



DAVID GRAEBER

FRAGMENTS OF  
AN ANARCHIST  
ANTHROPOLOGY

# Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology

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## **Anarchism:**

The name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government—harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.

Peter Kropotkin (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

Basically, if you're not a utopianist, you're a schmuck.

Jonothan Feldman (*Indigenous Planning Times*)

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What follows are a series of thoughts, sketches of potential theories, and tiny manifestos—all meant to offer a glimpse at the outline of a body of radical theory that does not actually exist, though it might possibly exist at some point in the future.

Since there are very good reasons why an anarchist anthropology really ought to exist, we might start by asking why one doesn't—or, for that matter, why an anarchist sociology doesn't exist, or an anarchist economics, anarchist literary theory, or anarchist political science.

### **Why are there so few anarchists in the academy?**

It's a pertinent question because, as a political philosophy, anarchism is veritably exploding right now.

Anarchist or anarchist-inspired movements are

growing everywhere; traditional anarchist principles—autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, direct democracy—have gone from the basis for organizing within the globalization movement, to playing the same role in radical movements of all kinds everywhere. Revolutionaries in Mexico, Argentina, India, and elsewhere have increasingly abandoned even talking about seizing power, and begun to formulate radically different ideas of what a revolution would even mean. Most, admittedly, fall shy of actually using the word “anarchist.”

But as Barbara Epstein has recently pointed out anarchism has by now largely taken the place Marxism had in the social movements of the '60s: even those who do not consider themselves anarchists feel they have to define themselves in relation to it, and draw on its ideas.

Yet all this has found almost no reflection in the academy. Most academics seem to have only the vaguest idea what anarchism is even about; or dismiss it with the crudest stereotypes. (“Anarchist organization! But isn't that a contradiction in terms?") In the United States there are thousands of academic

Marxists of one sort or another, but hardly a dozen scholars willing openly to call themselves anarchists.

So are academics just behind the curve here?

It's possible. Perhaps in a few years the academy will be overrun by anarchists. But I'm not holding my breath. It does seem that Marxism has an affinity with the academy that anarchism never will. It was, after all, the only great social movement that was invented by a Ph.D., even if afterwards, it became a movement intending to rally the working class. Most accounts of the history of anarchism assume it was basically similar: anarchism is presented as the brainchild of certain nineteenth-century thinkers—Proudhon,

Bakunin, Kropotkin, etc.—it then went on to inspire working-class organizations, became enmeshed in political struggles, divided into sects... Anarchism, in the standard accounts, usually comes out as Marxism's poorer cousin, theoretically a bit flat-footed but making up for brains, perhaps, with passion and sincerity. But in fact, the analogy is strained at best.

The nineteenth-century “founding figures” did not think of themselves as having invented anything particularly new. The basic principles of anarchism— self-organization, voluntary association,

mutual aid—referred to forms of human behavior they assumed to have been around about as long as humanity. The same goes for the rejection of the state and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination (anarchism literally means “without rulers”), even the assumption that all these forms are somehow related and reinforce each other. None of it was presented as some startling new doctrine. And in fact it was not: one can find records of people making similar arguments throughout history, despite the fact there is every reason to believe that in most times and places, such opinions were the ones least likely to be written down. We are talking less about a body of theory, then, than about an attitude, or perhaps one might even say a faith: the rejection of certain types of social relations, the confidence that certain others would be much better ones on which to build a livable society, the belief that such a society could actually exist.

Even if one compares the historical schools of Marxism, and anarchism, one can see we are dealing with a fundamentally different sort of project. Marxist schools have authors. Just as Marxism sprang from the mind of Marx, so we have Leninists, Maoists,

Trotskyites, Gramscians, Althusserians... (Note how the list starts with heads of state and grades almost seamlessly into French professors.) Pierre Bourdieu once noted that, if the academic field is a game in which scholars strive for dominance, then you know you have won when other scholars start wondering how to make an adjective out of your name. It is, presumably, to preserve the possibility of winning the game that intellectuals insist, in discussing each other, on continuing to employ just the sort of Great Man theories of history they would scoff at in just about any other context: Foucault’s ideas, like Trotsky’s, are never treated as primarily the products of a certain intellectual milieu, as something that emerged from endless conversations and arguments involving

hundreds of people, but always, as if they emerged from the genius of a single man (or, very occasionally, woman). It’s not quite either that Marxist politics organized itself like an academic discipline or that it has become a model for how radical intellectuals, or increasingly, all intellectuals, treated one another; rather, the two developed somewhat in tandem. From the perspective of the academy, this led to many salutary results—the feeling there should be some moral center, that academic concerns should be relevant to people’s lives—but also, many disastrous ones: turning much intellectual debate into a kind of parody of sectarian politics, with everyone trying to reduce each others’ arguments into ridiculous caricatures so as to declare them not only wrong, but also evil and

dangerous—even if the debate is usually taking place in language so arcane that no one who could not afford seven years of grad school would have any way of knowing the debate was going on.

Now consider the different schools of anarchism. There are Anarcho-Syndicalists, AnarchoCommunists, Insurrectionists, Cooperativists, Individualists, Platformists... None are named after some Great Thinker; instead, they are invariably named either after some kind of practice, or most often, organizational principle. (Significantly, those Marxist tendencies which are not named after individuals, like Autonomism or Council Communism, are also the ones closest to anarchism.) Anarchists like to distinguish themselves by what they do, and how they organize themselves to go about doing it. And indeed this has always been what anarchists have spent most of their time thinking and arguing about. Anarchists have never been much interested in the kinds of broad strategic or philosophical questions that have historically preoccupied Marxists—questions like: Are the peasants a potentially revolutionary class? (Anarchists consider this something for the peasants to decide.) What is the nature of the commodity form? Rather, they tend to argue with each other about

what is the truly democratic way to go about a meeting, at what point organization stops being empowering and starts squelching individual freedom. Or, alternately, about the ethics of opposing power: What is direct action? Is it necessary (or right) to publicly condemn someone who assassinates a head of state? Or can assassination, especially if it prevents something terrible, like a war, be a moral act? When is it okay to break a window?

To sum up then:

1. Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy.
2. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice.

tice; it insists, before anything else, that one's means must be consonant with one's ends; one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; in fact, as much as possible, one must oneself, in one's relations with one's friends and allies, embody the society one wishes to create. This does not square very well with operating within the university, perhaps the only Western institution other than the Catholic Church and British monarchy that has survived in much the same form from the Middle Ages, doing intellectual battle at conferences in expensive hotels, and trying to pretend all this somehow furthers revolution. At the very least, one would imagine being an openly anarchist

professor would mean challenging the way universities are run—and I don't mean by demanding an anarchist studies department, either—and that, of course, is going to get one in far more trouble than anything one could ever write.

Obviously, everything I've said has been something of a caricature (there have been wildly sectarian anarchist groups, and plenty of libertarian, practice-oriented Marxists including, arguably, myself). Still, even so stated, this does suggest a great deal of potential complementarity between the two. And indeed there has been: even Mikhail Bakunin, for all his endless battles with Marx over practical questions, also personally translated Marx's *Capital* into Russian. But it also makes it easier to understand why there are so few anarchists in the academy. It's not just that anarchism does not tend to have much use for high theory.

It's that it is primarily concerned with forms of prac

**This does not mean anarchist theory is impossible.**

This doesn't mean anarchists have to be *against* theory.

After all, anarchism is, itself, an idea, even if a very old one. It is also a project, which sets out to begin creating the institutions of a new society "within the shell of the old," to expose, subvert, and undermine structures of domination but always, while doing so, proceeding in a democratic fashion, a manner which itself demonstrates those structures are unnecessary.

Clearly any such project has need of the tools of intellectual analysis and understanding. It might not need High Theory, in the sense familiar today. Certainly it will not need one single, Anarchist High Theory. That would be completely inimical to its spirit. Much better, I think, something more in the spirit of anarchist decision-making processes, employed in anything from tiny affinity groups to gigantic spokescouncils of thousands of people. Most anarchist groups operate by a

consensus process which has been developed, in many ways, to be the exact opposite of the high-handed, divisive, sectarian style so popular amongst other radical groups. Applied to theory, this would mean accepting the need for a diversity of high theoretical perspectives, united only by certain shared commitments and understandings. In consensus process, everyone agrees from the start on certain broad principles of unity and purposes for being for the group; but beyond that they also accept as a matter of course that no one is ever going to convert another person completely to their point of view, and probably shouldn't try; and that therefore discussion should focus on concrete questions of action, and coming up with a plan that everyone can live with and no one feels is in fundamental violation of their principles. One could see a parallel here: a series of diverse perspectives, joined together by their shared desire to understand the human condition, and move it in the direction of greater freedom. Rather than be based on the need to prove others' fundamental assumptions wrong, it seeks to find particular projects on which they reinforce each other. Just because theories are incommensurable in certain respects does not mean they cannot exist or even reinforce each other, any more than the fact that individuals have unique and incommensurable views of the world means they cannot become friends, or

lovers, or work on common projects.

Even more than High Theory, what anarchism needs is what might be called Low Theory: a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project. Mainstream social science actually isn't much help here, because normally in mainstream social science this sort of thing is generally classified as "policy issues," and no self-respecting anarchist would have anything to do with these.

**against policy (a tiny manifesto):**

The notion of "policy" presumes a state or

governing apparatus which imposes its will on

others. "Policy" is the negation of politics; policy is by definition something concocted by some form of elite, which presumes it knows better than others how their affairs are to be conducted. By participating in policy debates the very best one can achieve is to limit the damage, since the very premise is inimical to the idea of people managing their own affairs.

So in this case, the question becomes: What sort of social theory would actually be of interest to those who are trying to help bring about a world in which people are free to govern their own affairs?

This is what this pamphlet is mainly about.

For starters, I would say any such theory

would have to begin with some initial assumptions.

Not many. Probably just two. First, it would have to proceed from the assumption that, as the Brazilian folk song puts it, "another world is possible." That institutions like the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance are not inevitable; that it would be possible to have a world in which these things would not exist, and that we'd all be better off as a result. To commit oneself to such a principle is almost an act of faith, since how can one have certain knowledge of such matters? It

might possibly turn out that such a world is *not* possible. But one could also make the argument that it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes a commitment to optimism a moral

imperative: Since one cannot know a radically better world is not possible, are we not betraying everyone by insisting on continuing to justify, and reproduce, the mess we have today? And anyway, even if we're wrong, we might well get a lot closer.

**against anti-utopianism (another tiny manifesto):**

Here of course one has to deal with the inevitable objection: that utopianism has led to unmitigated horror, as Stalinists, Maoists, and other idealists tried to carve society into impossible shapes, killing millions in the process.

This argument belies a fundamental misconception: that imagining better worlds was itself the problem. Stalinists and their ilk did not kill because they dreamed great dreams—actually, Stalinists were famous for being rather short on imagination—but because they mistook their dreams for scientific certainties. This led them to feel they had a right to impose their visions through a machinery of violence.

Anarchists are proposing nothing of the sort, on either count. They presume no inevitable course of history and one can never further the course of freedom by creating new forms of coercion. In fact all forms of systemic violence are (among other things) assaults on the role of the imagination as a political principle, and the only way to begin to think about eliminating systematic violence is by recognizing this.

And of course one could write very long books about the atrocities throughout history carried out by cynics and other pessimists...

So that's the first proposition. The second, I'd say, is that any anarchist social theory would have to reject self-consciously any trace of vanguardism. The role of intellectuals is most definitively not to form an elite that can arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then lead the masses to follow. But if not that, what? This is one reason I'm calling this essay "Fragments of an Anarchist *Anthropology*"—because this is one area where I think anthropology is particularly well positioned to help. And not only because most actually-existing self-governing communities, and actually-existing non-market economies in the world have been investigated by anthropologists rather than sociologists or historians. It is also because the practice of ethnography provides at least something of a model, if a very rough, incipient model, of how nonvanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice might work. When one carries out an ethnography, one

observes what people do, and then tries to tease out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logics that underlie their actions; one tries to get at the way people's habits and actions makes sense in ways that they are not themselves completely aware of. One obvious role for a radical intellectual is to do precisely that: to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts. This is more or less what I was trying to do a few paragraphs ago when I suggested that social theory could refashion itself in the manner of direct democratic process. And as that example makes clear, such a project would actually have to have two aspects, or moments if you like: one ethnographic, one utopian, suspended in a constant dialogue.

None of this has much to do with what anthropology, even radical anthropology, has actually been like over the last hundred years or so. Still, there has been a strange affinity, over the years, between anthropology and anarchism which is in itself significant.

## Graves, Brown, Mauss, Sorel

It's not so much that anthropologists embraced anarchism, or even, were consciously espousing anarchist ideas; it's more that they moved in the same circles, their ideas tended to bounce off one another, that

there was something about anthropological thought in particular—its keen awareness of the very range of

human possibilities—that gave it an affinity to anarchism from the very beginning.

Let me start with Sir James Frazer, even though he was the furthest thing from an anarchist.

Frazer, chair of anthropology in Cambridge at the

turn of the (last) century, was a classic stodgy

Victorian who wrote accounts of savage customs,

based mainly on the results of questionnaires sent out to missionaries and colonial officials. His ostensible theoretical attitude was utterly condescending—he

believed almost all magic, myth and ritual was based on foolish logical mistakes—but his magnum opus,

*The Golden Bough*, contained such florid, fanciful, and strangely beautiful descriptions of tree spirits, eunuch priests, dying vegetation gods, and the sacrifice of divine kings, that he inspired a generation of poets and literati. Among them was Robert Graves, a British

poet who first became famous for writing bitinglly

satirical verse from the trenches of World War I. At the end of the war, Graves ended up in a hospital in France where he was cured of shell shock by W. H. R.

Rivers, the British anthropologist famous for the

Torres Straits Expedition, who doubled as a psychiatrist. Graves was so impressed by Rivers that he was later to suggest professional anthropologists be placed in charge of all world governments. Not a particularly anarchist sentiment, certainly—but Graves tended to dart about between all sorts of odd political positions.

In the end, he was to abandon “civilization”—industrial society—entirely and spend the last fifty years or so of his life in a village on the Spanish island of Majorca, supporting himself by writing novels, but

also producing numerous books of love poetry, and a series of some of the most subversive essays ever

written.

Graves’ thesis was, among other things, that greatness was a pathology; “great men” were essentially destroyers and “great” poets not much better (his arch-enemies were Virgil, Milton and Pound),

that all real poetry is and has always been a mythic celebration of an ancient Supreme Goddess, of whom

Frazer had only confused glimmerings, and whose

matriarchal followers were conquered and destroyed

by Hitler’s beloved Aryan hoards when they emerged

from the Ukrainian Steppes in the early Bronze Age

(though they survived a bit longer in Minoan Crete).

