

# Beneath The Institutional

## Response To Gelderloos

William Gillis

January 2nd, 2019

Gelderloos complains at length about perceived small misreadings and misrepresentations in my piece warning about skews to “Diagnostic of the Future” but then he engages in a number of such himself. “*They say I claim that fascism should only be critiqued at the institutional level, and never at the ideological level.*”

But note that I made no extrapolations that Gelderloos thinks we should “*never*” talk about the ideology of fascism. What I wrote is that in his piece he casts fascism “in terms of dictatorship — a structure of institutions — rather than as an ideology.” This focus is what I take exception with.

Gelderloos writes,

*What I actually say is that fascist ideology is less important in the historical moment when fascists have little or no elite support than it is in the moment when capitalists and militarists have decided to throw their weight behind it. This is a difficult argument to dispute, which may be why William doesn't engage with it.*

Allow me to enunciate more thuddingly:

This take is not “difficult to dispute” — it’s largely beyond the pale in antifascist analysis because it’s widely recognized as a bad take. Fascist ideology is a pressing threat in a multitude of ways without directly seizing or allying with the capitalist and militarist forces of the establishment. Fascists can pose existential threats to us without “taking power” — either through autonomous extermination campaigns or corruption and derailment of our movements and ideologies — and there are viable myriad pathways to power that don’t lie through winning over establishment capitalists and militarists. When fascists are outside of institutional power their ideological motivations are arguably even more pertinent because this is also usually when they focus on entryism and attempts to ideologically influence other movements. For more you can see sections of this longer piece I wrote on antifascist organizing, arguing against right-libertarians dismissing the threat of fascists outside of establishment power.

Gelderloos’ focus on the establishment capitalists and militarists as critical precisely proves my point. This myopic focus on the establishment power structures relatively ignores the danger of them being bypassed or radically reconfigured.

Gelderloos points out that in the two most prominent historical instances where the most explicit fascists held regime power they morphed much of their ideology to court capitalists. This

is certainly true enough, but it is precisely the contention that Mussolini and Hitler are a somewhat unrepresentative sample of fascism as a whole. There are two far more productive senses in which we might think of “fascism”: as a self-identified movement and as deeper ideological or philosophical position they are attracted around.

The notion that fascism’s capture or alliance with capitalists is central to its definition or function is more commonly found in dusty marxist analyses than anarchist ones, which is no small part of why I recoiled in shock from Gelderloos’ confident assertion. What this theoretical lens does is relatively erase the danger of “anti-capitalist” variants of fascism. Under such an approach a lot of prominent ideological branches of fascism like “national bolshevism” can only be examined as either false fronts or non-fascist. I certainly do not deny that some ostensibly anti-capitalist fascist movements may happily reorient themselves to ally with the capitalists, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it is just as plausible that they will not. We kid ourselves if we believe that every “anti-capitalist” fascist tendency will either not stay true to an opposition to existing capitalists or never take power.

Gelderloos claims that “*fascism’s vision for society must include some kind of dictatorship*” and in order to back this claim he has to dismiss variants of fascist ideology that endorse decentralization as mere illusions propagated by the fascist masters to mislead their rube followers. Let me be honest: this is a horrifyingly misguided and dangerous misunderstanding of the situation that makes me sick to my gut. I’ve publicly fought to expel things like “national anarchism” and neoreaction from anarchist, leftist, and libertarian spaces for over a decade and the inability to recognize the sharp danger such pose makes me afraid for the future of anarchism.

While there are certainly places where Gelderloos’ dismissive picture is true — many instances of “leaderless resistance” are indeed nothing more than an array of henchmen being used by fascist leaders with aspirations to dictatorship — it is also the case that decentralization has become sincerely ideologically core to different branches of the fascist ideological tree. Segregation, extermination, and the toxic stew of traditionalism and “community” are unique threats that do not require dictatorial political structures. It shocks me that anyone could take a look at today’s archipelago of fascist ideologies and not see severe dangers outside the blueprint of seizing state power via making nice with the capitalists. To ignore things like “national anarchism,” neoreaction, or the variety of fascist-libertarian hybridized movements is folly.

