materials, etc necessary to save lives. But also the faster it will be infected. And once a nation gets breached by infection the growth rate internally is going to be the same global growth rate we'd otherwise see.

The wider our networks of collaboration the more shock absorbent we have overall AND the greater resources we can muster AND the faster we can do it.

The other thing to note is that borders actually provide very minimal and arbitrary prunings of the social graph that don't necessarily line up with what would actually be needed in a given situation to curtail a pandemic.

The connectivity you want severed in a pandemic is not clumsy aggregate clusters but personal interactions. This is where tracing points of contact, carriers, etc, becomes vitally important. Setting up military roadblocks around a city — while cinematic — isn't anywhere near as useful as getting everyone inside that city to temporarily limit their interactions and tracing vectors. Borders-style approaches create arbitrary and capricious kill zones, guaranteeing that regional resources will be overwhelmed, not an efficient reduction of harm.

The reality is that no pandemic in history has looked like zombie films and yet conservatives rush to the comforting reactionary simplicity of the zombie premise. Pandemics are complicated messy things that take expertise and collaboration; nationalism and war promise simple straightforward conflicts with straightforward prescriptions. This is why such infest our media narratives. We like clean, reassuring stories filled with quick "commonsense" fixes. It's easier to imagine a pandemic in war terms with familiar, conventional war solutions.

This is not to say that violence is never justified. Violence may in fact be justified to save net lives in a pandemic. For example using force to stop likely carriers from irresponsibly entering dense populations makes sense, especially early on when containment is still plausible. Many people are not, by default, altruistic. And the mere abolition of nations and states would not be the victory of anarchism. A significant percentage of the population are selfish pricks, pickled in the zero-sum perspective of power. In a pandemic one asshole can kill thousands. Violence can clearly be justified to curtail such actions. But when and if such situations arise in a free society it is unlikely to look anything like the violence of the state.

Reactionaries facilitate slaughter and then present their own slaughter as the only safety. And people who are afraid, who are made precarious, start longing for stability and simplicity at any price.

As with so many things, so it is with pandemics: the state creates problems and then, having demolished or forbidden all other solutions, embraces the few things it actually is good at. The state breaks your legs and then offers you shoddy crutches. It impoverishes you and then provides foodstamps. But that doesn't necessarily mean you should reject foodstamps. A prisoner's first obligation is to escape, and sometimes that means accepting the warden's poisoned meals. There may be pandemic situations while the state still reigns where brutal quarantines are the lesser evil, even while we must acknowledge the longterm poison they represent.

Benjamin Tucker said it a century ago, "The State is said by some to be a 'necessary evil'; it must be made unnecessary."

Fighting to save lives inevitably obliges fighting to destroy the state, and we must be mindful that we don't make that longterm task harder. But strategy is complex, triage is complex. There are no simple pat answers, the state is always our enemy, but it is not always our worst enemy. We mustn't lose sight of how it created and worsened this situation, but that doesn't mean always prioritizing resisting it rather than a virus.

Reactionaries isolate into prisons and fixed traditions. Anarchists build connections and possibility. They have the benefit of one path, we have the burden of having to evaluate many.

That's why so many of them didn't see this coming. And it's why they won't see us coming.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis
Anarchism and Pandemics
April 4, 2020

Retrieved on 2020-04-07 from c4ss.org

theanarchistlibrary.org