In a book called *The White Goddess: An Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, he claimed to map out the rudiments of her calendar rites in different parts of Europe, focusing on the periodic ritual murder of the Goddess' royal consorts, among other things a surefire way of guaranteeing would-be great men do not get

out of hand, and ending the book with a call for an eventual industrial collapse. I say "claimed" advisedly here. The delightful, if also confusing, thing about Graves' books is that he's obviously having so much fun writing them, throwing out one outrageous thesis after another, that it's impossible to tell how much of it is meant to be taken seriously. Or whether that's even a meaningful question. In one essay, written in the '50s, Graves invents the distinction between

"reasonableness" and "rationality" later made famous by Stephen Toulmin in the '80s, but he does it in the course of an essay written to defend Socrates' wife, Xanthippe, from her reputation as an atrocious nag.

(His argument: imagine you had been married to Socrates.)

Did Graves really believe that women are always superior to men? Did he really expect us to

believe he had solved one mythical problem by falling into an "analeptic trance" and overhearing a conversation about fish between a Greek historian and Roman official in Cyprus in 54 CE? It's worth wondering, because for all their current obscurity, in these writings, Graves essentially invented two different intellectual traditions which were later to become major theoretical strains in modern anarchism—if admittedly, generally considered two of the most *outré*. On the one hand, the cult of the Great Goddess has been

revived and become a direct inspiration for Pagan

Anarchism, hippyish performers of spiral dances who are always welcome at mass actions because they do

seem to have rather a knack for influencing the

weather; on the other, Primitivists, whose most

famous (and extreme) avatar is John Zerzan, who has taken Graves' rejection of industrial civilization and hopes for general economic collapse even further,

arguing that even agriculture was a great historical mistake. Both the Pagans and the Primitivists, curiously, share exactly that ineffable quality which makes Graves' work so distinctive: it's really impossible to know on what level one is supposed to read it. It's both ridiculous self-parody, and terribly serious, at the same time.

There have also been anthropologists—among them, some of the founding figures of the discipline—who have themselves dabbled with anarchist, or anarchistic, politics.

The most notorious case was that of a turn of the century student named Al Brown, known to his

college friends as “Anarchy Brown.” Brown was an

admirer of the famous anarchist Prince (he of course renounced his title), Peter Kropotkin, arctic explorer and naturalist, who had thrown social Darwinism into a tumult from which it still has never quite recovered by documenting how the most successful species tend to be those which cooperate the most effectively.

(Sociobiology for instance was basically an attempt to come up with an answer to Kropotkin.) Later, Brown

was to begin affecting a cloak and a monocle, adopting a fancy mock-aristocratic hyphenated name (A. R.

Radcliffe-Brown), and ultimately, in the 1920s and

'30s, becoming the master theorist of British social anthropology. The older Brown didn't like to talk too much about his youthful politics, but it's probably no coincidence that his main theoretical interest remained the maintenance of social order outside the state.

Perhaps the most intriguing case though is that of Marcel Mauss, Radcliffe-Brown's contemporary, and the inventor of French anthropology. Mauss was a child of Orthodox Jewish parents who had the

mixed blessing of also being the nephew of Emile

Durkheim, the founder of French sociology. Mauss

was also a revolutionary socialist. For much of his life, he managed a consumer coop in Paris, and was

constantly writing screeds for socialist newspapers, carrying out projects of research on coops in other countries, and trying to create links between coops in order to build an alternative, anti-capitalist, economy.

His most famous work was written in response to the crisis of socialism he saw in Lenin's reintroduction of the market in the Soviet Union in the '20s: If it was impossible to simply legislate the money economy

away, even in Russia, the least monetarized society in Europe, then perhaps revolutionaries needed to start looking at the ethnographic record to see what sort of creature the market really was, and what viable alternatives to capitalism might look like. Hence his "Essay on the Gift," written in 1925, which argued (among

other things) that the origin of all contracts lies in communism, an unconditional commitment to

another's needs, and that despite endless economic

textbooks to the contrary, there has never been an

economy based on barter: that actually-existing societies which do not employ money have instead been gift economies in which the distinctions we now make between interest and altruism, person and property, freedom and obligation, simply did not exist.

Mauss believed socialism could never be built by state fiat but only gradually, from below, that it was possible to begin building a new society based on

mutual aid and self-organization “in the shell of the old”; he felt that existing popular practices provided the basis both for a moral critique of capitalism and possible glimpses of what that future society would be like. All of these are classic anarchist positions. Still, he did not consider himself an anarchist. In fact, he never had anything good to say about them. This was, it appears, because he identified anarchism mainly

with the figure of Georges Sorel, an apparently quite personally distasteful French anarcho-syndicalist and anti-Semite, now mainly famous for his essay

*Reflections sur le Violence*. Sorel argued that since the masses were not fundamentally good or rational, it

was foolish to make one’s primary appeal to them

through reasoned arguments. Politics is the art of

inspiring others with great myths. For revolutionaries, he proposed the myth of an apocalyptic General

Strike, a moment of total transformation. To maintain it, he added, one would need a revolutionary elite

capable of keeping the myth alive by their willingness to engage in symbolic acts of violence—an elite which, like the Marxist vanguard party

(often somewhat less symbolic in its violence), Mauss described as a kind of perpetual conspiracy, a modern version of the secret political men's societies of the ancient world.

In other words, Mauss saw Sorel, and hence anarchism, as introducing an element of the irrational, of violence, and of vanguardism. It might seem a bit odd that among French revolutionaries of the time, it should have been the trade unionist emphasizing the power of myth, and the anthropologist objecting, but in the context of the '20s and '30s, with fascist stirrings everywhere, it's understandable why a European radical—especially a Jewish one—might see all this as just a little creepy. Creepy enough to throw cold water even on the otherwise rather appealing image of the General Strike—which is after all about the least

violent possible way to imagine an apocalyptic revolution. By the '40s, Mauss concluded his suspicions had proved altogether justified.

To the doctrine of the revolutionary vanguard, he wrote, Sorel added a notion originally culled from Mauss' own uncle Durkheim: a doctrine of corporatism, of vertical structures glued together by techniques of social solidarity. This he said was a great influence on Lenin, by Lenin's own admission. From

there it was adopted by the Right. By the end of his life, Sorel himself had become increasingly sympathetic with fascism; in this he followed the same trajectory as Mussolini (another youthful dabbler with anarcho-syndicalism) and who, Mauss believed, took

these same Durkheimian/Sorelian/Leninist ideas to

their ultimate conclusions. By the end of his life, Mauss became convinced even Hitler's great ritual

pageants, torch-lit parades with their chants of "*Seig Heil!*," were really inspired by accounts he and his uncle had written about totemic rituals of Australian aborigines. "When we were describing how ritual can create

social solidarity, of submerging the individual in the mass,” he complained, “it never occurred to us

that anyone would apply such techniques in the

modern day!” (In fact, Mauss was mistaken. Modern

research has shown Nuremberg rallies were actually

inspired by Harvard pep rallies. But this is another story.) The outbreak of war destroyed Mauss, who had never completely recovered from losing most of his

closest friends in the First World War. When the

Nazis took Paris he refused to flee, but sat in his office every day with a pistol in his desk, waiting for the Gestapo to arrive. They never did, but the terror, and weight of his feelings of historical complicity, finally shattered his sanity.

# **The anarchist anthropology that almost already does exist**

In the end, though, Marcel Mauss has probably had more influence on anarchists than all the other ones combined. This is because he was interested in alternative moralities, which opened the way to thinking that societies without states and markets were the way they were because they actively wished to live that way. Which in our terms means, because they were

anarchists. Insofar as fragments of an anarchist

anthropology do, already, exist, they largely derive from him.

Before Mauss, the universal assumption had been that economies without money or markets had

operated by means of “barter”; they were trying to engage in market behavior (acquire useful goods and services at the least cost to themselves, get rich if possible...), they just hadn’t yet developed very sophisticated ways of going about it. Mauss demonstrated that in fact, such economies were really “gift economies.” They were not based on calculation, but on a refusal to calculate; they were rooted in an ethical system which consciously rejected most of what we would consider the basic principles of

economics. It was not that they had not yet learned to seek profit through the most efficient means. They would have found the very premise that the point of an economic transaction—at least, one with someone who was not your enemy—was to seek the greatest

profit deeply offensive.

It is significant that the one (of the few) overtly anarchist anthropologists of recent memory, another Frenchman, Pierre Clastres, became famous for making a similar argument on the political level.

He insisted political anthropologists had still not completely gotten over the old evolutionist perspectives that saw the state primarily as a more sophisticated form of organization than what had come before; stateless peoples, such as the Amazonian societies Clastres studied, were tacitly assumed not to have attained the level of say, the Aztecs or the Inca. But what if, he proposed, Amazonians were not entirely unaware of what the elementary forms of state power might be like—what it would mean to allow some men to give everyone else orders which could not be questioned, since they were backed up by the threat of force—and were for that very reason determined to ensure such things never came about? What if they considered the fundamental premises of our political science morally objectionable?

The parallels between the two arguments are actually quite striking. In gift economies there are, often, venues for enterprising individuals: But everything is arranged in such a way they could never be used as a platform for creating permanent inequalities of wealth, since self-aggrandizing types all end up competing to see who can give the most away. In

Amazonian (or North American) societies, the institution of the chief played the same role on a political level: the position was so demanding, and so little rewarding, so hedged about by safeguards, that there was no way for power-hungry individuals to do much with it. Amazonians might not have literally whacked off the ruler's head every few years, but it's not an entirely inappropriate metaphor.

By these lights these were all, in a very real sense, anarchist societies. They were founded on an explicit rejection of the logic of the state and of the market.

They are, however, extremely imperfect ones.

The most common criticism of Clastres is to ask how his Amazonians could really be organizing their societies against the emergence of something they have never actually experienced. A naive question, but it points to something equally naive in Clastres' own approach. Clastres manages to talk blithely about the uncompromised egalitarianism of the very same

Amazonian societies, for instance, famous for their use of gang rape as a weapon to terrorize women

who transgress proper gender roles. It's a blind spot so glaring one has to wonder how he could possibly miss out on it; especially considering it provides an answer to just that question. Perhaps Amazonian men understand what arbitrary, unquestionable power,

backed by force, would be like because they themselves wield that sort of power over their wives and daughters. Perhaps for that very reason they would not like to see structures capable of inflicting it on them.

It's worth pointing out because Clastres is, in many ways, a naive romantic. From another perspective, though, there's no mystery here at all. After all, we are talking about the fact that most Amazonians don't want to give others the power to threaten them with physical injury if they don't do as they are told.

Maybe we should better be asking what it says about

ourselves that we feel this attitude needs any sort of explanation.

## **toward a theory of imaginary counterpower**

This is what I mean by an alternative ethics, then.

Anarchistic societies are no more unaware of human capacities for greed or vainglory than modern

Americans are unaware of human capacities for envy, gluttony, or sloth; they would just find them equally unappealing as the basis for their civilization. In fact, they see these phenomena as moral dangers so dire they end up organizing much of their social life

around containing them.

If this were a purely theoretical essay I would explain that all this suggests an interesting way of synthesizing theories of value and theories of resistance. For present purposes, suffice it to say that I think Mauss and Clastres have succeeded, somewhat despite themselves, in laying the groundwork for a theory of revolutionary counterpower.

I'm afraid this is a somewhat complicated argument. Let me take it one step at a time.

In typical revolutionary discourse a "counterpower" is a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from selfgoverning

communities to radical labor unions to popular militias. Sometimes it is also referred to as an “anti-power.” When such institutions maintain themselves in the face of the state, this is usually referred to as a “dual power” situation. By this definition most of human history is actually characterized by dual power situations, since few historical states had the means to root such institutions out, even assuming that they would have wanted to. But Mauss and Clastres’ argument suggests something even more radical. It suggests that counterpower, at least in the most

elementary sense, actually exists where the states and markets are not even present; that in such cases, rather than being embodied in popular institutions which pose themselves against the power of lords, or kings, or plutocrats, they are embodied in institutions which ensure such types of person never come about. What it is “counter” to, then, is a potential, a latent aspect, or dialectical possibility if you prefer, within the society itself. This at least would help explain an otherwise

peculiar fact; the way in which it is often particularly the egalitarian societies which are torn by terrible inner tensions, or at least, extreme forms of symbolic violence.

Of course, all societies are to some degree at

war with themselves. There are always clashes

between interests, factions, classes and the like; also, social systems are always based on the pursuit of different forms of value which pull people in different directions. In egalitarian societies, which tend to place an enormous emphasis on creating and maintaining

communal consensus, this often appears to spark a kind of equally elaborate reaction formation, a spectral nightworld inhabited by monsters, witches or other creatures of horror. And it’s the most peaceful societies which are also the most haunted, in their imaginative constructions of the cosmos, by constant specters of perennial war. The invisible worlds surrounding them are literally battlegrounds. It’s as if the endless labor of achieving consensus masks a constant inner violence— or, it might perhaps be better to say, is in

fact the process by which that inner violence is measured and contained—and it is precisely this, and the resulting tangle of moral contradiction, which is the prime font of social creativity. It's not these conflicting principles and contradictory impulses themselves which are the ultimate political reality, then; it's the regulatory process which mediates them. Some examples might help here:

**Case 1:** The Piaroa, a highly egalitarian society

living along tributaries of the Orinoco which

ethnographer Joanna Overing herself describes as

anarchists. They place enormous value on individual freedom and autonomy, and are quite selfconscious about the importance of ensuring that no one is ever at another person's orders, or the need to ensure no one gains such control over economic resources that they can use it to constrain others'

freedom. Yet they also insist that Piaroa culture itself was the creation of an evil god, a two-headed cannibalistic buffoon. The Piaroa have developed a moral philosophy which defines the human condition as caught between a "world of the senses," of wild, pre-social desires, and a "world of thought."

Growing up involves learning to control and

channel in the former through thoughtful consideration for others, and the cultivation of a sense of humor; but this is made infinitely more difficult by the fact that all forms of technical knowledge,

however necessary for life are, due to their origins, laced with elements of destructive madness.

Similarly, while the Piaroa are famous for their

peaceableness—murder is unheard of, the assumption being that anyone who killed another human being would be instantly consumed by pollution

and die horribly—they inhabit a cosmos of endless invisible war, in which wizards are engaged in

fending off the attacks of insane, predatory gods and all deaths are caused by spiritual murder and have to be avenged by the magical massacre of

whole (distant, unknown) communities.

market rules enforced by charms which embodied

diseases and were said to be powered by human

body parts and blood. Enterprising men who

managed to patch together some sort of fame,

wealth, or clientele were by definition witches.

Their hearts were coated by a substance called *tsav*, which could only be augmented by the eating of human flesh. Most tried to avoid doing so, but a

secret society of witches was said to exist which would slip bits of human flesh in their victims' food, thus incurring a "flesh debt" and unnatural cravings that would eventually drive those affected to

consume their entire families. This imaginary

society of witches was seen as the invisible government of the country. Power was thus institutionalized evil, and every generation, a witch-finding movement would arise to expose the culprits, thus, effectively, destroying any emerging structures of authority.

