

The Tangled Paths Of State Formation And Resistance

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The dearth of anarchist theory in print is sometimes pretty embarrassing. Our discourse is rich, but it can also be maddeningly ephemeral and inaccessible, lost to zines and interpersonal conversations. While illegibility *can* be a defensive weapon against outside authorities, it also frequently reinforces power relations by increasing barriers to access.

It's painful to have to tell another bright-eyed and bushy-tailed new anarchist looking to read up on a subject that "You just have to talk to people or read around and fill in the gaps." Anarchism is sadly filled to the brim with things we expect people to know but never write down. "Mainstream opinion" in anarchist circles is thus often something spread across piles of texts written by non-anarchists that we synthesize and share with our close friends, never bothering to write down a summary. Anthropology, gender studies, economics, at al... we remain parasitical on other discursive worlds, hashing out a shared analysis between close comrades but rarely providing a 101.

Peter Gelderloos has long been one of the rare exceptions — an anarchist committed to making anarchist theory accessible. It helps that Gelderloos is about as plumb-line of an anarchist as one could conceive, unassailably at the dead center of our myriad internal political spectra — or at least the center of mass. "Anarchy Works" and "How Nonviolence Protects The State" were agreeable and unoffensive to not only the mainstream of anarchism but to partisans of nearly every stripe. Within our movement Gelderloos is probably the least controversial anarchist writer alive — a truly stupendous accomplishment.

Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation is a great book, the sort of text that should be part of the obligatory canon for all anarchists. An accessible summary and nuanced analysis of why and how states form. I'm delighted we now have it on hand. Gelderloos sets out a clear and potent anarchist analysis that knocks down primitivist, Marxist, and Hobbesian accounts while shellacking the academics that are too conservative to openly recognize what's in front of their face.

Gelderloos' central thesis is that while there are many paths and pressures societies face, we nevertheless have some agency in how we navigate them. No technology, no material condition, no social condition is a prison sentence. It is our common values that play a huge role in determining whether a society can handle something like agriculture, cities, writing, or markets without

turning to tyranny. The fight between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism is ultimately a fight over values far more than it is a fight over particular conditions or tools.

As in other regions we see a relatively stable stateless period persisting for a long time after the development of agriculture and sedentary living, and a relatively rapid increase in hierarchy stratification, and the centralization of power once an organized religious cult perfects the ability to shape the spiritual beliefs of the broader society. (p. 214)

Unfortunately, *Worshipping Power* has two¹ minor problems: It focuses in on a definition of “states” far more pertinent to academics than anarchists, and at the same time, Gelderloos’ analysis leans into a hostility towards “worldview shapers” that builds some worrying momentum. Gelderloos is clearly chafing under academia and so he yin-yangs between a deferential, if tense, respect for it and outright heads-on-pikes insurrection against it.

The choice to stick with an established academic frame around “states” in technical and overly specific terms is useful in that it allows a more fine-grained analysis of the various hierarchical social systems at play in the last ten thousand years. But it’s also a deeply dangerous choice because it risks minimizing the full extent of what anarchists oppose. It’s clearly not enough to avoid having a centralized administrative hierarchy with at least three tiers of organization. Anarchists oppose rulership wholesale — from tribal chiefs to diffuse games of social capital and interpersonal abuse. There’s a noxious history of anthropologists collapsing ‘anarchism’ down to whatever mere anti-statism is necessary to valorize the society they’re currently taken with. This sort of shit is how we get people venerating warrior honor societies with literal slaves and calling them “anarchist” or thinking they’re anywhere near the vicinity of a liberated world. Gelderloos himself obviously knows better, but I’m not sure his few caveats are strong enough to correct errant readers.

This focus on a very specific subsection of power structures is interesting but it leads to a conclusion a little far afield from anarchism’s concerns. What’s the most critical element to starting multi-tier coercive administrations? The creation of values that enable universal centralization. This is certainly true as far as it goes, but the more interesting and *anarchist* question is what leads to domination at all, in any flavor or organizational structure? Such is of course less a question for anthropology or sociology and more one of game theory, philosophy, psychology, and the like. The danger with something as obtuse and macroscopic as the anthropological lens is that you’ll start viewing things in similarly sweeping terms.

