

Anthony Ince and Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre, *Society Despite the State:*

Reimagining Geographies of Order, London: Pluto Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780745341248 (paper); ISBN: 9781786808202 (ebook)

Did you know that Karl Marx was also anti-state? The central difference between anarchist and Marx, however, was that at one point he thought “once classes had been abolished the state would die a natural death, as if through lack of nourishment” (Fabbri 2017 [1922]: 20). Anarchists, and other autonomous peoples, inversely believed the state had to be consciously and actively dismantled. This debate, even if smothered by academic careerism, pragmatic politics, and authoritarian desires, still continues in various forms within geography (see Harvey 2017; Springer 2017, 2018). Anthony Ince and Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre’s *Society Despite the State: Reimagining Geographies of Order* reinvigorates this debate and breaks this relative silence in geography once again.

Seeking to advance “post-statist geographies as a set of theories, concepts, and practices”, *Society Despite the State* presents an intervention against statism (p.9). Broken into three sections (e.g. “Threads”, “Myths”, and “Horizons”) with a vignette for each, an introduction and seven chapters, the authors challenge the dominance of statism as “a conscious or unconscious reproduction of the logics of state order” (p.5) that “generally evades” ardent critique from geographers (p.11). Providing definitions of ontology, modernity, coloniality, and the modern state, the authors advocate the value of “anarchistic operational logics” rooted in “decentralised, anti-vanguardist, directly democratic, and more or less structurally ‘flat’” organizational methodologies (p.6). The introduction prepares the reader for a journey into statism and the historical and existing alternatives to it.

Continuing in this explanatory vein, the “Threads” section introduces “a radical pluriverse”, as opposed to the pluriverse, that expresses “the non-/anti-authoritarian past and living traditions that question and challenge structures of domination” (e.g. patriarchy, states, hierarchies) (p.23). The authors define “horizontality”, “epistemic encounters”, and discuss Eurocentrism in classical anarchism, but believe it represents the “most consistent

and serious in its attempt to challenge” states and empires. Chapters, moreover, explore “statist timescapes” and the weaponization of time that embeds ontological and epistemological beliefs that affirm state rule and hegemony (p.45). This entails, in Chapter 3, deconstructing developmental progress, civility, and objectivity built alongside binary constructions such as civilized/savage, rational/irrational, and history/myth. Revisiting the “state of nature myth”¹ and the construction of Indigenous lands as “*terra nullius*” (nobody’s land/unoccupied), the section explores the intimate relationship between the state and colonialism. Confronting the silent statism in so-called radical academia, Ince and Barrera remind readers that “[e]very state is colonial”, even if the “Guaraní may have an extremely different experience of internal colonialism from the Welsh or the Ainu, but they share common structural relationships of coloniality imposed by the Brazilian, British, and Japanese states respectively” (p.58). The “Threads” section later discusses fascism to explore state mythology, and concludes by noting the importance of counter-myths to statism and struggling to reclaim mythologies from racists and authoritarians.

The “Myths” section, continuing on the theme of “statist timescapes” reinforces decolonial theory by criticizing archeology and geography. Recognizing “temporal justice”, Ince and Barrera explain: “Time is a strategic resource to the state for normalizing its existence and justifying the contractual relations” through myth and fear of so-called “barbarism” (e.g. the state of nature myth [p.89]). Chapter 5 explores the patriarchal logics embedded within statism, modern science, and law. Dedicating a significant amount of time to dissecting cartography, colonial geography, and statist domination of nature, Ince and Barrera reflect, thinking of the Pink Tide countries (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador), among others, that the “self-determination struggle of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations have time and again reinstated the universal, abstract place of enunciation to decide over the population and resources, while expanding infrastructures of extractive capitalism”, noting that “the exact same logics of order that the imperial state uses to colonise other

¹ This myth describes the hypothetical way of life before civilization, empires, and states, which was “barbaric”, violent, and, in Hobbes’ words, “a war of all against all”.

lands becomes the fundamental logic of a ‘liberatory’ decolonial state” (pp.113-114). Colonial space, in many ways, is governed through notions of citizenship, the main focus of Chapter 6, moving from colonial incursion into African nations to the tightening of statist controls through Brexit in the UK. This section concludes by discussing anti- and non-state societies—noting in passing Ukrainian and Irish Communes, Zapatistas, Rojava, and examples from anarchist anthropology—and how people co-exist and transverse state authority, but also—talking about antifascism—the use of statist machinery.

Chapter 7, and the “Horizons” section, restates the main tenets of the book before advocating a criminal relationship to the university, critical pedagogy, and a “cosmopolitics of disregard” that “actively and consciously devalues and evades state logics by touching the state only lightly and disinterestedly” (p.159). This relationship implies withdrawing negative or positive energy from the state, stopping to fetishize it and stealing from it when possible. This section engages in a conversation to advance post-statist geographies within the academy and beyond.

Society Despite the State remains a fundamentally important contribution to the literature on the state and statism. Confronting efforts to believe in the state, and highlighting the specific technique within academia Ince and Barrera show that to focus on the specific condition of a certain state is a technique regularly used to divert attention away from opposition to the state form *per se* and toward critique of the technical arrangements of a particular state (“this state is bad, but that state is good”). Instead, focusing on statism helps us to consider both the oneness and the multiplicity of state experiences (p.151). Said simply, statism refers to the ethos and structural features of states, bypassing the unique historical, political, economic, artistic conditions and ethnic compositions that differentiate states and frequently obstruct people from recognizing repetitive political cycles that harm people, habitats, and their social ecologies.