### **Case 2: The Tiv, another notoriously egalitarian**

society, make their homes along the Benue River

in central Nigeria. Compared to the Piaroa, their domestic life is quite hierarchical: male elders tend to have many wives, and exchange with one

another the rights to younger women's fertility;

younger men are thus reduced to spending most of

their lives chilling their heels as unmarried dependents in their fathers' compounds. In recent centuries the Tiv were never entirely insulated

from the raids of slave traders; Tivland was also dotted with local markets; minor wars between

clans were occasionally fought, though more often large disputes were mediated in large communal

"moots." Still, there were no political institutions larger than the compound; in fact, anything that

even began to look like a political institution was considered intrinsically suspect, or more precisely, seen as surrounded by an aura of occult horror. This was, as ethnographer Paul Bohannan succinctly put it, because of what was seen to be the nature of

power: "men attain power by consuming the

substance of others." Markets were protected, and **Case 3: Highland Madagascar**, where I lived

between 1989 and 1991, was a rather different place.

The area had been the center of a Malagasy state—the Merina kingdom—since the early nineteenth

century, and afterwards endured many years of harsh colonial rule. There was a market economy and, in theory, a central government—during the time I was there, largely dominated by what was called the

“Merina bourgeoisie.” In fact this government had effectively withdrawn from most of the countryside and rural communities were effectively governing

themselves. In many ways these could also be

considered anarchistic: most local decisions were made by consensus by informal bodies, leadership

was looked on at best with suspicion, it was considered wrong for adults to be giving one another orders, especially on an ongoing basis; this was

considered to make even institutions like wage

labor inherently morally suspect. Or to be more

precise, unmalagasy—this was how the French

behaved, or wicked kings and slaveholders long

ago. Society was overall remarkably peaceable. Yet once again it was surrounded by invisible warfare; just about everyone had access to dangerous medicine or spirits or was willing to let on they might; the night was haunted by witches who danced

naked on tombs and rode men like horses; just

about all sickness was due to envy, hatred, and

magical attack. What’s more, witchcraft bore a

strange, ambivalent relation to national identity.

While people made rhetorical reference to

Malagasy as equal and united “like hairs on a head,”

ideals of economic equality were rarely, if ever, invoked; however, it was assumed that anyone who

became too rich or powerful would be destroyed by witchcraft, and while witchcraft was the definition of evil, it was also seen as peculiarly Malagasy

(charms were just charms but evil charms were

called “Malagasy charms”). Insofar as rituals of

moral solidarity did occur, and the ideal of equality was invoked, it was largely in the course of rituals held to suppress, expel, or destroy those witches who, perversely, were the twisted embodiment and

practical enforcement of the egalitarian ethos of the society itself.

Note how in each case there's a striking contrast between the cosmological content, which is nothing if not tumultuous, and social process, which is all about mediation, arriving at consensus. None of these societies are entirely egalitarian: there are always certain key forms of dominance, at least of men over women, elders over juniors. The nature and intensity of these forms vary enormously: in Piaroa communities the hierarchies were so modest that

Overing doubts one can really speak of "male dominance" at all (despite the fact that communal leaders are invariably male); the Tiv appear to be quite

another story. Still, structural inequalities invariably exist, and as a result I think it is fair to say that these anarchies are not only imperfect, they contain with them the seeds of their own destruction. It is hardly a coincidence that when larger, more systematically violent forms of domination do emerge, they draw on precisely these idioms of age and gender to justify themselves.

Still, I think it would be a mistake to see the invisible violence and terror as simply a working out of the "internal contradictions" created by those forms of inequality. One could, perhaps, make the case that most real, tangible violence is. At least, it is a somewhat notorious thing that, in societies where the only notable inequalities are based in gender, the only murders one is likely to observe are men killing each other over women. Similarly, it does seem to be the case, generally speaking, that the more pronounced the differences between male and female

roles in a society, the more physically violent it tends to be. But this hardly means that if all inequalities vanished, then everything, even the imagination,

would become placid and untroubled. To some

degree, I suspect all this turbulence stems from the very nature of the human condition. There would

appear to be no society which does not see human life as fundamentally a problem. However much they

might differ on what they deem the problem to be, at the very least, the existence of work, sex, and reproduction are seen as fraught with all sorts of quandaries; human desires are always fickle; and then there's the fact that we're all going to die. So there's a lot to be troubled by. None of these dilemmas are going to vanish if we eliminate structural inequalities (much though I think this would radically improve things in just about every other way). Indeed, the fantasy that it might, that the human condition,

desire, mortality, can all be somehow resolved seems to be an especially dangerous one, an image of utopia which always seems to lurk somewhere behind the

pretensions of Power and the state. Instead, as I've suggested, the spectral violence seems to emerge from the very tensions inherent in the project of maintaining an egalitarian society. Otherwise, one would at least imagine the Tiv imagination would be more

tumultuous than the Piaroa.

That the state emerged from images of an impossible resolution of the human condition was Clastres' point as well. He argued that historically, the institution of the state could not have possibly emerged from the political institutions of anarchist societies, which were designed to ensure this never happened. Instead, it could only have been from religious institutions: he pointed to the Tupinamba prophets who led the whole population on a vast migration in search of a "land without evil." Of course, in later contexts, what Peter Lamborn Wilson calls "the Clastrian machine," that set of mechanisms which oppose the emergence of domination, what I'm calling the apparatus of counterpower, can itself become caught in such apocalyptic fantasies.

Now, at this point the reader may be objecting, "Sure, but what does any of this have to do with the kind of insurrectionary communities which revolutionary theorists are normally referring to when they use the word 'counterpower'?"

Here it might be useful to look at the difference between the first two cases and the third— because the Malagasy communities I knew in 1990

were living in something which in many ways resembled an insurrectionary situation. Between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, there had been a remarkable transformation of popular attitudes. Just about all reports from the last century insisted that, despite widespread resentment against the corrupt and often brutal Malagasy government, no one questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy itself, or particularly, their absolute personal loyalty to the Queen. Neither would anyone explicitly question the legitimacy of slavery. After the French conquest of the island in 1895, followed immediately by the abolition of both the monarchy and slavery, all this seems to have changed extremely quickly. Before a generation was out, one began to encounter the attitude that I found to be well-nigh universal in the countryside a hundred years later: slavery was evil, and monarchs were seen as inherently immoral because they treated others like slaves. In the end, all relations of

command (military service, wage labor, forced labor) came to be fused together in people's minds as variations on slavery; the very institutions which had previously been seen as beyond challenge were now the definition of illegitimacy, and this, especially among those who had the least access to higher

education and French Enlightenment ideas. Being

“Malagasy” came to be defined as rejecting such

foreign ways. If one combines this attitude with

constant passive resistance to state institutions, and the elaboration of autonomous, and relatively egalitarian modes of selfgovernment, one could see what happened as a revolution. After the financial crisis of the '80s, the state in much of the country effectively collapsed, or anyway devolved into a matter of hollow form without the backing of systematic coercion.

Rural people carried on much as they had before,

going to offices periodically to fill out forms even though they were no longer paying any real taxes, the government was hardly providing services,

and in the event of theft or even murder, police would no longer come. If a revolution is a matter of people resisting some form of power identified as oppressive, identifying some key aspect of that power as the source of what is fundamentally objectionable about it, and then trying to get rid of one's oppressors in such a way as to try to eliminate that sort of power

completely from daily life, then it is hard to deny that, in some sense, this was indeed a revolution. It might not have involved an actual uprising, but it was a revolution nonetheless.

How long it would last is another question; it was a very fragile, tenuous sort of freedom. Many such enclaves have collapsed—in Madagascar as elsewhere. Others endure; new ones are being created all the time. The contemporary world is riddled with

such anarchic spaces, and the more successful they are, the less likely we are to hear about them. It's only if such a space breaks down into violence that there's any chance outsiders will even find out that it exists.

The puzzling question is how such profound changes in popular attitudes could happen so fast?

The likely answer is that they really didn't; there were probably things going on even under the nineteenth-century kingdom of which foreign observers (even those long resident on the island) were simply

unaware. But clearly, too, something about the imposition of colonial rule allowed for a rapid reshuffling of priorities. This, I would argue, is what the ongoing existence of deeply embedded forms of counterpower allows. A lot of the ideological work, in fact, of making a revolution was conducted precisely in the spectral nightworld of sorcerers and witches; in redefinitions of the moral implications of different forms of magical power. But this only underlines how these spectral zones are always the fulcrum of the moral imagination, a kind of creative reservoir, too, of potential revolutionary change. It's precisely from these invisible spaces—invisible, most of all, to power—whence the potential for insurrection, and

the extraordinary social creativity that seems to emerge out of nowhere in revolutionary moments,

actually comes.

To sum up the argument so far, then:

1) Counterpower is first and foremost rooted in the imagination; it emerges from the fact that all social systems are a tangle of contradictions, always to some degree at war with themselves.

Or, more precisely, it is rooted in the relation

between the practical imagination required to

maintain a society based on consensus (as any

society not based on violence must, ultimately,

be)—the constant work of imaginative identification with others that makes understanding possible—and the spectral violence which

appears to be its constant, perhaps inevitable

corollary.

2) In egalitarian societies, counterpower might be said to be the predominant form of social

power. It stands guard over what are seen as

certain frightening possibilities within the

society itself: notably against the emergence of

systematic forms of political or economic

dominance.

2a) Institutionally, counterpower takes the form of what we would call institutions of

direct democracy, consensus and mediation;

that is, ways of publicly negotiating and

controlling that inevitable internal tumult

and transforming it into those social states

(or if you like, forms of value) that society

sees as the most desirable: conviviality,

unanimity, fertility, prosperity, beauty,

however it may be framed.

3) In highly unequal societies, imaginative counterpower often defines itself against certain aspects of dominance that are seen as particularly obnoxious and can become an attempt to eliminate them from social relations completely. When it does, it becomes revolutionary.

3a) Institutionally, as an imaginative well, it is responsible for the creation of new social

forms, and the revalorization or transformation of old ones, and also, 4) in moments of radical transformation—revolutions in the old-fashioned sense—this is precisely what allows for the notorious

popular ability to innovate entirely new politics, economic, and social forms. Hence, it is the root of what Antonio Negri has called

“constituent power,” the power to create

constitutions.

Most modern constitutional orders see themselves as having been created by rebellions: the American revolution, the French revolution, and so on. This has, of course, not always been the case. But this leads to a very important question, because any really politically engaged anthropology will have to start by seriously confronting the question of what, if anything, really divides what we like to call the “modern” world from the rest of human history, to which folks like the Piaroa, Tiv or Malagasy are

normally relegated. This is as one might imagine a pretty vexed question but I am afraid it can’t be avoided, since otherwise, many readers might not be convinced there’s any reason to have an anarchist anthropology to begin with.

# Blowing Up Walls

As I remarked, an anarchist anthropology doesn't really exist. There are only fragments. In the first part of this essay I tried to gather some of them, and to

look for common themes; in this part I want to go

further, and imagine a body of social theory that

might exist at some time in the future.

## obvious objections

**Anarchist:** Okay, then. There have been all

sorts of successful experiments: experiments with

worker's self-management, like Mondragon;

economic projects based on the idea of the gift

economy, like Linux; all sorts of political organizations based on consensus and direct democracy...

**Skeptic:** Sure, sure, but these are small, isolated

examples. I'm talking about whole societies.

**Anarchist:** Well, it's not like people haven't tried. Look at the Paris Commune, the revolution

in Republican Spain...

**Skeptic:** Yeah, and look what happened to those guys! They all got killed!

Before being able to do so I really do need to address the usual objection to any project of this nature: that the study of actually-existing anarchist societies is

simply irrelevant to the modern world. After all, aren't we just talking about a bunch of primitives?

For anarchists who do know something about anthropology, the arguments are all too familiar. A

typical exchange goes something like this:

**Skeptic:** Well, I might take this whole anarchism idea more seriously if you could give me some reason to think it would work. Can you name

me a single viable example of a society which has existed without a government?

**Anarchist:** Sure. There have been thousands. I could name a dozen just off the top of my head: the Bororo, the Baining, the Onondaga, the Wintu, the Ema, the Tallensi, the Vezo...

**Skeptic:** But those are all a bunch of primitives! I'm talking about anarchism in a modern, technological society.

The dice are loaded. You can't win. Because when the skeptic says "society," what he really means

is "state," even "nation-state." Since no one is going to produce an example of an anarchist state—that would

be a contradiction in terms—what we're really being

asked for is an example of a modern nation-state with

the government somehow plucked away: a situation in

which the government of Canada, to take a random

example, has been overthrown, or for some reason

abolished itself, and no new one has taken its place but instead all former Canadian citizens begin to organize themselves into libertarian collectives. Obviously this would never be allowed to happen. In the past, whenever it

even looked like it might—here, the Paris commune and Spanish civil war are excellent examples—the politicians running pretty much every state in the vicinity have been willing to put their differences on hold until those trying to bring such a situation about had been rounded up and shot.

There is a way out, which is to accept that anarchist forms of organization would not look

anything like a state. That they would involve an

endless variety of communities, associations,

networks, projects, on every conceivable scale, overlapping and intersecting in any way we could imagine, and possibly many that we can't. Some would be quite

local, others global. Perhaps all they would have in

common is that none would involve anyone showing

up with weapons and telling everyone else to shut up

and do what they were told. And that, since anarchists are not actually trying to seize power within any

national territory, the process of one system replacing the other will not take the form of some sudden revolutionary cataclysm—the storming of a Bastille, the seizing of a Winter Palace—but will necessarily be

gradual, the creation of alternative forms of organization on a world scale, new forms of communication, new, less alienated ways of organizing life, which will, eventually, make currently existing forms of power

seem stupid and beside the point. That in turn would

mean that there are endless examples of viable anarchism: pretty much any form of organization would count as one, so long as it was not imposed by some

higher authority, from a klezmer band to the international postal service.

Unfortunately, this kind of argument does not seem to satisfy most skeptics. They want “societies.”

So one is reduced to scouring the historical and

ethnographic record for entities that look like a

nation-state (one people, speaking a common

language, living within a bounded territory, acknowledging a common set of legal principles...), but which lack a state apparatus (which, following Weber, one

can define roughly as: a group of people who claim

that, at least when they are around and in their official capacity, they are the only ones with the right to act violently). These, too, one can find, if one is

willing to look at relatively small communities far

away in time or space. But then one is told they don’t count for just this reason.