What falls out of Gelderloos’ account is a enmity towards elite worldview-shapers that he repeatedly identifies in personal asides with scientists and modern academics. It’s a compelling argument and certainly no anarchist worth their salt would defend elites of any sort. Further — ever intellectually honest — Gelderloos does note the potential for such figures to be potent sources of anti-authoritarian rebellion.

Still this framing leads Gelderloos to paint a split between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘non-pragmatic,’ that he spins as the critical difference between the sort of invention, writing, engineering, trade, etc, that can be perfectly harmless and the sort that ends up feeding the state. This is a flavor of anarchist morality that would collapse all our values down to merely resistance to social authority.

¹ Gelderloos does make one factual mistake or omission, he dates the earliest domesticated plant species to 10,500 years ago, but evidence in Palestine has revealed that humans domesticated first started farming grains 23,000 years ago. Who knows what else has been covered up, sunken around the edge of the Mediterranean?

Casting the inquiry and creativity that underpins science and technology as only tolerable if they are made merely *instrumental*.

Learning is only worthwhile if it helps us fight, to live healthy, to live free. (p. 235)

What a terribly impoverished notion of “living free”! Surely inquiry and creativity are themselves part and parcel of freedom, not merely servants or tools. Is freedom just some passive state of being we’re trying to retreat to? Or is it an active, striving, reaching sort of thing, that necessarily includes learning for its own sake, exploring for its own sake, dreaming for its own sake?

To say that I recoil in horror at the prescription that science be enslaved to serve some kind of social order would be a severe understatement. A world where we must interrogate every flight of investigation and demand to know its pragmatic utility for the social order is a world far away from any notion of freedom I value. If anything I’d say the goal of anarchy is to finally *unleash* science from the shackles that social hierarchies have kept it in. Don’t hate academics for being “unpractical,” hate the system that gives them that privilege and denies the rest of us it.

While it’s certainly an occasionally valid lens to look at “science” from the outside, in sociological terms as an existing institution, community, and practice situated in a specific social and historical context, it’s at least as valid to view “science” from the inside, in cognitive or philosophical terms as an approach to pattern-finding, as diligent root-seeking or radicalism, an approach that is present in all conscious minds — yes even isolated ones — and certainly in all societies. “Science as radicalism” obviously in no remote way obliges a priest class. It can lead to universalizing values or perspectives, but when rooted in the people, emergent from the ground up rather than from an elite, actual truths ultimately aren’t easily manipulable to serve power, instead they provide greater agency to all. Our capacity for choice is dependent upon the accuracy of our maps of reality. And freedom would certainly be meaningless without the inclination to grapple with, to feel out, connect, and engage with our environments.

Yet it must be said that at points Gelderloos talks in ways that conflict with said enshrinement of pragmatism and instrumentalism, for instance characterizing a critical stage in the devolution to statism with, “Authoritarian orders within the network would unite, since their logic favored the accumulation of power over the unimpeded search for truth, meaning, and ecstasy.” I couldn’t have put it better.

This tension with his other framings is indicative of Worshiping Power’s greatest strength, its honest complexity. While I love rhetorically potent Gelderloos, and he certainly pokes his head out at points to call forth fire and brimstone, he is mostly at his best when he embraces nuance, tracing the complex and varied paths of state formation and resistance.

Gelderloos absolutely eviscerates Marxist and primitivist claims about state formation by simply bringing to the fore the immense contingency and differences in the record. The only reasonable takeaway is that a society’s internal meta-structures of culture, religion, ethics, etc. guide them at least as much as material conditions. Honest nuance comprises a vicious denial of any sort of simplistic deterministic prescriptions.

In particular Gelderloos is very honest about markets not obliging inequality, hierarchy or states:

States can organize trade networks, but trade networks do not generate states. The Indus Valley civilization, one of the oldest in the world, is an interesting example. At its height

(between 2600 and 1900 BCE), the civilization had a population of some five million people living in half a dozen cities — such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro — and over a thousand towns and villages. It made up a world system together with its trading partners, ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Of these, the Indus Valley civilization was the largest. and in contrast to the other two, it was probably stateless. No solid evidence has been found of kings, priests, armies, temples, or palaces. Some of the largest buildings in the urban centers were public baths; the urban planning, sewage, and hygiene systems were the best in the ancient world; and the relative equality of housing size suggests an egalitarian, non-stratified society. ...the lack of military structures suggests that the rural population traded their surplus more or less voluntarily with the artisans of the towns and cities. (p. 142)