Yes, if institutional power and dictatorship were provided on a platter for many of these movements, most would abandon part of their ideology and seize it. But there is often strength to their ideological commitments and their strategies often avoid pursuing institutional power altogether, and so are unlikely to be in a position where they are handed it.

Fascists that support decentralization and or anti-capitalism pull directly and explicitly from fascist history, identity, and ideologues. Gelderloos’ dichotomy of dictatorship and democracy would place them firmly on the side of democracy, but that in no sense diminishes their standing as fascists and it would blind us to attempt that reduction.

Definitions of fascism are just as notoriously diverse and contested as definitions of “anarchism,” “liberalism,” and “socialism.” Do we define things in terms of “historical movements” or explicit ideologies? Is there space to evaluate implicit philosophical commitments? How should we balance being honest about self-identification and extrapolating very clear cut commonalities or cloaked entryism? These are all legitimate discussions. Many authors have pointed out that, beyond the core hyper-nationalism, fascism involves a cluster of different associated positions, but not necessarily every one of them. Anti-semitism for example is very common in fascism,

but fascists are still fascists if they don't have that aspect. An honest evaluation of the fascist ideological and social landscape today would have to place "dictatorship" as one of these common but not essential characteristics. In my various writings on the subject I've frequently defended a two-tier notion of fascism: the first a series of political positions centered around nationalism, the second a philosophical position with some derivations centered around power, the cluster of positions around each are important — things like palingenesis and anti-modernism, but very numerous (dictatorship being one of them). The result is something a lot like concentric rings or degrees of fascism. Gelderloos snorts, "So... *Winston Churchill was a fascist?*" and countless anarchists would retort "*OF COURSE.*" But we can be more nuanced. Churchill was both liberalish and fascistic certainly. Just as Pinochet or Franco were "fascistic" although on a multidimensional spectrum with many important differences and distinctions. My claim here is that there are theoretical or analytical contexts in which it is quite useful to speak of them as fascist and others where it is not. The same is true when it comes to other terms like "socialist" or "leftist."

I support dexterity in our evaluations. It can in some contexts be useful and edifying to characterize the makeup of a shopping mall "fascistic" or claim that even those self-identified anarchists who dismiss the suffering of elephants say along human-nationalist style arguments of common "human" community are making fascist arguments. Recognizing that terms imply spectrums or clusters like "liberal" can add a lot of capacity to our language that is otherwise lost when we trap ourselves with a few words with very limited usages.

Philosophical frameworks and motivations matter and ultimately matter a hell of a lot more than the happenstance macrostructures we happen to be under today. The raw embrace of power for power's sake is, I think, an important position that deserves highlighting and centering in our language. In some but not all contexts it is appropriate to discuss early human societies as "anarchist" or "anarchistic" — despite that precise term and all its social and ideological baggage being a recent invention attached to specific struggles and movements. I think the same is true of "fascism." There is no analytical benefit to exclusively confining "fascism" to the smallest fraction of human history and contexts.

In *Worshipping Power* Gelderloos emphasizes the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of social systems of oppression, that macroscale power structures like states depend upon broad shared philosophical or ideological perspectives. I praised him for that analysis, I just think it should be extended to likewise centering the ideological and philosophical premise of fascism. Recognizing fascism as a particularly self-aware purification of tendencies that run throughout human history, not merely as a marginal or historical position devoid of catastrophic threat without a hand from the capitalist and militarist establishment.