So we’re back to the original problem. There is assumed to be an absolute rupture between the

world we live in, and the world inhabited by anyone

who might be characterized as “primitive,” “tribal,”

or even as “peasants.” Anthropologists are not to

blame here: we have been trying for decades now to

convince the public that there’s no such thing as a

“primitive,” that “simple societies” are not really all that simple, that no one ever existed in timeless isolation, that it makes no sense to speak of some social systems as more or less evolved; but so far, we’ve

made very little headway. It is almost impossible to

convince the average American that a bunch of

Amazonians could possibly have anything to teach

them—other than, conceivably, that we should all

abandon modern civilization and go live in

Amazonia—and this because they are assumed to live

in an absolutely different world. Which is, oddly

enough, again because of the way we are used to

thinking about revolutions.

Let me take up the argument I began to sketch out in the last section and try to explain why I think this is true:

**a fairly brief manifesto**

**concerning the concept of revolution:**

The term “revolution” has been so relentlessly

cheaped in common usage that it can mean

almost anything. We have revolutions every week

now: banking revolutions, cybernetic revolutions,

medical revolutions, an internet revolution every

time someone invents some clever new piece of

software.

This kind of rhetoric is only possible because the commonplace definition of revolution has

always implied something in the nature of a paradigm shift: a clear break, a fundamental rupture in the nature of social reality after which everything

works differently, and previous categories no

longer apply. It is this which makes it possible to,

say, claim that the modern world is derived from

two “revolutions”: the French revolution and the

Industrial revolution, despite the fact that the two

had almost nothing else in common other than

seeming to mark a break with all that came before.

One odd result is that, as Ellen Meskins Wood has

noted, we are in the habit of discussing what we

call “modernity” as if it involved a combination of

English laissez faire economics, and French

Republican government, despite the fact that the

two never really occurred together: the industrial

revolution happened under a bizarre, antiquated,

still largely medieval English constitution, and

nineteenth-century France was anything but laissez

faire.

(The one-time appeal of the Russian revolution for the “developing world” seems to derive from the fact it’s the one example where both sorts

of revolution did seem to coincide: a seizure of

cataclysmic ruptures. Since, after all, how else

could one totalizing system be replaced by a

completely different one than by a cataclysmic

rupture? Human history thus becomes a series of

revolutions: the Neolithic revolution, the

Industrial revolution, the Information revolution,  
etc., and the political dream becomes to somehow  
take control of the process; to get to the point  
where we can cause a rupture of this sort, a  
momentous breakthrough that will not just happen  
but result directly from some kind of collective  
will. “The revolution,” properly speaking.

national power which then led to rapid industrialization. As a result almost every twentieth-century  
government in the global south determined to play

economic catch-up with the industrial powers had  
also to claim to be a revolutionary regime.)

If there is one logical error underlying all this, it rests on imagining that social or even technological  
change takes the same form of what Thomas Kuhn has called “the structure of scientific revolutions.”  
Kuhn is referring to events like the shift from a Newtonian to Einsteinian universe:

suddenly there is an intellectual breakthrough and  
afterwards, the universe is different. Applied to  
anything other than scientific revolutions, it  
implies that the world really was equivalent to our  
knowledge of it, and the moment we change the  
principles on which our knowledge is based, reality

changes too. This is just the sort of basic intellectual mistake developmental psychologists say we’re  
supposed to get over in early childhood, but it  
seems few of us really do.

In fact, the world is under no obligation to live up to our expectations, and insofar as “reality”  
refers to anything, it refers to precisely that which

can never be entirely encompassed by our imaginative constructions. Totalities, in particular, are  
always creatures of the imagination. Nations, societies, ideologies, closed systems... none of these  
really exist. Reality is always infinitely messier than that—even if the belief that they exist is an  
undeniable social force. For one thing, the habit of thought which defines the world, or society, as a

totalizing system (in which every element takes on its significance only in relation to the others) tends to lead almost inevitably to a view of revolutions as

If so it's not surprising that the moment radical thinkers felt they had to give up this dream, their first reaction was to redouble their efforts to identify revolutions happening anyway, to the point where in the eyes of someone like Paul Virilio, rupture is our permanent state of being, or for someone like Jean Baudrillard, the world now changes completely every couple years, whenever he gets a new idea.

This is not an appeal for a flat-out rejection of such imaginary totalities—even assuming this were possible, which it probably isn't, since they are probably a necessary tool of human thought. It is an appeal to always bear in mind that they are just that: tools of thought. For instance, it is indeed a very good thing to be able to ask “after the revolution, how will we organize mass transportation?,” “who will fund scientific research?,” or even, “after the revolution, do you think there will still be fashion magazines?” The phrase is a useful mental hinge; even if we also recognize that in reality, unless we are willing to massacre thousands of people (and probably even then), the revolution will almost certainly not be quite such a clean break as such a phrase implies.

What will it be, then? I have already made some suggestions. A revolution on a world scale will take a very long time. But it is also possible to recognize that it is already starting to happen. The

easiest way to get our minds around it is to stop

thinking about revolution as a thing—“the” revolution, the great cataclysmic break—and instead ask “what is revolutionary action?” We could then

suggest: revolutionary action is any collective

action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some

form of power or domination and in doing so,

reconstitutes social relations—even within the

collectivity—in that light. Revolutionary action

does not necessarily have to aim to topple governments. Attempts to create autonomous communities in the face of power (using Castoriadis’ definition here: ones that constitute themselves, collectively make their own rules or principles of operation, and continually reexamine them), would, for instance, be almost by definition revolutionary

acts. And history shows us that the continual accumulation of such acts can change (almost) everything.

I’m hardly the first to have made an argument like this—some such vision follows almost necessarily

once one is no longer thinking in terms of the framework of the state and seizure of state power. What I want to emphasize here is what this means for how

we look at history.

## **a thought experiment, or, blowing up walls**

What I am proposing, essentially, is that we engage in a kind of thought experiment. What if, as a recent title put it, “we have never been modern”? What if there

never was any fundamental break, and therefore, we

are not living in a fundamentally different moral,

social, or political universe than the Piaroa or Tiv or rural Malagasy?

There are a million different ways to define “modernity.” According to some it mainly has to do

with science and technology, for others it’s a matter of individualism; others, capitalism, or bureaucratic rationality, or alienation, or an ideal of freedom of one sort or another. However they define it, almost everyone

agrees that at somewhere in the sixteenth, or seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries, a Great

Transformation occurred, that it occurred in Western

Europe and its settler colonies, and that because of it, we became “modern.” And that once we did, we

became a fundamentally different sort of creature than anything that had come before.

But what if we kicked this whole apparatus away? What if we blew up the wall? What if we

accepted that the people who Columbus or Vasco da

Gama “discovered” on their expeditions were just us?

Or certainly, just as much “us” as Columbus and Vasco

da Gama ever were?

I’m not arguing that nothing important has changed over the last five hundred years, any more

than I’m arguing that cultural differences are unimportant. In one sense everyone, every community, every individual for that matter, lives in their own

unique universe. By “blowing up walls,” I mean most

of all, blowing up the arrogant, unreflecting assumptions which tell us we have nothing in common with 98% of people who ever lived, so we don't really have

to think about them. Since, after all, if you assume the fundamental break, the only theoretical question you

can ask is some variation on "what makes us so

special?" Once we get rid of those assumptions, decide to at least entertain the notion we aren't quite so

special as we might like to think, we can also begin to think about what really has changed and what hasn't.

**An example:**

There has long been a related debate over what

particular advantage "the West," as Western

Europe and its settler colonies have liked to call

themselves, had over the rest of the world that

allowed them to conquer so much of it in the four

hundred years between 1500 and 1900. Was it a

more efficient economic system? A superior military tradition? Did it have to do with Christianity, or Protestantism, or a spirit of rationalistic inquiry?

Was it simply a matter of technology? Or did it

have to do with more individualistic family

arrangements? Some combination of all these

factors? To a large extent, Western historical sociology has been dedicated to solving this problem. It is a sign of how deeply embedded the assumptions

are that it is only quite recently that scholars have

come to even suggest that perhaps, Western

Europe didn't really have any fundamental advantage at all. That European technology, economic and social arrangements, state organization, and the rest in 1450 were in no way more "advanced"

than

what prevailed in Egypt, or Bengal, or Fujian, or most any other urbanized part of the Old World at the time. Europe might have been ahead in some areas (e.g., techniques of naval warfare, certain forms of banking), but lagged significantly behind in others (astronomy, jurisprudence, agricultural technology, techniques of land warfare). Perhaps there was no mysterious advantage. Perhaps what happened was just a coincidence. Western Europe happened to be located in that part of the Old World where it was easiest to sail to the New; those who first did so had the incredible luck to discover lands full of enormous wealth, populated by defenseless stone-age peoples who conveniently began dying almost the moment they arrived; the resultant windfall, and the demographic advantage from having lands to siphon off excess population was more than enough to account for the European powers' later successes. It was then possible to shut down the (far more efficient) Indian cloth industry and create the space for an industrial revolution, and generally ravage and dominate Asia to such an extent that in technological terms—particularly industrial and military technology—it fell increasingly behind.

A number of authors (Blaut, Goody, Pommeranz, Gunder Frank) have been making

some variation of this argument in recent years. It is at root a moral argument, an attack on Western arrogance. As such it is extremely important. The only problem with it, in moral terms, is that it tends to confuse means and inclination. That is, it rests on the assumption that Western historians talism as its opponents prefer, as founded on the connection between a wage system and a principle of the never-ending pursuit of profit for its own sake. This in turn makes it possible to argue this was a strange perversion of normal commercial logic which happened to take hold in one, previously rather barbarous, corner of the world and encouraged the inhabitants to engage in what might otherwise have been considered unspeakable forms of behavior. Again, all this does not necessarily mean that one has to agree with the premise that once capitalism came into existence, it instantly became a totalizing system and that from that moment, everything else that happened can only be understood in relation to it. But it suggests one of the axes on which one can begin to think about what really is different nowadays.

were right to assume that whatever it was that made it possible for Europeans to dispossess, abduct, enslave, and exterminate millions of other human beings, it was a mark of superiority and that therefore, whatever it was, it would be insulting to non-Europeans to suggest they didn't have it too. It seems to me that it is far more insulting to suggest

anyone would ever have behaved like Europeans of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries—e.g., depopulating large portions of the Andes or central Mexico by working millions to death in the mines, or kidnapping a significant chunk of the population of Africa to work to death on sugar plantations—unless one has some actual evidence to suggest they were so genocidally inclined. In fact there appear to have been plenty of examples of people in a position to wreak similar havoc on a world scale—say, the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century—but who didn't, not so much because they scrupled to, so much as because it would never have occurred to them to act this way to begin with.

In the end it all turns, oddly enough, on how one chooses to define capitalism. Almost all the authors cited above tend to see capitalism as yet another accomplishment which Westerners arrogantly assume they invented themselves, and therefore define it (as capitalists do) as largely a matter of commerce and financial instruments. But that willingness to put considerations of profit above any human concern which drove Europeans to depopulate whole regions of the world in order to place the maximum amount of silver or sugar on the market was certainly something else. It seems to me it deserves a name of its own. For this reason it seems better to me to continue to define capi

Let us imagine, then, that the West, however defined, was nothing special, and further, that there

has been no one fundamental break in human history.

No one can deny there have been massive quantitative changes: the amount of energy consumed, the speed at which humans can travel, the number of books

produced and read, all these numbers have been rising

exponentially. But let us imagine for the sake of argument that these quantitative changes do not, in themselves, necessarily imply a change in quality: we are not living in a fundamentally different sort of society than has ever existed before, we are not living in a

fundamentally different sort of time, the existence of factories or microchips do not mean political or social possibilities have changed in their basic nature: Or, to be more precise, the West might have introduced

some new possibilities, but it hasn't canceled any of the old ones out.

The first thing one discovers when one tries to think this way is that it is extremely difficult to do so.

One has to cut past the endless host of intellectual tricks and gimmicks that create the wall of distance around "modern" societies. Let me give just one example. It is common to distinguish between what are called "kinship-based societies" and modern ones,

which are supposed to be based on impersonal institutions like the market or the state. The societies traditionally studied by anthropologists have

kinship systems. They are organized into descent groups— lineages, or clans, or moieties, or ramages—which

trace descent to common ancestors, live mainly on

ancestral territories, are seen as consisting of similar “kinds” of people—an idea usually expressed through

physical idioms of common flesh, or bone, or blood,

or skin. Often kinship systems become a basis of social inequality as some groups are seen as higher than

others, as for example in caste systems; always, kinship establishes the terms for sex and marriage and the

passing of property over the generations.

The term “kin-based” is often used the way people used to use the word “primitive”; these are

exotic societies which are in no way like our own.

(That’s why it is assumed we need anthropology to

study them; entirely different disciplines, like sociology and economics, are assumed to be required to study modern ones.) But then the exact same people

who make this argument will usually take it for

granted that the main social problems in our own,

“modern” society (or “postmodern”: for present

purposes it’s exactly the same thing) revolve around

race, class, and gender. In other words, precisely from the nature of our kinship system.

After all, what does it mean to say most Americans see the world as divided into “races”? It

means they believe that it is divided into groups which are presumed to share a common descent and

geographical origin, who for this reason are seen as

different “kinds” of people, that this idea is usually expressed through physical idioms of blood and skin,

and that the resulting system regulates sex, marriage, and the inheritance of property and therefore creates

and maintains social inequalities. We are talking about something very much like a classic clan system, except on a global scale. One might object that there is a lot of interracial marriage going on, and even more interracial sex, but then, this is only what we should expect.

Statistical studies always reveal that, even in “traditional” societies like the Nambikwara or Arapesh, at least 5-10% of young people marry someone they’re

not supposed to. Statistically, the phenomena are of

about equal significance. Social class is slightly more complicated, since the groups are less clearly bounded.

Still, the difference between a ruling class and a

collection of people who happen to have done well is,

precisely, kinship: the ability to marry one’s children off appropriately, and pass one’s advantages on to one’s descendants. People marry across class lines too, but

rarely very far; and while most Americans seem to be

under the impression that this is a country of considerable class mobility, when asked to adduce examples all they can usually come up with is a handful of rags to riches stories. It is almost impossible to find an

example of an American who was born rich and ended

up a penniless ward of the state. So all we are really dealing with then is the fact, familiar to anyone who's studied history, that ruling elites (unless polygamous) are never able to reproduce themselves demographically, and therefore always need some way to recruit new blood (and if they are polygamous, of course, that itself becomes a mode of social mobility).

Gender relations are of course the very fabric

of kinship.

### **what would it take to knock down these walls?**

I'd say a lot. Too many people have too much invested in maintaining them. This includes anarchists, incidentally. At least in the United States, the anarchists who do take anthropology the most seriously are the

Primitivists, a small but very vocal faction who argue that the only way to get humanity back on track is to

shuck off modernity entirely. Inspired by Marshall

Sahlins' essay "The Original Affluent Society," they

propose that there was a time when alienation and

inequality did not exist, when everyone was a huntergathering anarchist, and that therefore real liberation can only come if we abandon "civilization" and return

to the Upper Paleolithic, or at least the early Iron Age. In fact we know almost nothing about life in the Paleolithic, other than the sort of thing that can be gleaned from studying very old skulls (i.e., in the Paleolithic people had much better teeth; they also died much more frequently from traumatic head

wounds). But what we see in the more recent ethnographic record is endless variety. There were huntergatherer societies with nobles and slaves, there are agrarian societies that are fiercely egalitarian. Even in Clastres' favored stomping grounds in Amazonia, one

finds some groups who can justly be described as anarchists, like the Piaroa, living alongside others (say, the warlike Sherente) who are clearly anything but. And

"societies" are constantly reforming, skipping back and forth between what we think of as different evolutionary stages.