Stateless societies also existed at the heart of one of the most intensive, high-value trade networks in world history, in the Banda islands of the Maluku archipelago. The islanders participated in the spice trade for centuries, occupying an essential productive niche, while preserving their statelessness. Social organization throughout the Maluku archipelago was localized and largely horizontal. (p. 144)

The Cucuteni-Trypillian culture existed from 4800 to 3000 BCE in the area that is now western Ukraine, Moldova and eastern Romania. They practiced agriculture ... invented the oldest known proto-writing system in the world, manufactured and traded. ... Contrary to assumptions about the state being a more advanced form of political organization, the Cucuteni-Trypillian culture was stateless, egalitarian, peaceful and non-patriarchal.

The Cretan civilization were in all probability a stateless people who organized an important trade network spanning the Mediterranean over more than a thousand years. They were a peaceful society with a minimum of defensive infrastructure and no record of involvement in offensive warfare. ...there is no evidence of such rulers. The palaces served as warehouses, redistribution centers, collective housing for priestesses and administrators, archives and religious sites. ... The Cretan diet was too rich, too diversified, to suggest a hyper-exploited, enslaved lower class. ... Nor is there evidence of a Cretan army or other mechanisms capable of imposing the sort of work-or-starve, blackmail economy so common in other city states. The very diversity of Cretan food production (spanning multicrop agriculture, apiculture, silvaculture, aquaculture, fishing, and hunting, a diversity that would be impossible for a weak state to surveil and control), paired with a lack of evidence of a police or military structure makes the proposal of a coerced or dependent peasant population ludicrous. In the worst case the merchant-priests controlling the palaces might have been able to impose an unfavorable exchange rate making it difficult or impossible for the peasants to acquire luxury goods, but the peasants would still have been more or less self-sufficient, autonomous, and healthy.

The Cretan civilization did have a written language, at the time a common sign of state authority, although nearly all the decoded fragments of Linear B are simple trade records and lists of resources, with a few religious references thrown in. Universally, early states with written languages used the written record to preserve laws, chronicles, and accounts of the power and grandeur of their supreme leaders.

In practice, the palace economy was probably a network of religious centers where farmers, artisans, and merchants bought their produce or their trade goods, sometimes in the spirit of a gift, an offering to the gods that would be redistributed, and sometimes in the spirit of exchange. Mask-wearing priestesses represented the gods in important ceremonies, anonymizing spiritual power rather than concentrating it in any individual or family. They also specialized in the occult knowledge, like math and writing, which allowed them to administer a large trade network. (p. 149)

There are numerous other examples throughout *Worshipping Power* as Gelderloos drags to light just how systematic the bias in the historical record is towards states, and how good of reasons we have to assume all the holes in the map were anarchistic or at the very least stateless.

Too often, historians and archaeologists fabricate cheap mysteries, “Why did this great civilization suddenly collapse?” because they refuse to accept the obvious: that states are odious structures that their populations destroy whenever they get the opportunity, and sometimes even when they face impossible odds.

Words cannot do justice to the relief one feels at finally having a book that makes this long-standing anarchist argument in direct terms and extensive examples. I hope that *Worshipping Power*’s longest lasting contribution will be to open our eyes not just to the complex trajectories that power structures can take but to the immensity of anti-authoritarian currents and forces throughout history that resist and suppress them.

This is the first major step in fleshing out and normalizing an anarchist narrative of world history where the giant gaping holes in the conventional histories are centered and given their rightful place as the real agents and heroes.

Gelderloos tries his hardest for a certain academic equanimity throughout *Worshipping Power* but you can sense the white knuckling going on until the end when he can finally let loose the anarchist howl, ***we are still here.***

We have not disappeared. We are still here. ...No matter what continent we are from, those who choose to align ourselves with an anti-authoritarian history can be proud: we are the ones who have killed kings.

Worshipping Power is an excellent and potent reminder of the expanse of the possible. All the possible ways we can shoot ourselves in the foot and allow the rot of domination to spread, but also all the ways we can resist, all those that have, and all those that have succeeded at living freer than we can sometimes imagine.

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Review of Worshiping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation by Peter Gelderloos.

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