I mention that in the Spanish civil war the twisted liberal delusion collapsed and people rushed to two poles: fascist and anarchist. The anarchist literature on the Spanish civil war is filled with examples but my favorite comes from Abel Paz' *Durruti* where he tells of the day the president went to his office as normal and attempted to call his ministers, perturbed to discover one by one that they weren't picking up. Slowly through investigation it dawns upon him that the entire state apparatus has effectively been dissolved, revolution has been made, and he is one of the last to know. Gelderloos retorts that this moment of ideological clarity on the ground is irrelevant because of the bigger geopolitical framing of jockeying involving powers like Britain and the USSR. I could ask for no better example of how a focus upon the abstract geopolitical macrostructure blinds people to the truths revealed in the micro.

Getting to capitalism, Gelderloos dings me for giving broader examples of how sweeping or holistic notions of capitalism warp the imagination and understanding of leftists. Let me be more specific to his article with some pertinent examples without fiscing it line by line.

First, Peter repeatedly speaks of capitalism in subject terms, as an agent. This is often to make sympathetic points both of us would agree with, but the framing is important to note because of the lurking dangers of resulting skew that I covered in my first response.

*“Capitalism can brook no autonomy, no liberated space, but neither could it overcome the resistance of the exploited.”*

“Capitalism” is the entity given agency and motivation here. Not *capitalists* or specific institutional or market processes. Gelderloos chooses to speak in terms of a sweeping whole, as a single aggregate *institution*.

There are a lot of ways to view “capitalism” in this institutional analysis. One lens Gelderloos uses is as a “logic” — a kind of viral ratchet that underpins and unifies the total system. This matches an analysis in which “intensification” of capitalism involves the deeper penetration of quantification and market exchange.

*[I]n the new economy there is no more distinction between labor time and free time or even producer time and consumer time; rather, all lived time is absorbed into a unified capitalist logic leading to a qualitative advance in the production of subjectivities.*

And Gelderloos lists a number of supposedly terrible predictions involving capitalism eating more of the world. Nano productions, gene therapy, and decentralized diversified greenhouse production.

Note what is functionally being objected to here: not specific hierarchies but rather just finer tuned agency in the physical world surrounding us.

For the sake of space I will drill down and focus on a single example from Gelderloos’ original piece, the shift from mass agriculture to greenhouse production.

Let us remember that once upon a time big sweeping industrial agricultural production was the perfect exemplar of capitalism — focused on economies of scale in hamfisted ways intensely unconcerned and incapable of parsing externalities.

Radicals retorted that what we needed to keep billions from starving was something more akin to horticulture or permaculture, complex and varied but attentively watched over in more responsive ways than the brute sweeping force of mass agriculture. The critique most frequently lobbed in response was that while you could get significant advantages out of permaculture greenhouses, it would often take more human labor per calorie. Now recognition of many downsides of mass industrial agriculture is growing and pressure is building to force changes in market or societal or infrastructural norms. But — because this involves more nuanced attentiveness, finer measurement and response — it’s now painted as capitalism “consuming” a space of dynamics that we once (blessedly) could gloss over in ignorance or simple heuristics.

When a subsistence horticulturalist personally tends to the complex polyculture they maintain, that is totally fine, but when IoT devices are used to free up human labor and transportation pollution per calorie produced that’s cast as bad, or at least as a strengthening or intensification of “capitalism.”

In my aside about recurring tendencies among leftists to slapdashedly treat “commodification” as a bad thing, I was addressing this kind of thinking, which I encounter constantly and many people on the left are quick to leap to. The expansion of quantified exchange dynamics certainly means the expansion of legibility or market information, but that in no sense is necessarily the same as the expansion of capitalism, indeed it can mean the reduction of capitalism’s broad structural features like centralized wealth accumulation, workplace hierarchies, even the psychological dynamics of greed, etc. Markets are, after all, not the same thing as capitalism.

Of course in the absence of myriad campaigns and approaches of social struggle it is unlikely that market and infrastructural norms will smoothly shift over on their own to some kind of idyllic networked permaculture of decentralized and distributed, organic and responsive production that utilizes greenhouses to help cut off or more closely internalize environmental externalities. But the replacement of mass industrial agriculture with more decentralized and attentive modes is surely an objectively positive development.