I do not think we're losing much if we admit that humans never really lived in the garden of Eden.

Knocking the walls down can allow us to see this history as a resource to us in much more interesting

ways. Because it works both ways. Not only do we, in

industrial societies, still have kinship (and cosmologies); other societies have social movements and revolutions. Which means, among other things, that radical theorists no longer have to pore endlessly over the same scant two hundred years of revolutionary

history.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries the west coast of Madagascar was divided into a series

of related kingdoms under the Maroansetra dynasty.

Their subjects were collectively known as the

Sakalava. In northwest Madagascar there is now an

“ethnic group” ensconced in a somewhat difficult,

hilly back country referred to as the Tsimihety. The

word literally means “those who do not cut their hair.”

This refers to a Sakalava custom: when a king died,

his male subjects were all expected to crop off their

hair as a sign of mourning. The Tsimihety were those

who refused, and hence rejected the authority of the

Sakalava monarchy; to this day they are marked by

resolutely egalitarian social organization and practices. They are, in other words, the anarchists of northwest Madagascar. To this day they have maintained a reputation as masters of evasion: under the French, administrators would complain that they

could send delegations to arrange for labor to build a road near a Tsimihety village, negotiate the terms

with apparently cooperative elders, and return with

the equipment a week later only to discover the

village entirely abandoned—every single inhabitant had moved in with some relative in another part of the country.

What especially interests me here is the principle of “ethnogenesis,” as it’s called nowadays. The Tsimihety are now considered a *foko*—a people or ethnic group— but their identity emerged as a political project. The desire to live free of Sakalava domination was translated into a desire—one which came to suffuse all social institutions from village assemblies to mortuary ritual—to live in a society free of markers of hierarchy.

This then became institutionalized as a way of life of a community living together, which then in turn came

to be thought of as a particular “kind” of people, an ethnic group—people who also, since they tend to intermarry, come to be seen as united by common ancestry. It is easier to see this happening in

Madagascar where everyone pretty much speaks the same language. But I doubt it is that unusual. The

ethnogenesis literature is a fairly new one, but it is becoming increasingly clear that most of human

history was characterized by continual social change.

Rather than timeless groups living for thousands of years in their ancestral territories, new groups were being created, and old ones dissolving, all the time.

Many of what we have come to think of as tribes, or nations, or ethnic groups were originally collective projects of some sort. In the Tsimihety case we are talking about a revolutionary project, at least revolutionary in that sense I have been developing here: a conscious rejection of certain forms of overarching political power which also causes people to rethink and reorganize the way they deal with one another on an everyday basis. Most are not. Some are egalitarian, others are about promoting a certain vision of authority or hierarchy. Still, one is dealing with something very much along the lines of what we'd think of as a social movement; it is just that, in the absence of broadsides, rallies and manifestos, the media through which one can create and demand new forms of (what we'd call) social, economic or political life, to pursue different forms of value, were different: one had to work through literally or figuratively sculpting flesh, through music and ritual, food and clothing, and ways of disposing of the dead. But in part as a result, over time, what were once projects become identities, even ones continuous with nature. They ossify and harden into self-evident truths or collective properties.

A whole discipline could no doubt be invented to understand precisely how this happens: a process in only some ways analogous to Weber's

“routinization of

charisma,” full of strategies, reversals, diversions of energy... Social fields which are, in their essence,

arenas for the recognition of certain forms of value

can become borders to be defended; representations

or media of value become numinous powers in themselves; creation slips into commemoration; the ossified remains of liberatory movements can end up, under

the grip of states, transformed into what we call

“nationalisms” which are either mobilized to rally

support for the state machinery or become the basis

for new social movements opposed to them.

The critical thing here, it seems to me, is that this petrification does not only apply to social projects.

It can also happen to the states themselves. This is a phenomenon theorists of social struggle have rarely

fully appreciated.

When the French colonial administration established itself in Madagascar it duly began dividing the population up into a series of “tribes”: Merina, Betsileo, Bara, Sakalava, Vezo, Tsimihety, *etc.* Since there are few clear distinctions of language, it is easier here, than in most places, to discern some of the principles by which these divisions came about. Some are political. The Sakalava are noted subjects of the Maroantsetra dynasty (which created at least three

kingdoms along the West coast). The Tsimihety are

those who refused allegiance. Those called the

“Merina” are those highland people originally united

by allegiance to a king named Andrianampoinimerina;  
subjects of other highland kingdoms to the south,  
who the Merina conquered almost immediately  
thereafter, are referred to collectively as Betsileo.

Some names have to do with where people live or how they make a living: the Tanala are “forest people” on the east coast; on the west coast, the

Mikea are hunters and foragers and the Vezo, fisherfolk. But even here there are usually political elements: the Vezo lived alongside the Sakalava

monarchies but like the Tsimihety, they managed to  
remain independent of them because, as legend has  
it, whenever they learned royal representatives were  
on the way to visit them, they would all get in their  
canoes and wait offshore until they went away.

Those fishing villages that did succumb became  
Sakalava, not Vezo.

The Merina, Sakalava, and Betsileo are by far the most numerous however. So most Malagasy,  
then, are defined, not exactly by their political loyalties, but by the loyalties their ancestors had  
sometime around 1775 or 1800. The interesting thing is what happened to these identities once the  
kings

were no longer around. Here the Merina and

Betsileo seem to represent two opposite possibilities.

Many of these ancient kingdoms were little more than institutionalized extortion systems; insofar as  
ordinary folk actually participated in royal politics, it was through ritual labor: building royal palaces  
and

tombs, for example, in which each clan was usually  
assigned some very specific honorific role. Within  
the Merina kingdom this system ended up being so  
thoroughly abused that by the time the French

arrived, it had been almost entirely discredited and royal rule became, as I mentioned, identified with slavery and forced labor; as a result, the “Merina” now mainly exist on paper. One never hears anyone in the countryside referring to themselves that way except perhaps in essays they have to write in school. The Sakalava are quite another story. Sakalava is still very much a living identity on the West coast, and it continues to mean, followers of the Maroantsetra dynasty. But for the last hundred and fifty years or so, the primary loyalties of most Sakalava have been to the members of this dynasty who are dead. While living royalty are largely ignored, the ancient kings’ tombs are still continually rebuilt and redecorated in vast communal projects and this is what being Sakalava is seen largely to be about. And dead kings still make their wishes known—through spirit mediums who are usually elderly women of commoner descent.

In many other parts of Madagascar as well, it often seems that no one really takes on their full authority until they are dead. So perhaps the Sakalava case is

not that extraordinary. But it reveals one very common way of avoiding the direct effects of power:

if one cannot simply step out of its path, like the Vezo or Tsimihety, one can, as it were, try to fossilize it. In the Sakalava case the ossification of the

state is quite literal: the kings who are still worshipped take the physical form of royal relics, they are literally teeth and bones. But this approach is probably far more commonplace than we would be given to suspect.

Kajsa Eckholm for example has recently made the intriguing suggestion that the kind of divine kingship Sir James Frazer wrote about in *The Golden Bough*, in which kings were hedged about with endless ritual and taboo (not to touch the earth, not to see the sun...), was not, as we normally assume, an archaic

form of kingship, but in most cases, a very late one.

She gives the example of the Kongo monarchy, which

when the Portuguese first showed up in the late

fifteenth century doesn't seem to have been particularly more ritualized than the monarchy in Portugal or Spain at the same time. There was a certain amount of

court ceremonial, but nothing that got in the way of

governing. It was only later, as the kingdom collapsed into civil war and broke into tinier and tinier fragments, that its rulers became increasingly sacred beings. Elaborate rituals were created, restrictions

multiplied, until by the end we read about "kings"

who were confined to small buildings, or literally

castrated on ascending the throne. As a result they

ruled very little; most BaKongo had in fact passed to a largely selfgoverning system, though also a very

tumultuous one, caught in the throes of the slavetrade.

Is any of this relevant to contemporary concerns? Very much so, it seems to me. Autonomist

thinkers in Italy have, over the last couple decades,

developed a theory of what they call revolutionary

“exodus.” It is inspired in part by particularly Italian conditions—the broad refusal of factory work among

young people, the flourishing of squats and occupied

“social centers” in so many Italian cities... But in all this Italy seems to have acted as a kind of laboratory for future social movements, anticipating trends that

are now beginning to happen on a global scale.

The theory of exodus proposes that the most effective way of opposing capitalism and the liberal

state is not through direct confrontation but by means of what Paolo Virno has called “engaged withdrawal,”

mass defection by those wishing to create new forms

of community. One need only glance at the historical

record to confirm that most successful forms of

popular resistance have taken precisely this form.

They have not involved challenging power head on

(this usually leads to being slaughtered, or if not,

turning into some—often even uglier—variant of the very thing one first challenged) but from one or another strategy of slipping away from its grasp, from flight, desertion, the founding of new communities.

One Autonomist historian, Yann Moulier Boutang, has even argued that the history of capitalism has been a series of attempts to solve the problem of worker mobility—hence the endless elaboration of institutions like indenture, slavery, coolie systems, contract workers, guest workers, innumerable forms of border control—since, if the system ever really came close to its own fantasy version of itself, in which workers were free to hire on and quit their work wherever and

whenever they wanted, the entire system would collapse. It's for precisely this reason that the one most consistent demand put forward by the radical elements

in the globalization movement—from the Italian Autonomists to North American anarchists—has

always been global freedom of movement, “real globalization,” the destruction of borders, a general tearing down of walls.

The kind of tearing down of conceptual walls I've been proposing here makes it possible for us not

only to confirm the importance of defection, it

promises an infinitely richer conception of how alternative forms of revolutionary action might work. This is a history which has largely yet to be written, but

there are glimmerings. Peter Lamborn Wilson has

produced the brightest of these, in a series of essays which include reflections, on, among other things, the collapse of the Hopewell and Mississippian cultures

through much of eastern North America. These were

societies apparently dominated by priestly elites, castebased social structures, and human sacrifice—which mysteriously disappeared, being replaced by far more

egalitarian hunter/gathering or horticultural societies.

He suggests, interestingly enough, that the famous

Native American identification with nature might not

really have been a reaction to European values, but to a dialectical possibility within their own societies from which they had quite consciously run away. The story

continues through the defection of the Jamestown

settlers, a collection of servants abandoned in the first North American colony in Virginia by their gentleman patrons, who apparently ended up

becoming Indians, to an endless series of “pirate

utopias,” in which British renegades teamed up with

Muslim corsairs, or joined native communities from

Hispaniola to Madagascar, hidden “triracial” republics founded by escaped slaves at the margins of European

settlements, Antinomians, and other little-known

libertarian enclaves that riddled the continent even

before the Shakers and Fourierists and all the betterknown nineteenth-century “intentional communities.”

Most of these little utopias were even more marginal than the Vezo or Tsimihety were in

Madagascar; all of them were eventually gobbled up.

Which leads to the question of how to neutralize the

state apparatus itself, in the absence of a politics of direct confrontation. No doubt some states and corporate elites will collapse of their own dead weight; a few already have; but it’s hard to imagine a scenario in

which they all will. Here, the Sakalava and BaKongo

might be able to provide us some useful suggestions.

What cannot be destroyed can, nonetheless, be

diverted, frozen, transformed, and gradually deprived

of its substance—which in the case of states, is ultimately their capacity to inspire terror. What would this mean under contemporary conditions? It’s not

entirely clear. Perhaps existing state apparati will gradually be reduced to window-dressing as the substance is pulled out of them from above and below: i.e., both from the growth of international institutions, and

from devolution to local and regional forms of selfgovernance. Perhaps government by media spectacle will devolve into spectacle pure and simple (somewhat

along the lines of what Paul Lafargue, Marx's West

Indian son-in-law and author of *The Right to Be Lazy*, implied when he suggested that after the revolution,

politicians would still be able to fulfill a useful social function in the entertainment industry). More likely it will happen in ways we cannot even anticipate. But no

doubt there are ways in which it is happening already.

As Neoliberal states move towards new forms of

feudalism, concentrating their guns increasingly

around gated communities, insurrectionary spaces

open up that we don't even know about. The Merina

rice farmers described in the last section understand

what many would-be revolutionaries do not: that there

are times when the stupidest thing one could possibly

do is raise a red or black flag and issue defiant declarations. Sometimes the sensible thing is just to pretend nothing has changed, allow official state representatives to keep their dignity, even show up at their offices and fill out a form now and then, but otherwise, ignore them.

# Tenets of a Non-existent Science

Let me outline a few of the areas of theory an anarchist anthropology might wish to explore:

## 1) A THEORY OF THE STATE

States have a peculiar dual character. They are at

the same time forms of institutionalized raiding or extortion, and utopian projects. The first certainly reflects the way states are actually experienced, by any communities that retain some degree of

autonomy; the second however is how they tend to

appear in the written record.

In one sense states are the “imaginary totality”

par excellence, and much of the confusion entailed

in theories of the state historically lies in an

inability or unwillingness to recognize this. For the most part, states were ideas, ways of imagining

social order as something one could get a grip on,

models of control. This is why the first known

works of social theory, whether from Persia, or

China, or ancient Greece, were always framed as

theories of statecraft. This has had two disastrous effects. One is to give utopianism a bad name. (The word “utopia” first calls to mind the image of an

ideal city, usually, with perfect geometry—the

image seems to harken back originally to the royal

military camp: a geometrical space which is entirely the emanation of a single, individual will, a fantasy of total control.) All this has had dire political

consequences, to say the least. The second is that

we tend to assume that states, and social order,

even societies, largely correspond. In other words, we have a tendency to take the most grandiose,

even paranoid, claims of world-rulers seriously, assuming that whatever cosmological projects they

claimed to be pursuing actually did correspond, at least roughly, to something on the ground.

Whereas it is likely that in many such cases, these claims ordinarily only applied fully within a few dozen yards of the monarch in any direction, and most subjects were much more likely to see ruling elites, on a day-to-day basis, as something much along the lines of predatory raiders.

