

An Anarchist View of State Formation

Review of Peter Gelderloos, "Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation"

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Is it important for anarchism to have a theory of the state, the fundamentals of government, its origins and development. This is my third essay on this topic, the first being a presentation of the class theory of the state, as held by both anarchists and Marxists (Price 2018a). The second was a review of a “post-anarchist” analysis of the state, proposed by Saul Newman (Price 2018b). This is a review of Peter Gelderloos’ analysis of the nature of the state and its origins.

Gelderloos defines the state as “*a bureaucratic, territorial, coercive organization with multiple levels of administration, in which power is institutional rather than personal, and power-holders monopolize (...) the legitimate use of force...*” (5) “*The state [is] a centralized, hierarchical system of political organization based on coercion and alienation...*” (14) These are fine definitions.

In his broad overview of state formation, Gelderloos has two fundamental hypotheses. The first is his opposition to any specific theory of state origins. States are not the result of any one special force, but are the end result of all sorts of factors, he argues. “*State formation is a multi-lineal process and not a teleological progressive evolution.*” (Gelderloos 2016; 234) “*States...are...a social arrangement that evolved following a wide variety of evolutionary pathways, in very different conditions, on different continents.*” (13) His book is a hotch-potch collection of accounts of state formations, in no particular order, covering all sorts of possible causes in specific cases. This includes cultural and religious factors, as well as military, political, and geographic factors, among others. He ends up with no less than fifteen “*models*” of state formation. (233–234) That many factors go into the formation of each specific state is undoubtedly true. The question is whether any underlying generalizations can be made about the main factor or factors.

What I take to be his second main thesis is the rejection of the class (or historical materialist) theory of the state. He rejects the view that the state grows out of the tendency of early humanity to create a surplus which results in early class divisions (developing out of other early social divisions such as gender, age, or special knowledge). He regards the hypothesis that the state exists “*to regulate economic production and surplus value*” to be as “*demonstrably false*” as the myth that it exists “*to protect individual rights through a social contract.*” (1) On the contrary, Gelderloos insists that the state was first formed and then it promoted class division and exploitation. In his view, the state does not serve capitalism (feudalism, slavery, etc.) but capitalism serves the state.

He claims that this is the classical anarchist view of Bakunin and Kropotkin (which I do not think is true; Price 2018a). He quotes Bakunin, “*If there is a state, there must be domination of one class by another, and as a result, slavery; the state without slavery is unthinkable...*” (4–5) He writes, “*Capitalism can easily be read as the motor of the modern state... Sometimes capitalists have modernized government in order to increase their power.*” ((6–7) These views would seem to contradict his own generalization.

It would be difficult to demonstrate, historically or by anthropology, either that the state created class societies or that class societies created the state. As Gelderloos agrees, very few statist systems began ab novo. Almost all states we know about began in societies which already had states—and had class systems of exploitation. Summarizing the evidence, he makes the important statement, “*As a general rule, reciprocity is the basis of society and culture.*” (7) This is to say that class division created the state and the state created class division and so on, back and forth, intertwined, at the same time, (dialectically, if you will).

While Gelderloos discusses various possible pathways to state formation, he repeatedly returns to one model: early elites creating a state to serve their interests. “*Local elites within the preexisting autochthonous hierarchies were impressed by the greater power amassed by elites in neighboring societies and sought to copy them.*” (38) “*The exigencies of warfare...are exploited by*

an endogenous proto-elite to create a pathway for increasing social discipline and hierarchy. “ (53) *“The ascendance of the council and other institutional forms of leadership in the [early] Kuba state reflect a push by the elite to extend their power...”* (5) *“Incipient elites used military brotherhoods and resurgent patriarchy to establish a new kind of state authority.”* (133) *“State formation was a strategic act of elite will.”* (153)

He does not discuss who were these elites which existed before the state but which deliberately created states to serve their interests. Were they not the local lords, rich farmers, clan leaders, patriarchs, slave holders, and so on—proto-ruling classes—who made states to expand their wealth and their power over others’ labor? This is the view of the class theory.