You have to be trapped in a leftist frame of mind where capitalism is a unified Molochian beast to believe our only options are reform or revolution and thus cast these kinds of developments as mere reform, expanding tyranny, or more sinister co-option. Instead what I see is a spontaneous erosion of some aspects of agricultural capitalism, just as the “boring mass media” and deep sexual controls that once characterized our society have collapsed to significant measure because demand and other market pressures from the bottom up ended up partially eroding those norms.

As Kevin Carson succinctly put it,

*“There are all kinds of interstitial changes going on within capitalism that capital and the state will attempt to coopt with varying degrees of success, but the net effect will be to gradually reduce its rate of extraction and make withdrawal of a growing share of life from the system increasingly feasible, and hence to make the system less capitalistic over time. To frame this scenario as “Anything not insurrectionary is just disguised capitalism” is flat-out stupid.”*

This is not to suggest that insurrection is bad or unneeded, merely that there are numerous developments spontaneously — even apolitically — arising in the economy that are positive. Market pressures can facilitate or lead to adaptations or shifts that erode power and liberate. The world is complicated. There is no iron law imposed from above that makes every market shift, adaptation, or development a net expansion of capitalism.

Gelderloos uses the very loaded word “control” to characterize such more dynamic and decentralized food production and there’s a dangerous conflation going on in such use. In some cases the word “control” actually means “agency.” When someone with cerebral palsy has trouble “controlling” their limbs what we’re really saying isn’t that they’re frustrated imperialists but that they’re facing limits or restrictions to their physical agency. When a village loses “control” of their water supply we’re not saying that this is a liberatory revolt of the aquifer, we’re saying that they’ve lost agency in the use of critical material resources.

Actual thinking minds — actual fucking agents — matter. Rocks and vegetables are not capable of freedom. And control of persons is a vastly different concept than “control” of objects. The premise of freedom itself and indeed anarchy is incoherent without this distinction.

Freedom is not isolation from causal interplay with our environment nor is it being ignorant to the consequences of our actions. We seek to collaboratively have more agency in the world

around us, to expand the impact of our thoughts and the accuracy of our understanding of our world. This is not the fucking same thing as social domination and to conflate the two is obscene.

To be sure there are deep and important tensions when it comes to legibility and social control. Systems of knowledge that make the physical universe more transparent also have the danger of making struggles of resistance more transparent to political power. *But conversely*, illegibility creates barriers to entry that can prop up social hierarchies and deny us informed consent. I've written on this before in dialogue with David Graeber's works, which are both enlightening and frustrating in this area.

Networked devices in greenhouse environments closely tracking and adjusting for environmental and growth variables is not some imperialist conquest. Nor is it necessarily part and parcel with a broader "logic" of control over individual human beings.

The central narrative about "capitalism" and industrial society used to be that it was too big — piles of capital, giant megamachines of runaway accumulation that were divorced from and unresponsive to the particularities of local or individual life and thus utterly inefficient and destructive. Now, much of that is getting replaced with more attentive, more nuanced, more responsive infrastructural norms while even bigger monsters retain political and economic control. These loci of power must be killed, the increasingly decentralized infrastructure ripped out and appropriated out from underneath them, and the exact character of the new decentralized norms should be fiercely contested, but too often the left — and anarchists swallowing their narratives — have gone down the wrong path by demonizing the decentralization itself because it occurs through the market.

Decentralization alone is adamantly not a salve — obviously small businesses can be capricious and I've just spent paragraphs warning about the threat of decentralized variants of fascism. But *decentralized infrastructure is not an intensification of capitalism, even though it may create more exchange value*. Increased legibility, conscious awareness, and agency in tiny particulars of food production, bodily function, etc. are not "the logic of capitalism" they are the necessary precondition to expand our freedom — that is to say, *what we can do*.