An adequate theory of states would then have to begin by distinguishing in each case between the relevant ideal of rulership (which can be almost

anything, a need to enforce military style discipline, the ability to provide perfect theatrical representation of gracious living which will inspire others, the need to provide the gods with endless human

hearts to fend off the apocalypse...), and the

mechanics of rule, without assuming that there is

necessarily all that much correspondence between

them. (There might be. But this has to be empirically established.) For example: much of the mythology of “the West” goes back to Herodotus’

description of an epochal clash between the Persian Empire, based on an ideal of obedience and

absolute power, and the Greek cities of Athens and

Sparta, based on ideals of civic autonomy, freedom

and equality. It’s not that these ideas—especially

their vivid representations in poets like Aeschylus or historians like Herodotus—are not important.

One could not possibly understand Western history

without them. But their very importance and vividness long blinded historians to what is becoming the increasingly clear reality: that whatever its

ideals, the Achmaenid Empire was a pretty light

structures are seen as something which immediately

precedes the emergence of the state, not an alternative form, or even something a state can turn into.

To clarify all this would be a major historical project.

touch when it came to the day-to-day control of its subjects' lives, particularly in comparison with the degree of control exercised by Athenians over their slaves or Spartans over the overwhelming majority

of the Laconian population, who were helots.

Whatever the ideals, the reality, for most people

involved, was much the other way around.

One of the most striking discoveries of evolutionary anthropology has been that it is perfectly possible to have kings and nobles and all the exterior trappings of monarchy without having a state in the mechanical sense at all. One should think

this might be of some interest to all those political philosophers who spill so much ink arguing about theories of "sovereignty"—since it suggests that

most sovereigns were not heads of state and that

their favorite technical term actually is built on a near-impossible ideal, in which royal power actually does manage to translate its cosmological pretensions into genuine bureaucratic control of a given territorial population. (Something like this started happening in Western Europe in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, but almost as soon as it did, the sovereign's personal power was replaced by a fictive person called "the people," allowing the

bureaucracy to take over almost entirely.) But so far as I'm aware, political philosophers have as yet had nothing to say on the subject. I suspect this is

largely due to an extremely poor choice of terms.

Evolutionary anthropologists refer to kingdoms

which lack full-fledged coercive bureaucracies as

"chiefdoms," a term which evokes images more of

Geronimo or Sitting Bull than Solomon, Louis the

Pious, or the Yellow Emperor. And of course the

evolutionist framework itself ensures that such

## **2) A THEORY OF POLITICAL ENTITIES**

## **THAT ARE NOT STATES**

So that's one project: to reanalyze the state as a relation between a utopian imaginary, and a messy reality involving strategies of flight and evasion, predatory elites, and a mechanics of regulation and control.

All this highlights the pressing need for another project: one which will ask, If many political entities we are used to seeing as states, at least in any Weberian sense, are not, then what are they? And what does that imply about political possibilities?

In a way it's kind of amazing that such a theoretical literature doesn't already exist. It's yet another sign, I guess, of how hard it is for us to think outside the statist framework. An excellent case in point: one of the most consistent demands of "anti-globalization" activists has been for the elimination of border restrictions. If we're to globalize, we say, let's get serious about it. Eliminate national borders. Let people come and go as they please, and live wherever they like. The demand is often phrased in terms of some notion of global citizenship. But this inspires immediate objections: doesn't a call for "global citizenship" mean calling for some kind of global state? Would we really want that? So then the question becomes how do we theorize a citizenship outside the state. This is often treated as a profound, perhaps insurmountable, dilemma; but

more recent times: an historian named Spruyt has

suggested that in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries the territorial nation-state was hardly the only game in town; there were other possibilities

(Italian city-states, which actually were states; the Hanseatic league of confederated mercantile

centers, which involved an entirely different

conception of sovereignty) which didn't happen to

win out—at least, right away—but were no less

intrinsically viable. I have myself suggested that one reason the territorial nation-state ended up winning out was because, in this early stage of globalization, Western elites were trying to model themselves on

China, the only state in existence at the time which actually seemed to conform to their ideal of a

uniform population, who in Confucian terms were

the source of sovereignty, creators of a vernacular literature, subject to a uniform code of laws,

administered by bureaucrats chosen by merit,

trained in that vernacular literature... With the

current crisis of the nation-state and rapid increase in international institutions which are not exactly states, but in many ways just as obnoxious, juxtaposed against attempts to create international institutions which do many of the same things as states but would be considerably less obnoxious, the lack

of such a body of theory is becoming a genuine

crisis.

if one considers the matter historically, it's hard to understand why it should be. Modern Western

notions of citizenship and political freedoms are

usually seen to derive from two traditions, one originating in ancient Athens, the other primarily stemming from medieval England (where it tends to be traced back to the assertion of aristocratic privilege against the Crown in the Magna Carta, Petition of

Right, etc., and then the gradual extension of these same rights to the rest of the population). In fact there is no consensus among historians that either

classical Athens or medieval England were states at all—and moreover, precisely for the reason that citizens' rights in the first, and aristocratic privilege in the second, were so well established. It is hard to think of Athens as a state, with a monopoly of force by the state apparatus, if one considers that the

minimal government apparatus which did exist

consisted entirely of slaves, owned collectively by the citizenry. Athens' police force consisted of

Scythian archers imported from what's now Russia

or Ukraine, and something of their legal standing

might be gleaned from the fact that, by Athenian

law, a slave's testimony was not admissible as

evidence in court unless it was obtained under

torture.

So what do we call such entities? "Chiefdoms"?

One might conceivably be able to describe King

John as a "chief" in the technical, evolutionary

sense, but applying the term to Pericles does seem

absurd. Neither can we continue to call ancient

Athens a “city-state” if it wasn’t a state at all. It seems we just don’t have the intellectual tools to

talk about such things. The same goes for the

typology of types of state, or state-like entities in

### **3) YET ANOTHER THEORY OF CAPITALISM**

One is loathe to suggest this but the endless drive to naturalize capitalism by reducing it to a matter of commercial calculation, which then allows one to claim it is as old as Sumer, just screams out for

it. At the very least we need a proper theory of the history of wage labor, and relations like it. Since after all, it is in performing wage labor, not in

buying and selling, that most humans now waste

away most of their waking hours and it is that

which makes them miserable. (Hence the IWW

didn’t say they were “anti-capitalist,” much though they were; they got right to the point and said they were “against the wage system.”) The earliest wage

labor contracts we have on record appear to be

really about the rental of slaves. What about a

model of capitalism that sets out from that? Where

anthropologists like Jonathan Friedman argue that

ancient slavery was really just an older version of capitalism, we could just as easily—actually, a lot more easily—argue that modern capitalism is really

just a newer version of slavery. Instead of people

selling us or renting us out we rent out ourselves.

But it’s basically the same sort of arrangement.

### **4) POWER/IGNORANCE, or POWER/STUPIDITY**

Academics love Michel Foucault’s argument that identifies knowledge and power, and insists that brute force is no longer a major factor in social control. They love it because it flatters them: the perfect formula for people who like to think of

themselves as political radicals even though all they do is write essays likely to be read by a few dozen other people in an institutional environment. Of course, if any of these academics were to walk into their university library to consult some volume of Foucault without having remembered to bring a valid ID, and decided to enter the stacks anyway, they would soon discover that brute force is really

not so far away as they like to imagine—a man with a big stick, trained in exactly how hard to hit people with it, would rapidly appear to eject them.

In fact the threat of that man with the stick permeates our world at every moment; most of us

have given up even thinking of crossing the innumerable lines and barriers he creates, just so we don't have to remind ourselves of his existence. If you see a hungry woman standing several yards

away from a huge pile of food—a daily occurrence

for most of us who live in cities—there is a reason you can't just take some and give it to her. A man with a big stick will come and very likely hit you.

Anarchists, in contrast, have always delighted in

reminding us of him. Residents of the squatter

community of Christiana, Denmark, for example,

have a Christmastide ritual where they dress in

Santa suits, take toys from department stores and

distribute them to children on the street, partly just so everyone can relish the images of the cops

beating down Santa and snatching the toys back

from crying children.

Such a theoretical emphasis opens the way to a theory of the relation of power not with knowledge, but with ignorance and stupidity. Because violence, particularly structural violence, where all the power is on one side, creates ignorance. If you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on,

and therefore, generally speaking, you don't. Hence the sure-fire way to simplify social arrangements, to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten to attack anyone who breaks it.

This is why violence has always been the favored

recourse of the stupid: it is the one form of

stupidity to which it is almost impossible to come

up with an intelligent response. It is also of course the basis of the state.

Contrary to popular belief, bureaucracies do not create stupidity. They are ways of managing

situations that are already inherently stupid because they are, ultimately, based on the arbitrariness of force.

Ultimately this should lead to a theory of the relation of violence and the imagination. Why is it that the folks on the bottom (the victims of structural violence) are always imagining what it must be like for the folks on top (the beneficiaries of structural violence), but it almost never occurs to the folks on top to wonder what it might be like to be

on the bottom? Human beings being the sympathetic creatures that they are this tends to become one of the main bastions of any system of

inequality—the downtrodden actually care about

their oppressors, at least, far more than their

oppressors care about them—but this seems itself

to be an effect of structural violence.

## **5) AN ECOLOGY**

### **OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS**

What kinds exist? In what environments do they thrive? Where did the bizarre notion of the “corporation” come from anyway?

**6) A THEORY OF POLITICAL HAPPINESS** Rather than just a theory of why most contemporary people never experience it. That would be easy.

## **7) HIERARCHY**

A theory of how structures of hierarchy, by their

own logic, necessarily create their own counterimage or negation. They do, you know.

pleasure. If one wishes to emphasize commonality,

the easiest way is to point out that they also feel pain.

## **8) SUFFERING AND PLEASURE: ON THE**

### **PRIVATIZATION OF DESIRE**

It is common wisdom among anarchists, autonomists, Situationists, and other new revolutionaries that the old breed of grim, determined, self-sacrificing revolutionary, who sees the world only in terms of suffering will ultimately only produce

more suffering himself. Certainly that's what has tended to happen in the past. Hence the emphasis on pleasure, carnival, on creating "temporary autonomous zones" where one can live as if one is already free. The ideal of the "festival of resistance" with its crazy music and giant puppets is, quite consciously, to return to the late medieval world of huge wickerwork giants and dragons, maypoles and morris dancing; the very world the Puritan pioneers of the "capitalist spirit" hated so much and ultimately managed to destroy. The history of capitalism moves from attacks on collective, festive consumption to the promulgation of highly personal, private, even furtive forms (after all, once they had all those people dedicating all their time to producing stuff instead of partying, they did have to figure out a way to sell it all); a process of the privatization of desire. The theoretical question: how to reconcile all this with the disturbing theoretical insight of people like Slavoj Žižek: that if one wishes to inspire ethnic hatred, the easiest way to do so is to concentrate on the bizarre, perverse ways in which the other group is assumed to pursue

engage in effective political action (because it's been my experience that many do quite remarkable work) is itself a fascinating sociological question.

But surely, an alternative analysis of alienation

might be useful here.

We could start with a kind of sociology of

micro-utopias, the counterpart of a parallel

typology of forms of alienation, alienated and nonalienated forms of action... The moment we stop insisting on viewing all forms of action only by

their function in reproducing larger, total, forms of inequality of power, we will also be able to see that anarchist social relations and nonalienated forms

of action are all around us. And this is critical

because it already shows that anarchism is, already, and has always been, one of the main bases for human interaction. We self-organize and engage in

mutual aid all the time. We always have. We also

engage in artistic creativity, which I think if examined would reveal that many of the least alienated forms of experience do usually involve an element

of what a Marxist would call fetishization. It is all the more pressing to develop such a theory if you

accept that (as I have frequently argued) revolutionary constituencies always involve a tacit alliance between the least alienated and the most

oppressed.

**Q:**How many voters does it take to change a light bulb?

**A:**None. Because voters can't change anything.

## **9) ONE OR SEVERAL THEORIES OF**

### **ALIENATION**

This is the ultimate prize: what, precisely, are the possible dimensions of nonalienated experience?

How might its modalities be catalogued, or considered? Any anarchist anthropology worth its salt would have to pay particular attention to this question because this is precisely what all those punks, hippies, and activists of every stripe most look to anthropology to learn. It's the anthropologists, so terrified of being accused of romanticizing the societies they study that they refuse to even suggest there might be an answer, who leave them no recourse but to fall into the arms of the real romanticizers. Primitivists like John Zerzan, who in trying to whittle away what seems to divide us from pure, unmediated experience, end up whittling away absolutely everything. Zerzan's increasingly popular works end up condemning the very existence of language, math, time keeping, music, and all forms of art and representation. They are all written off as forms of alienation, leaving us with a kind of impossible evolutionary ideal: the only truly nonalienated human being was not even quite human, but more a kind of perfect ape, in some kind of currently-unimaginable telepathic connection with its fellows, at one with wild nature, living maybe about a hundred thousand years ago. True revolution could only mean somehow returning to that. How it is that aficionados of this sort of thing still manage to

There is of course no single anarchist program—nor could there really be—but it might be helpful to end by giving the reader some idea about current directions of thought and organizing.

# **(1) Globalization and the Elimination of North-South Inequalities**

As I've mentioned, the "anti-globalization movement"

is increasingly anarchist in inspiration. In the long run the anarchist position on globalization is obvious: the effacement of nation-states will mean the elimination of national borders. This is genuine globalization. Anything else is just a sham. But for the interim, there are all sorts of concrete suggestions on how the situation can be improved right now, without falling back on statist, protectionist, approaches. One

example:

Once during the protests before the World Economic Forum, a kind of junket of tycoons, corporate flacks and politicians, networking and sharing cocktails at the Waldorf Astoria, pretended to be discussing ways to alleviate global poverty. I was invited to engage in a radio debate with one of their representatives. As it happened the task went to another activist but I did get far enough to prepare a three-point program that I think would have taken care of the problem nicely:

The point is that despite the endless rhetoric about "complex, subtle, intractable issues" (justifying decades of expensive research by the rich and their well-paid flunkies), the anarchist program would probably have resolved most of them in five or six years. But, you will say, these demands are entirely unrealistic! True enough. But why are they unrealistic? Mainly, because those rich guys meeting in the Waldorf would never stand for any of it. This is why we say they are themselves the problem.

## (2) The Struggle Against Work

- an immediate amnesty on international debt (An amnesty on personal debt might not be a bad

idea either but it's a different issue.)

- an immediate cancellation of all patents and

other intellectual property rights related to technology more than one year old

- the elimination of all restrictions on global

freedom of travel or residence

The rest would pretty much take care of itself. The moment the average resident of Tanzania, or Laos,

was no longer forbidden to relocate to Minneapolis or Rotterdam, the government of every rich and

powerful country in the world would certainly decide nothing was more important than finding a way to

make sure people in Tanzania and Laos preferred to stay there. Do you really think they couldn't come up with something?

The struggle against work has always been central to

anarchist organizing. By this I mean, not the struggle for better worker conditions or higher wages, but the struggle to eliminate work, as a relation of domination, entirely. Hence the IWW slogan "against the wage system." This is a long-term goal of course. In the shorter term, what can't be eliminated can at least be reduced. Around the turn of the century, the

Wobblies and other anarchists played the central role in winning workers the 5-day week and 8-hour day.