“Primitive Accumulation” by the State

Against *“the matter of economic accumulation...as the motor of state formation...”*, Gelderloos says, *“the very notion of understanding (...) the economy as a distinct sphere of social life is problematic...”* (138) He does not realize that the idea of the distinction between the economy and the state was created by the experience of capitalism. Almost for the first time, the ruling class did not need to directly manage the state. Capitalist enterprises were run by businesspeople and their managers, while professional politicians could manage the state. In the U.S.A. today, the state claims legitimacy as “democratic,” while the capitalist economy is justified on the basis of “freedom.”

Gelderloos is right to challenge this apparent distinction between the capitalist market and the state. But then what becomes of his chicken-or-the-egg-which-came-first argument about which causes which? Are we not back to the “reciprocal” (dialectical) understanding that each causes the other? *“History has been shaped by the conflict between rulers and ruled”* (3) which is also the conflict between exploiters and exploited.

It may surprise Gelderloos, but that was the perspective of Karl Marx. In his discussion of “primitive” (or “previous” or “primary”) accumulation, which began capitalism, Marx emphasized the role of the state and other non-market forces. *“In general history, it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part....The history of this, [the workers’] expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”* (Marx 1906; 785–6) The different methods of “primitive accumulation,” in different countries and different times, *“all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.”* (823–4)

Kropotkin criticized Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation,” only because he thought it gave the impression that state support of capitalism was solely in its early period. Kropotkin insisted that the state continued to intervene in the economy, to prop up capitalism. “Force” continues to be “an economic power.”

The Marxist geographer, David Harvey, writes, *“In recent times, several commentators, including myself, have suggested that we need to take the continuity of primitive accumulation throughout the historical geography of capitalism seriously. Rosa Luxemburg put that question firmly on the agenda a century ago.”* (Harvey 2010; 305) The accumulation of capital, not only through exploitation of labor but also through state expropriation of existing wealth, has become ubiquitous. Harvey

prefers to call it today, “accumulation by dispossession.” (310) This is consistent with the views of anarchists such as Kropotkin.

Program to Destroy the State

Gelderloos has not written an academic work. With justification, he wants to strengthen the anarchist case against the state, to encourage “*an unambiguous desire to destroy the state.*” (234) He wants to refute the liberal and reform socialist view that the state can be used to improve society in a consistent and permanent way. “*No party has ever stood in the way of capitalism, yet people keep on voting.*” (238) He rejects the Marxist-Leninist program of overthrowing this state and replacing it with a new state (the “dictatorship of the proletariat”). He has an ambivalent discussion of the Kurdish movement in Rojava. This has been influenced by anarchism but “*they have not made a complete rupture with preexisting governmental and capitalist institutions.*” (239)

Rojava aside, there are ambiguities in his programmatic approach. Since he sees capitalism as primarily a tool of the state, he does not advocate “socialism” (let alone “libertarian communism”), as did Bakunin and Kropotkin. He only uses “socialism” to mean “state socialism” rather than “libertarian socialism” (anarchism). Since he regards exploitation as only secondary to state domination, he does not emphasize the popular struggles of workers and other oppressed and exploited people. How wealth is generated and distributed is not central to his analysis of society.

He apparently opposes mass movements making demands on the state (such as ending specific wars, raising minimum wages, outlawing discrimination of women or People of Color, etc.) Instead anarchists should “*disparage state representatives, insult them, mock them, ignore them, or silence them.*” (244) Disrespecting politicians is all right but not a strategy for destroying the state. Instead of working class struggles, he advocates “*refusal to pay taxes,...willfully breaking every law that one can get away with....rejecting or abstaining from the private communications technologies that states increasingly use to monitor their subjects....using cash instead of credit cards....*” (244) These are mostly individual, rather than mass actions. This too is hardly a program for overthrowing the state. Gelderloos praises anarchist and other terrorists who have assassinated “*monarchs, generals, presidents, and governors.*” (246) Without shedding tears for the monarchs, etc., we have to acknowledge that such deeds (outside of the context of revolutionary wars) often killed all sorts of working people, antagonized the popular masses, and resulted in jailing or killing many good militants.

Peter Gelderloos raises many important questions about the relation of the state, its origin, and its future to economic, popular, and class forces. There is very little current material on the anarchist view of the state and this book makes a significant contribution.

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