In its decentralized bottom-up attempt to satiate desires, the market attempts to make legible what was not previously so as to have more fine-tuned and efficient engagement. This is not itself a bad thing. When anarchists practicing polyamory talk explicitly about feelings, expectations, dynamics, etc, we work hard to make legible the illegible. When we combat informal power dynamics of social capital or norms within our milieus, we work hard to expose and make legible what was illegible in the process of dragging power dynamics out and killing them.

When someone is able to better measure and respond to conditions in their garden they are able to produce more food — creating more value. Same as when a device or treatment gives someone with cerebral palsy more control over their body — value is created. But this is not necessarily the same thing as value accumulation since it is an orthogonal question as to whether most value is seized by the loci of power in a given political-economic context.

Gelderloos complains about myriad ways in which our leisure and social time has been made economically legible. Many of these norms were imposed top-down and are absolutely horrible. Everything to do with the bottled up, planned suburbia and city centers that demolished old organic neighborhoods and agoras is evil. *But many other norms emerged bottom-up from popular demand*. To go back to my example, when a dating site asks you to fill out a form you are in some sense "commodifying" your social interaction, because you're making legible and fungible in a broader network what was previously personal and obscure — but this is hardly a bad thing.

Legibility can expand our options, our reach, and the efficiency by which we reach certain goals. The fetishization of the illegible is a dangerous mythologization of ignorance.

Gelderloos complains that *“those in power prefer that we do not get any kind of meaningful choice at all”* and that’s certainly true, but he’s wrong to imply that the illegibility of certain spaces like “free time” provided us with more meaningful choice. I played with sticks in a section of forest around a homeless camp as a kid, I am hardly one to besmirch the latitude of such imagination, but it is a shallow play that is cut off from affecting the wider universe. “Choice” without depth of material consequence is as shallow as the “choice” between different colored shampoo bottles. Those in power would absolutely love to see us be content with sticks and dreams, thankfully people want more. Advertising attempted to mold our desires into regulated, controlled, and legible-to-power forms, we should be grateful the unruly power of people’s naturally complicated and growing desires ate away at its effectiveness.

Gelderloos willfully misreads the significant in-context distinction between “system” and “ecosystem” and demands, *“Does ‘unified’ mean every element is the same? ...Does ‘unified’ mean that every element is connected within a web of influence?”* There is of course a massive spectrum between these extremes, the point here is assuming a kind of integrability, cohesion, and intentionality to a system that casts it as an “organic” whole where the individual components or dynamics are unified in a kind of almost teleological reinforcement of the whole and taking their marching orders from the whole. Even just “unified in a common logic.” This approach is vastly different from seeing capitalism as a battlefield where we — the actual agents — struggle and contest, buffeted by vastly different forces and dynamics. Obviously Gelderloos examines different components of “capitalism” and some of his particular analyses are correct or largely agreeable, but my response was to make clear my concern with the sweeping framework approach and the kind of quick narratives that reflexively give institutions agency or narrative power.

A number of radicals have pointed out that it’s actually quite bizarre that we would use the same description of “capitalism” for today’s economic context and that of the mid 1800s. Terms like *late-late-capitalism* do a poor job at covering the vast contestation and change that has occurred. This approach presumes a kind of historical continuity, agential cohesion, or narrative solidity that often misleads. I am not as convinced. I think capital accumulation, class society, disposable wage labor in hierarchical workplaces, etc still exist in substantive ways and thus the term “capitalism” retains descriptive utility. But I take issue with the Molochian image of it and worry that people will just keep redefining capitalism ever more expansively to handwave away important conflicts within it or miss both advances and potential developments. My hostility and need to warn and call out about these kind of Molochian narratives is directly in the tradition of the post-left, or at least what I find most valorous in it. There is a danger to systemic analysis that can go quite bad. It’s not my claim that Gelderloos is as far down that path as some, but a good deal of methodological individualism should be re-injected.