In Western Europe social democratic governments are now, for the first time in almost a century, once again reducing the working week. They are only instituting trifling changes (from a 40-hour week to 35), but in the US no one's even discussing that much.

Instead they are discussing whether to eliminate time and a-half for overtime. This despite the fact that Americans now spend more hours working than any

other population in the world, including Japan. So the Wobblies have reappeared, with what was to be the

next step in their program, even back in the '20s: the 16-hour week. ("4-day week, 4-hour day.") Again, on the face of it, this seems completely unrealistic, even insane. But has anyone carried out a feasibility study?

After all, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that a considerable chunk of the hours worked in America

are only actually necessary to compensate for problems created by the fact that Americans work too much. (Consider here such jobs as all-night pizza

deliveryman or dog-washer, or those women who run

nighttime day care centers for the children of women who have to work nights providing child care for

businesswomen...not to mention the endless hours

spent by specialists cleaning up the emotional and physical damage caused by overwork, the injuries,

suicides, divorces, murderous rampages, producing

the drugs to pacify the children...)

So what jobs are really necessary?

Well, for starters, there are lots of jobs whose

disappearance, almost everyone would agree, would

be a net gain for humanity. Consider here telemarketers, stretch-SUV manufacturers, or for that matter, corporate lawyers. We could also eliminate the entire advertising and PR industries, fire all politicians and their staffs, eliminate anyone remotely connected with an HMO, without even beginning to get near essential social functions. The elimination of advertising would also reduce the production, shipping, and

selling of unnecessary products, since those items people actually do want or need, they will still figure out a way to find out about. The elimination of

radical inequalities would mean we would no longer require the services of most of the millions currently employed as doormen, private security forces, prison guards, or SWAT teams—not to mention the military.

Beyond that, we'd have to do research. Financiers, insurers, and investment bankers are all essentially parasitic beings, but there might be some useful functions in these sectors that could not simply be replaced with software. All in all we might discover that if we identified the work that really did need to be done to maintain a comfortable and ecologically sustainable standard of living, and redistribute the hours, it may turn out that the Wobbly platform is perfectly realistic. Especially if we bear in mind that it's not like anyone would be forced to stop working after four hours if they didn't feel like it. A lot of people do enjoy their jobs, certainly more than they would lounging around doing nothing all day (that's why in prisons, when they want to punish inmates,

they take away their right to work), and if one has eliminated the endless indignities and sadomasochistic games that inevitably follow from top-down organization, one would expect a lot more would. It might even turn out that no one will have to work more

than they particularly want to.

**minor note:**

Admittedly, all of this presumes the total reorganization of work, a kind of “after the revolution”

scenario which I've argued is a necessary tool to

even begin to think about human possibilities, even if revolution will probably never take such an apocalyptic form. This of course brings up the "who will do the dirty jobs?" question—one which always gets thrown at anarchists or other utopians.

Peter Kropotkin long ago pointed out the fallacy

of the argument. There's no particular reason dirty jobs have to exist. If one divided up the unpleasant tasks equally, that would mean all the world's top scientists and engineers would have to do them

too; one could expect the creation of self-cleaning kitchens and coal-mining robots almost immediately.

All this is something of an aside though because what I really want to do in this final section is focus on:

### (3) DEMOCRACY

This might give the reader a chance to have a glance at what anarchist, and anarchist-inspired, organizing is actually like—some of the contours of the new world

now being built in the shell of the old—and to show

what the historical-ethnographic perspective I've been trying to develop here, our non-existent science,

might be able to contribute to it.

The first cycle of the new global uprising— what the press still insists on referring to, increasingly ridiculously, as “the anti-globalization movement”— began with the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas

and came to a head with the *asambleas barreales* of Buenos Aires, and cities throughout Argentina. There

is hardly room here to tell the whole story: beginning with the Zapatistas' rejection of the idea of seizing

power and their attempt instead to create a model of

democratic self-organization to inspire the rest of

Mexico; their initiation of an international network

(People's Global Action, or PGA) which then put out

the calls for days of action against the WTO (in

Seattle), IMF (in Washington, Prague...) and so on;

and finally, the collapse of the Argentine economy, and the overwhelming popular uprising which, again,

rejected the very idea that one could find a solution by replacing one set of politicians with another. The

slogan of the Argentine movement was, from the start,

*que se vayan todas*—get rid of the lot of them. Instead of a new government they created a vast network of

alternative institutions, starting with popular assemblies to govern each urban neighborhood (the only limitation on participation is that one cannot be

employed by a political party), hundreds of occupied,

worker-managed factories, a complex system of

“barter” and newfangled alternative currency system

to keep them in operation—in short, an endless variation on the theme of direct democracy.

All of this has happened completely below the radar screen of the corporate media, which also missed the point of the great mobilizations. The organization of these actions was meant to be a living illustration of what a truly democratic world might be like, from the

festive puppets to the careful organization of affinity groups and spokescouncils, all operating without a

leadership structure, always based on principles of

consensus-based direct democracy. It was the kind of

organization which most people would have, had they

simply heard it proposed, written off as a pipe-dream; but it worked, and so effectively that the police departments of city after city were completely flummoxed with how to deal with them. Of course, this also had

something to do with the unprecedented tactics

(hundreds of activists in fairy suits tickling police with feather dusters, or padded with so many inflatable

inner tubes and rubber cushions they seemed to roll

along like the Michelin man over barricades, incapable of damaging anyone else but also pretty much impervious to police batons...), which completely confused traditional categories of violence and nonviolence.

When protesters in Seattle chanted “this is what democracy looks like,” they meant to be taken

literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its

mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its

tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why

the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary. This is why all the condescending

remarks about the movement being dominated by a

bunch of dumb kids with no coherent ideology

completely missed the mark. The diversity was a function of the decentralized form of organization, and this organization was the movement’s ideology.

The key term in the new movement is

“process,” by which is meant, decision-making process. In North America, this is almost invariably done through some process of finding consensus. This is as I mentioned much less ideologically stifling than it may sound because the assumption behind all good consensus process is that one should not even try to convert others to one’s overall point of view; the point of consensus process is to allow a group to decide on a common course of action. Instead of voting proposals up and down, then, proposals are worked and reworked, scotched or reinvented, until one ends up with something everyone can live with. When it comes to the final stage, actually “finding consensus,” there are two levels of possible objection: one can “stand aside,” which is to say “I don’t like this and won’t participate but I wouldn’t stop anyone else from doing it,” or “block,” which has the effect of a veto.

One can only block if one feels a proposal is in violation of the fundamental principles or reasons for being of a group. One might say that the function which in

the US constitution is relegated to the courts, of striking down legislative decisions that violate constitutional principles, is here relegated to anyone with the courage to actually stand up against the

combined

will of the group (though of course there are also ways of challenging unprincipled blocks).

One could go on at length about the elaborate and surprisingly sophisticated methods that have been

developed to ensure all this works; of forms of modified consensus required for very large groups; of the way consensus itself reinforces the principle of decentralization by ensuring one doesn't really want to bring proposals before very large groups unless one

has to, of means of ensuring gender equity and

resolving conflict... The point is this is a form of

direct democracy which is very different than the kind we usually associate with the term—or, for that matter, with the kind usually employed by European or North

American anarchists of earlier generations, or still

employed, say, in urban Argentine *asambleas*. In North America, consensus process emerged more

than anything else through the feminist movement,

as part of broad backlash against some of the more

obnoxious, self-aggrandizing macho leadership styles

of the '60s New Left. Much of the procedure was

originally adopted from the Quakers, and Quaker-inspired groups; the Quakers, in turn, claim to have been inspired by Native American practice. How

much the latter is really true is, in historical terms, difficult to determine. Nonetheless, Native American

decision-making did normally work by some form of consensus. Actually, so do most popular assemblies around the world now, from the Tzeltal or Tzotzil or Tojolobal-speaking communities in Chiapas to

Malagasy *fokon'olona*. After having lived in Madagascar for two years, I was startled, the first

time I started attending meetings of the Direct

Action Network in New York, by how familiar it all

seemed—the main difference was that the DAN

process was so much more formalized and explicit. It

had to be, since everyone in DAN was just figuring

out how to make decisions this way, and everything

had to be spelled out; whereas in Madagascar,

everyone had been doing this since they learned to

speak.

In fact, as anthropologists are aware, just about every known human community which has to

come to group decisions has employed some variation

of what I'm calling "consensus process"—every one,

that is, which is not in some way or another drawing

on the tradition of ancient Greece. Majoritarian

democracy, in the formal, Roberts Rules of Order type sense rarely emerges of its own accord. It's curious that almost no one, anthropologists included, ever seems to ask oneself why this should be.

**An hypothesis.**

Majoritarian democracy was, in its origins, essentially a military institution.

Of course it's the peculiar bias of Western historiography that this is the only sort of democracy that is seen to count as "democracy" at all.

We are usually told that democracy originated in ancient Athens—like science, or philosophy, it was a Greek invention. It's never entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say? That would be ridiculous. Clearly there have been plenty of egalitarian societies in history—many far more egalitarian than Athens, many that

must have existed before 500 BCE—and obviously, they must have had some kind of procedure for

coming to decisions for matters of collective

importance. Yet somehow, it is always assumed

that these procedures, whatever they might have

been, could not have been, properly speaking,

“democratic.”

Even scholars with otherwise impeccable radical credentials, promoters of direct democracy,

have been known to bend themselves into pretzels

trying to justify this attitude. Non-Western egalitarian

communities are “kin-based,” argues Murray Bookchin. (And Greece was not? Of

course the Athenian agora was not itself kin-based

but neither is a Malagasy *fokon’olona* or Balinese *seka*. So what?) “Some might speak of Iroquois or Berber democracy,” argued Cornelius Castoriadis,

“but this is an abuse of the term. These are primitive societies which assume the social order is handed to them by gods or spirits, not self-constituted by the people themselves as in Athens.”

(Really? In fact the “League of the Iroquois” was a

treaty organization, seen as a common agreement

created in historical times, and subject to constant

renegotiation.) The arguments never make sense.

But they don’t really have to because we are not

really dealing with arguments at all here, so much

as with the brush of a hand.

The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawezi or Tallensi village council as “democratic”—well, aside from simple racism,

the reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity were quite on the level as Pericles—is that they do not vote. Now,

admittedly, this is an interesting fact. Why not? If we accept the idea that a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of the plaza and everyone against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that they never would have occurred to anyone until some ancient genius “invented” them, then why are they so rarely employed? Again, we seem to have an example of explicit rejection. Over and over, across the world, from Australia to Siberia, egalitarian communities have preferred some variation on consensus process. Why?

The explanation I would propose is this: it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision—either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee humiliations, resentments, hatreds, in the end, the destruction of

communities. What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling

that their views have been totally ignored.

Majority democracy, we might say, can only

emerge when two factors coincide:

1. a feeling that people should have equal say in making group decisions, and
2. a coercive apparatus capable of enforcing those

decisions.

It is of obvious relevance that Ancient Greece

was one of the most competitive societies known

to history. It was a society that tended to make

everything into a public contest, from athletics to

philosophy or tragic drama or just about anything

else. So it might not seem entirely surprising that

they made political decision-making into a public

contest as well. Even more crucial though was the

fact that decisions were made by a populace in

arms. Aristotle, in his *Politics*, remarks that the constitution of a Greek city-state will normally

depend on the chief arm of its military: if this is

cavalry, it will be an aristocracy, since horses are

expensive. If hoplite infantry, it will have an

oligarchy, as all could not afford the armor and

training. If its power was based in the navy or light

infantry, one could expect a democracy, as anyone

can row, or use a sling. In other words if a man is

armed, then one pretty much has to take his opinions into account. One can see how this worked at its starkest in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which tells the story of an army of Greek mercenaries who

suddenly find themselves leaderless and lost in the

middle of Persia. They elect new officers, and then hold a collective vote to decide what to do next. In a case like this, even if the vote was 60/40, everyone could see the balance of forces and what would happen if things actually came to blows. Every vote was, in a real sense, a conquest.

Roman legions could be similarly democratic; this was the main reason they were never allowed to enter the city of Rome. And when Machiavelli revived the notion of a democratic republic at the dawn of the “modern” era, he immediately reverted to the notion of a populace in arms.

notes, it originally referred to representatives of the people before the king, internal ambassadors in fact, rather than those who wielded power in any sense themselves—that it was rehabilitated, in the eyes of well-born political theorists, and took on the meaning it has today.

For most of human history, it has been extremely unusual to have both at the same time. Where egalitarian societies exist, it is also usually considered wrong to impose systematic coercion. Where a machinery of coercion did exist, it did not even occur to those wielding it that they were enforcing any sort of popular will.

This in turn might help explain the term “democracy” itself, which appears to have been coined as something of a slur by its elitist opponents: it literally means the “force” or even “violence” of the people. *Kratos*, not *archos*. The elitists who coined the term always considered democracy not too far from simple rioting or mob rule; though of course their solution was the

permanent conquest of the people by someone else. And ironically, when they did manage to suppress democracy for this reason, which was usually, the result was that the only way the general populace's will was known was precisely through rioting, a practice that became quite institutionalized in, say, imperial Rome or eighteenthcentury England.

All this is not to say that direct democracies— as practiced, for example, in medieval cities or New England town meetings—were not normally orderly and dignified procedures; though one suspects that here too, in actual practice, there was a certain baseline of consensus-seeking going on. Still, it was this military undertone which allowed the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, like almost all other literate men of their day, to take it for granted that what they called “democracy”—by which they meant, direct democracy—was in its nature the most unstable, tumultuous form of government, not to mention one which endangers the rights of minorities (the specific minority they had in mind in this case being the rich). It was only once the term “democracy” could be almost completely transformed to incorporate the principle of representation—a term which itself has a very curious history, since as Cornelius Castoriadis

In a sense then anarchists think all those rightwing political theorists who insist that “America is not a democracy; it’s a republic” are quite correct. The

difference is that anarchists have a problem with that.

They think it ought to be a democracy. Though increasing numbers have come to accept that the traditional elitist criticism of majoritarian direct democracy is not entirely baseless either.

I noted earlier that all social orders are in some sense at war with themselves. Those unwilling to

establish an apparatus of violence for enforcing decisions necessarily have to develop an apparatus for creating and maintaining social consensus (at least in that minimal sense of ensuring malcontents can still

feel they have freely chosen to go along with bad decisions); as an apparent result, the internal war ends up projected outwards into endless night battles and

forms of spectral violence. Majoritarian direct democracy is constantly threatening to make those lines of force explicit. For this reason it does tend to be rather unstable: or more precisely, if it does last, it's because its institutional forms (the medieval city, New England town council, for that matter Gallup polls, referendums...) are almost invariably ensconced within a larger framework of governance in which ruling elites

use that very instability to justify their ultimate

monopoly of the means of violence. Finally, the threat of this instability becomes an excuse for a form of

“democracy” so minimal that it comes down to

nothing more than insisting that ruling elites should

occasionally consult with “the public”—in carefully

staged contests, replete with rather meaningless jousts and tournaments—to reestablish their right to go on

making their decisions for them.