As to the kinda random personal insinuations, I am of course an individualist anarchist in the long vein of those that see value in markets and a tension between their deterritorializing, decentralizing aspects and the territorializing and centralizing aspects of capitalism. Like Voltairine de Cleyre I can only roll my eyes at accusations of being a capitalist. I don’t see “commodification” or “monetization” as necessarily bad things nor deeply tied to the continuation of capitalism. I don’t think exchange is inherently abusive or hierarchical and find bottom-up efforts to expand legibility in exchange networks often quite positive. Oh no. And yes I think ecosystems are often

a productive metaphor in considering markets, although less so in more capitalist spaces. There are certainly pernicious cancers and apex predators to be found in certain ecosystems too and in many ways state intervention in markets can create runaway problems much the same way as industrial intervention in biomes. The horror. What more can be said on all that that we haven't already in massive books and detailed essays?

Particularly fun is Gelderloos' attempt to cast the transhumanist desire to overcome limits and expand positive freedom as "liberal" since liberalism historically centrally distinguished itself by its focus on negative freedom, rights, and limits. Terms and movements are complicated!

Let me be clear for the millionth fucking time, transhumanism is literally just the position of morphological freedom: individuals should be free to alter their bodies to expand their agency how they each see fit. This has been repeatedly emphasized in the core non-anarchist transhumanist lit from Bostrom to Sandberg, even if sometimes branches or individuals get excited about specific technological ideas or aspirations. I have long been vociferously hostile to non-anarchist transhumanists over their failure to consistently evaluate the social consequences of this position – namely a rejection of social hierarchy and attendant infrastructural norms and an embrace of global collaboration to facilitate expansion of our freedom in a non zero-sum way.

Gelderloos asks me for examples of transhumanists defending things like the production of implants in particular "*without mining, nuclear energy, or contamination from solar and wind power.*" Of course there's a small cottage industry of yuppie transhumanists and technocratic greens publishing breathless articles about advances or sometimes just press releases of the latest green tech, to varying degrees of decoupling from the above things. There are a worrying deluge of sites like SingularityHub trafficking in such triumphalism. I like many other *anarchist* transhumanists am broadly skeptical of such chatter, albeit in no sense giving up on the possibilities. After all the character of "transhumanism" as a broad movement in no way speaks to the character of anarcho-transhumanists any more than the various failings of "communist" and "environmentalist" movements reflect upon anarcho-communists or green anarchists. No one expects green anarchists to police the entirety of the environmentalist movement just as it would be clearly unfair to use the behavior and analysis of the Sierra Club as a bludgeon against all green thought.

As to my own thoughts, we could be here all day detailing different pathways and their relative probabilities and downsides. It's certainly important talk, but it's also a quagmire of particulars that avoid the deeper philosophical questions of what we want and should want. I prefer to get those hashed out first and get on the same page in terms of aspirations before we go into how hard some pathways are and the engineering and social difficulties attendant. Gelderloos sneers about "mining" but asteroid mining could very rapidly bootstrap a situation with automated smelting in orbit that would radically crash metals markets and shutter every mine within the biosphere, confining the most destructive processes beyond the earth. A dozen years ago I wrote a long piece with an anarchist transhumanist approach that attempts to move industrial production ASAP into orbit or away from the interconnected biosphere, and retract the footprint of cities. I am also somewhat open to the possibility that developing designs of thorium salt reactors will move beyond the stark existing downsides of the cold war generation of reactors we all grew up critiquing. I've also written on the ways that capitalist norms and state geopolitics shift innovation pathways away from more ecologically sound tools. For example, when the Chinese state can evict people and strip-mine massive regions, solar and wind approaches that depend on heavy metals become better investments for further research than far lighter footprint approaches.

Detailing some exact alternative blueprint is not my game, and has never been the game of transhumanism, even the non-anarchist variants admit the goal is to open possibilities and erode totalizing norms. Indeed a longstanding anarcho-transhumanist slogan has been “*not a single future but many.*” Additionally in a more pragmatic vein the future will no doubt be incredibly messy and contested, we will win some positive developments and lose others. My point is to make sure we don’t get lost in reactionary narratives like “limits to agency are good” that mewlingly defend our physical chains.

Through the magic of loose association and clustering Gelderloos implies that wanting to tear down limits to our physical freedom is totally the same thing as genocidal western colonialism. What a laughable misread of history and overly expansive use of the term “enlightenment.” Yes the atrocities of the british empire for example *were totally driven by a desire to assure individual morphological freedom.* What nonsense. The enlightenment was an incredibly complicated messy conflicting bunch of things, often with diametrical internal oppositions, defenses appealing to other fractions or popular notions were often draped over things done for totally different motivations, and all that gets handwaved away on the most scurrilous of implied causalities. Further it’s a kind of dramatic flattening, a very “campist” way of viewing world history that suppresses the degree to which “rationalist” or “individualist” or whatever currents get proclaimed as the primordial sin of western imperialism existed and exist external to “the west.” Were the pacific islanders who didn’t accept the limits of their islands and trekked off to cover the pacific terrible colonial monsters?

Yeah I happen to want people to not have to die when they don’t want to, when they still have more to love, more to read, more to give and see. The desire to help people on either side of some arbitrary social norm of “able bodied” who personally want to run faster, swim further, see further, etc, is obviously in no way inherently bound to the enslavement of other persons.

But this just in, demanding the impossible is no longer the standard anarchist position but must now be sneered at as imperialist. How dare we be “entitled” to bread, roses, and the stars. Audacity must be chucked because somehow nothing is worse than “*entitlement, scorn, and superiority.*” ...I could write volumes on the kind of performative submission and caustic “humility” that leftist spaces too often normalize under the delusions that holding each other down is the same thing as a liberatory equality. A sense that wanting more than just playing with sticks is “uppity” and the same thing as actually abusive social hierarchy.

At the end of the day all the poetry and daydreaming in the world won’t change the plain fact of some shitty physical constraints. I would prefer to be on the side of those who, in the words of Evan Greer, “*want something better.*” And while I am not so haughty to think I or anyone can find the exact dimensions of flows of that, I’m going to keep on fighting for it, keep proactively searching through all the possibilities, to keep the impossible in our sights.

It’s not that, as Gelderloos puts it, transhumanism is defined by a quest to “*slay the dreadful beast of pristine nature,*” but that we can and should want more and be immediately suspicious of anyone demanding we temper our dreams and desires. Our bodies have limits that suck, they come in configurations that are inconvenient or don’t align with our aspirations. It is precisely the longstanding assertion of transhumanism that “*we have always been transhuman,*” we have always been trans, in transition, in motion, not in a monotonous static equilibria but on a runaway burst in wild new unknown directions. There is no magical pristine state of being to be held to, no limit to confine ourselves to in service of some phantasmic spook called “Nature.”

Gelderloos accuses me of apathy on the subject of technological norms because I didn't waste volumes on technological particulars when responding to concerning broad themes in his analysis.

Let me be clear: abusively imposed infrastructural norms can suck, and much of transhumanism has been an effort to go in the polar opposite direction of eugenics — to argue for a vast diversity of explorations of morphological freedom, of technological agency.