It's a trap. Bouncing back and forth between the two ensures it will remain extremely unlikely that one could ever imagine it would be possible for people to manage their own lives, without the help of "representatives." It's for this reason the new global movement has begun by reinventing the very meaning of democracy. To do so ultimately means, once again,

coming to terms with the fact that "we"—whether as

"the West" (whatever that means), as the "modern

world," or anything else—are not really as special as

we like to think we are; that we're not the only people ever to have practiced democracy; that in fact, rather than disseminating democracy around the world,

"Western" governments have been spending at least as

much time inserting themselves into the lives of

people who have been practicing democracy for thousands of years, and in one way or another, telling them to cut it out.

One of the most encouraging things about these new, anarchist-inspired movements is that they

propose a new form of internationalism. Older,

communist internationalism had some very beautiful

ideals, but in organizational terms, everyone basically flowed one way. It became a means for regimes

outside Europe and its settler colonies to learn

Western styles of organization: party structures,

plenaries, purges, bureaucratic hierarchies, secret

police... This time—the second wave of internationalism one could call it, or just, anarchist globalization—the movement of organizational forms has largely gone the other way. It's not just consensus

process: the idea of mass nonviolent direct action first developed in South Africa and India; the current

network model was first proposed by rebels in

Chiapas; even the notion of the affinity group came

out of Spain and Latin America. The fruits of ethnography—and the techniques of ethnography—could be enormously helpful here if anthropologists can get

past their—however understandable—hesitancy, owing

to their own often squalid colonial history, and come

to see what they are sitting on not as some guilty

secret (which is nonetheless their guilty secret, and no one else's) but as the common property of humankind.

# ANTHROPOLOGY

**(in which the author somewhat reluctantly  
bites the hand that feeds him)**

The final question—one that I’ve admittedly been rather avoiding up to now—is why anthropologists

haven’t, so far? I have already described why I think

academics, in general, have rarely felt much affinity

with anarchism. I’ve talked a little about the radical inclinations in much early twentieth-century anthropology, which often showed a very strong affinity with anarchism, but that seemed to largely evaporate over

time. It’s all a little odd. Anthropologists are after all the only group of scholars who know anything about

actually-existing stateless societies; many have actually lived in corners of the world where states have ceased to function or at least temporarily pulled up stakes and left, and people are managing their own affairs

autonomously; if nothing else, they are keenly aware

that the most commonplace assumptions about what

would happen in the absence of a state (“but people

would just kill each other!”) are factually untrue.

Why, then?

Well, there are any number of reasons. Some

are understandable enough. If anarchism is, essentially, an ethics of practice, then meditating on anthropological practice tends to kick up a lot of unpleasant things. Particularly if one concentrates on the experience of anthropological fieldwork—which is what anthropologists invariably tend to do when they

become reflexive. The discipline we know today was

made possible by horrific schemes of conquest, colonization, and mass murder—much like most modern academic disciplines, actually, including geography,

and botany, not even to mention ones like mathematics, linguistics or robotics, which still are, but anthropologists, since their work tends to involve

getting to know the victims personally, have ended up

agonizing over this in ways that the proponents of

other disciplines have almost never done. The result

has been strangely paradoxical: anthropological reflections on their own culpability has mainly had the effect of providing non-anthropologists who do not

want to be bothered having to learn about 90% of

human experience with a handy two or three sentence

dismissal (you know: all about projecting one's sense of Otherness into the colonized) by which they can feel

morally superior to those who do.

For the anthropologists themselves, the results

have been strangely paradoxical as well. While anthropologists are, effectively, sitting on a vast archive of human experience, of social and

political experiments

no one else really knows about, that very body of

comparative ethnography is seen as something

shameful. As I mentioned, it is treated not as the

common heritage of humankind, but as our dirty little

secret. Which is actually convenient, at least insofar as academic power is largely about establishing ownership rights over a certain form of knowledge and ensuring

that others don't really have much access to it. Because as I also mentioned, our dirty little secret is still ours.

It's not something one needs to share with others.

There's more to it though. In many ways,

anthropology seems a discipline terrified of its own

potential. It is, for example, the only discipline in a position to make generalizations about humanity as a

whole—since it is the only discipline that actually

takes all of humanity into account, and is familiar with all the anomalous cases. (“All societies practice

marriage, you say? Well that depends on how you

define ‘marriage.’ Among the Nayar...”) Yet it

resolutely refuses to do so. I don't think this is to be accounted for solely as an understandable reaction to

the right-wing proclivity to make grand arguments

about human nature to justify very particular, and usually, particularly nasty social institutions (rape, war, free market capitalism)—though certainly that is a big part of it. Partly it's just the vastness of the subject matter. Who really has the means, in discussing, say, conceptions of desire, or imagination, or the self, or sovereignty, to consider everything Chinese or Indian or Islamic thinkers have had to say on the matter in addition to the Western canon, let alone folk conceptions prevalent in hundreds of Oceanic or Native American societies as well? It's just too daunting. As a result, anthropologists no longer produce many broad theoretical generalizations at all—instead, turning over the work to European philosophers who usually have absolutely no problem discussing desire, or the imagination, or the self, or sovereignty, as if such concepts had been invented by Plato or Aristotle, developed by Kant or DeSade, and never meaningfully discussed by anyone outside of elite literary traditions in Western Europe or North America. Where once anthropologists' key theoretical terms were words like mana, totem, or taboo, the new buzzwords are invariably derived from Latin or Greek, usually via French, occasionally German. So while anthropology might seem perfectly positioned to provide an intellectual forum for all sorts of planetary conversations, political and otherwise,

there is a certain built-in reluctance to do so. Then there's the question of politics. Most anthropologists write as if their work has obvious political significance, in a tone which suggests they consider what they are doing quite radical, and certainly left of center. But what does this politics actually consist of? It's increasingly hard to say. Do anthropologists tend to be anti-capitalist? Certainly it's hard to think of one who has much good to say about capitalism. Many are in the habit of describing the current age as one of "late capitalism," as if by declaring it is about to end, they can by the very act of doing so hasten its demise. But it's hard to think of an anthropologist who has, recently, made any sort of suggestion of what an alternative to capitalism might be like. So are they liberals? Many can't pronounce the word without a snort of contempt. What then? As far as I can make out the only real fundamental political commitment running through the entire field is a kind of broad populism. If nothing else, we are definitely not on the side of whoever, in a given situation, is or fancies themselves to be the elite. We're for the little guys. Since in practice, most anthropologists are attached to (increasingly global) universities, or if not, end up in jobs like marketing consultancies or jobs with the UN—positions within the very apparatus of

global rule—what this really comes down to is a kind of constant, ritualized declaration of disloyalty to that very global elite of which we ourselves, as academics, clearly form one (admittedly somewhat marginal) fraction.

Now, what form does this populism take in practice? Mainly, it means that you must demonstrate that the people you are studying, the little guys, are successfully resisting some form of power or globalizing influence imposed on them from above. This is, anyway, what most anthropologists talk about when the subject turns to globalization—which it usually does almost immediately, nowadays, whatever it is you study. Whether it is advertising, or soap operas, or forms of labor discipline, or state-imposed legal systems, or anything else that might seem to be crushing or homogenizing or manipulating one's people, one demonstrates that they are not fooled, not crushed, not homogenized; indeed they are creatively appropriating or reinterpreting what is being thrown at them in ways that its authors would never have anticipated. Of course, to some extent all this is true. I would certainly not wish to deny it is important to combat the—still remarkably widespread—popular assumption that the moment people in Bhutan or

Irian Jaya are exposed to MTV, their civilization is

basically over. What's disturbing, at least to me, is the degree to which this logic comes to echo that of global capitalism. Advertising agencies, after all, do not claim to be imposing anything on the public either.

Particularly in this era of market segmentation, they

claim to be providing material for members of the

public to appropriate and make their own in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways. The rhetoric of "creative consumption" in particular could be considered the very ideology of the new global market: a world in which all human behavior can be classified as either production, exchange, or consumption; in

which exchange is assumed to be driven by basic

human proclivities for rational pursuit of profit which are the same everywhere, and consumption becomes a

way to establish one's particular identity (and production is not discussed at all if one can possibly avoid it).

We're all the same on the trading floor; it's what we

do with the stuff when we get home that makes us

different. This market logic has become so deeply

internalized that, if, say, a woman in Trinidad puts

together some outrageous get-up and goes out

dancing, anthropologists will automatically assume

that what she's doing can be defined as "consumption"

(as opposed to, say, showing off or having a good time), as if what's really important about her evening is the fact that she buys a couple drinks, or maybe,

because the anthropologist considers wearing clothes itself to be somehow like drinking, or maybe, because

they just don't think about it at all and assume that

whatever one does that isn't working is "consumption"

because what's really important about it is that manufactured products are involved. The perspective of the anthropologist and the global marketing executive

have become almost indistinguishable.

It's not that different on the political level.

Lauren Leve has recently warned that anthropologists

risk, if they are not careful, becoming yet another cog in a global "identity machine," a planet-wide apparatus of institutions and assumptions that has, over the last decade or so, effectively informed the earth's inhabitants (or at least, all but the very most elite) that, since all debates about the nature of political or economic

possibilities are now over, the only way one can now

make a political claim is by asserting some group identity, with all the assumptions about what identity is (i.e., that group identities are not ways of comparing one group to each other but constituted by the way a

group relates to its own history, that there is no essential difference in this regard between individuals and groups...) established in advance. Things have come to such a pass that in countries like Nepal even

Theravada Buddhists are forced to play identity politics, a particularly bizarre spectacle since they are essentially basing their identity claims on adherence to a universalistic philosophy that insists identity is an illusion. Many years ago a French anthropologist

named Gerard Althabe wrote a book about Madagascar called *Oppression et Liberation dans l'Imaginaire*. It's a catchy phrase. I think it might well be applied to what ends up happening in a lot of

anthropological writing. For the most part, what we

call "identities" here, in what Paul Gilroy likes to call the "over-developed world," are forced on people. In

the United States, most are the products of ongoing

oppression and inequality: someone who is defined as

Black is not allowed to forget that during a single

moment of their existence; his or her own self-definition is of no significance to the banker who will deny him credit, or the policeman who will arrest him for

being in the wrong neighborhood, or the doctor who,

in the case of a damaged limb, will be more likely to

recommend amputation. All attempts at individual or

collective self-fashioning or self-invention have to take place entirely within those extremely violent sets of

constraints. (The only real way that could change

would be to transform the attitudes of those who have

the privilege of being defined as “White”—ultimately, probably, by destroying the category of Whiteness itself.) The fact is though that nobody has any idea how most people in North America would chose to define themselves if institutional racism were to actually vanish—if everyone really were left free to define themselves however they wished. Neither is there much point in speculating about it. The question is how to create a situation where we could find out. This is what I mean by “liberation in the imaginary.” To think about what it would take to live in a world in which everyone really did have the power to decide for themselves, individually and collectively, what sort of communities they wished to belong to and what sort of identities they wanted to take on—that’s really difficult. To bring about such a world would be almost unimaginably difficult. It would require changing almost everything. It also would meet with stubborn, and ultimately violent, opposition from those who benefit the most from existing arrangements. To instead write as if these

identities are already freely created—or largely so—is easy, and it lets one entirely off the hook for the intricate and intractable problems of the degree to which one's own work is part of this very identity machine.

But it no more makes it true than talking about “late capitalism” will itself bring about industrial collapse or further social revolution.

**An illustration:**

In case it's not clear what I am saying here, let me

return for a moment to the Zapatista rebels of Chiapas, whose revolt on New Year's day, 1994, might be said to have kicked off what came to be known as the globalization movement. The Zapatistas were overwhelmingly drawn from Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolobal Maya-speaking communities that had established themselves in the Lacandon rain forest—some of the poorest and most exploited communities in Mexico. The Zapatistas do not call themselves anarchists, quite, or even, quite autonomists; they represent their own unique strand within that broader tradition; indeed, they are trying to revolutionize revolutionary strategy itself by abandoning any notion of a vanguard party seizing control of the state, but instead battling to create free enclaves that could serve as models for autonomous self-government, allowing a general reorganization of Mexican society into a complex overlapping network of selfmanaging groups that could then begin to discuss the reinvention of political society. There was,

apparently, some difference of opinion within the Zapatista movement itself over the forms of democratic practice they wished to promulgate. The Maya-speaking base pushed strongly for a form of consensus process adopted from their own communal traditions, but reformulated to be more radically egalitarian; some of the Spanish-speaking military leadership of the rebellion were highly skeptical of whether this could really be applied on the national level. Ultimately, though, they had to defer to the vision of those they “led by obeying,” as the Zapatista saying went. But the remarkable thing was what happened when news of this rebellion spread to the rest of the world. It’s here we can really see the workings of Leve’s “identity machine.” Rather than a band of rebels with a vision of radical democratic transformation, they were immediately redefined as a band of Mayan Indians demanding indigenous autonomy. This is how the international media portrayed them; this is what was considered important about them from everyone from humanitarian organizations to Mexican bureaucrats to human rights monitors at the UN. As time went on, the Zapatistas—whose strategy has from the beginning been dependent on gaining allies in the international community—were increasingly forced to play the indigenous card as well, except when dealing with their most committed allies.

This strategy has not been entirely ineffective.

Ten years later, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation is still there, without having hardly had to fire a shot, if only because they have been willing, for the time being, to downplay the “National” part in their name. All I want to emphasize is exactly how patronizing—or, maybe let’s not pull punches here, how completely racist—the international reaction to the Zapatista rebellion has really been. Because what the Zapatistas were proposing to do was exactly to begin that difficult work that, I pointed out, so much of the rhetoric about “identity” effectively ignores: trying to work out what forms of organization, what forms of process and deliberation, would be required to create a world in which people and communities are actually free to determine for themselves what sort of people and communities they wish to be. And what were they told? Effectively, they were informed that, since they were Maya, they could not possibly have anything to say to the world about the processes through which identity is constructed; or about the nature of political possibilities. As Mayas, the only possible political statement they could make to non-Mayas would be about their Maya identity itself. They could assert the right to continue to be Mayan. They could demand recognition as Mayan. But for a Maya to say something to the world that was not simply a comment on their own Maya-ness would be inconceivable.

And who was listening to what they really had to say?  
Largely, it seems, a collection of teenage anarchists in Europe and North America, who soon began besieging the summits of the very global elite to whom anthropologists maintain such an uneasy, uncomfortable, alliance.

But the anarchists were right. I think anthropologists should make common cause with them. We have tools at our fingertips that could be of enormous importance for human freedom. Let's start taking

some responsibility for it.

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