I've long argued that this includes restoring suppressed "low" technologies and combating the social systems that would impose certain normalizations or hegemonic structures. But I will concede that not every emergent norm is a bad thing. Language is the prototypical technology and language of course changes over time, sometimes quite deliberately. Many reactionaries today complain about being left behind by progressive discourse norms they refuse to adopt. I will concede that there are some situations where it would be desirable to socially normalize the usage of specific technologies in specific ways, at least for large majorities, while leaving room for modes, spaces, or communities of dissenters, I could imagine an anarchist society with strong social sanctions on those that don't vaccinate for example, or the deployment of an encrypted chat app that refuses to communicate with earlier less secure versions. I am not convinced that those are pernicious any more than our strong social sanctions for using racist language. But sure, I broadly encourage and work towards a rich technological pluralism.

Gelderloos singles out phones in his original essay and returns to it in his response so I'll admit I am a partial enemy of the phone form as it exists today and certainly desire to bootstrap different norms surrounding their use. Unlike many I am privileged enough to largely survive on the economic periphery in the global north and in radical spaces where I can simply refuse to use a smartphone except in specific cases when I actually want to, and not suffer any social pressures to or sanction for never picking up. But social pressures to change norms around phones definitely exist in the mainstream and have made progress. Years ago older people used to constantly complain that millennials refused to accept unplanned phone calls and never checked voice messages, today this has become increasingly accepted as the new norm, even in the few business contexts that I sometimes operate. While there have certainly been pernicious pushes to have people always "on call" it does seem like social norms are turning against this, although as always the most vulnerable are often the last to see such benefits. One could write an entire essay or book on phone adoption and norms across societies from DIY communities in Somalia to the annoying anarchist milieu normalization of talking openly on Signal and spamming people with hundreds of texts a day, but I see reasons to hope within all of these contexts, and ingenious counter-adaptations to resolve the bad pressures. Of course consumer choice and slow cultural evolution — while often able to eek out some positives — are hardly a panacea. Substantive engagement to change or alter the flow of norm creation and mutation is certainly called for, but it's harder when people take Molochian lenses that miss positive tendencies.

(Incidentally one very simple fix that I've endorsed to impede the runaway attention ratchet of cliques or activist groups texting each other nonstop is to adopt a collective norm of paying some measure of money or other investment in collectively in exchange for spamming with memes or small messages. If you want to demand everyone's attention, pay them for it. I gleefully look forward to the howls of me advocating the commodification and monetization of everyday social interactions, but it's a good quick fix that pushes back on phone culture, encourages normalizing activist groups having more explicit say in addressing their particular operating context, while

making sure that the negative externalities are internalized and gives that extra second pause to the kid who wants to talk about crimes over Signal.)

Phones — particularly in the global north — may seem a trivial example, and we can even get into the variety of economic and environmental costs in the existing order to make a phone and the per phone cost to establish wildly different means of production or social contexts, that's always a fun one, but Gelderloos brought up this specific issue of norms and we would be here all day going through every possible example of technological norms.

Lastly in his response Gelderloos pulls a Neil Degrasse Tyson style “well actually” responding to a standard bit of poetic imagery about butterflies and storms to argue that because some measure of dynamic equilibrium is often the norm of systems we should continue viewing things in aggregate. One butterfly, one vote.

I could not ask for a better indictment of the Molochian approach.

Yes, there are myriad systems that stabilize into equilibria. But this picture often ignores the small parameters that *can* cascade it into disorder. Just because a pattern has been roughly stable in some specific context for some period of time doesn't mean it has broader self-restorative magic, it may already be perturbed into a process of substantive change that is not yet obvious. It's often a grave mistake to view a system in some dynamic equilibria as locked into some simplified state, such shorthand atrophies our capacity to see fringe possibilities and potentials.

Our aspiration should not be engineers, describing a unified machine with an assumed purpose, but physicists, attempting to find the boundary conditions, the inflection points, the root dynamics that can radically reconfigure world, or shift systems beyond where we ever expected them to go. If radicalism is about not getting distracted by the spooks but instead searching for the roots, anarchism should be about using that approach to always expand the possible.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis  
Beneath The Institutional  
Response To Gelderloos  
January 2nd, 2019

<https://c4ss.org/content/51542>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**