Drawing on movement voices, and a diverse range of scholars, the book alerts readers to the profoundly harmful and deep roots of statism. The authors are successful in providing a critical intervention into geography and (academic) decolonial thought, highlighting taken-for-granted techniques of state making related to its ontology,

epistemology, time and myth making. This includes providing accessible definitions and explanations of modernity, coloniality, Eurocentrism, statism, anarchism, horizontality, the pluriverse, epistemology/epistemic encounters, ontology, and so on, even if new and more challenging terms are introduced, such as ontologisation/de-ontologisation. This makes the book a highly recommended and important read, especially considering the failure within various critical facets of geography to recognize the truly profound issues embedded in the state form and its objectives.

The book's disciplinary focus, geography jargon (e.g. temporalities, spatial-temporal, epistemic, etc.), and academic style can potentially challenge readers. The greatest difficulty was an excessive metanarrative and "sign posting", constantly touching on interesting points and deferring readers to other chapters. This created expectations, and assumptions of detailed case studies or, at the least, chapter sections dedicated to examples exploring post-statist geographies, commoning, or methods of anti- or non-authoritarian forms of organization that felt rushed, and partial compared to the claims made in earlier chapters. Even if a celebrated academic style, this lends itself to repetitive metanarrative throughout the book that mixes with bypassing important contemporary works.

The minimal engagement with James C. Scott's (2017) work in general and, even more so, Peter Gelderloos' (2017) *Worshipping Power*, which offers a comprehensive historical expose into the tactics and strategies of statism and colonial takeover (see Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), was a lost opportunity considering the politics, affinity, and shared findings. Citing these works, Ince and Barrera state that "we are not concerned here with a comprehensive account of the origins of the state, nor with a precise inventory of characteristics; rather, we focus in the rest of this chapter on how the formation of certain worldviews..." (p.40). Gelderloos' (2017) expose of colonial/statist strategies and tactics reinforces the "Myths" section in a mutually constructive way deserving comment. Alongside ignoring these works, the authors surprisingly sidestep, or leave implicit, eco-anarchist theory's explicit connection between statism and civilizations (Dunlap 2022). This commentary should not detract from reading the valuable work accomplished within

Society Despite the State, but offer an afterlife weaving complementary authors with different approaches and ideas to strengthen a common struggle.

This raises two discussion points. The first challenges the idea of “a radical pluriverse” presented by the authors, and the second the analytical separation made between statism and colonialism in academia. What distinguishes the pluriverse from pluralism is its inherent anti-authoritarianism and its radical political character challenging the roots of statism and capitalism. The pluriverse should be understood as “radical pluralism”, which Gustavo Esteva (2023 [1999]: 96) discusses as:

a political horizon beyond the nation-state, reformulating the meaning of democratic struggles and recovering autonomous definitions of the good life that emerge from autonomous centers of knowledge production. Even governments that openly oppose the dominant paradigms, such as those of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, still adopt these catechisms and heretically repress the grassroots movements that challenge them.

Esteva’s and Ince and Barrera’s political affinity, discontent, and conception of the pluriverse echo each other, and I would argue prefacing the pluriverse with “radical” is redundant and potentially caters to an authoritarian current within mainstream decolonial thought (see Cusicanqui 2012; Dunlap 2022), which this book rightfully opposes. The pluriverse as autonomous and anti- and/or non-authoritarian is the norm even if academics of various identities and political persuasions would shape this differently to revive authoritarian ideals and programs.

Finally, the book raises a question about statism and colonialism, specifically if people should refer to them as separate things. Is statism not imbued with the “Othering”, gender and ethnic hierarchy (e.g. patriarchy and racism), and forms of organization, militarism, and violence, expressed in coloniality or (neo)colonialism? Ince and Barrera correctly observe that “statism”, in academia, “remains largely uncriticized in comparison with other, mutually constitutive projects, such as colonialism, modernity, and capitalism”

(p.57), saying earlier in the book that there is an “inherent nexus between statism and colonialism” (p.26) and, because of academic analytics, statism, colonialism, modernity, and capitalism are defined separately. While Ince and Barrera speak of statism and colonialism separately at moments, noting a “nexus”, the book also easily reads that statism is the core and foundational layer that exports, replicates, and intensifies its processes as colonialism overseas. While presumably differences can emerge—maybe similar to the differences between the state and statism discussed in the book—the differences between statism and colonialism appear few (e.g. geographical distance and intensity of political/racial violence). The practical utility of dividing these terms and the existing degree of difference (at different times) remains an open question, yet there is no denying the common problem of how the extreme violence of civilizations, monarchies, empires, and colonial conquest terrorizes people into statism. This is a common feature of state formation, even if forming through various multiplies and variables to form structures of political, ecological, and economic conquest that the planet still faces today.

References

- Cusicanqui S R (2012) *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization* (trans B Baletti). *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(1):95–109
- Dunlap A (2022) “I don’t want your progress! It tries to kill...me!”: Decolonial encounters and the anarchist critique of civilization. *Globalizations*
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2073657>
- Dunlap A and Jakobsen J (2020) Unraveling the lies of his-story with James Scott and Peter Gelderloos. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 31(3):136–139
- Esteva G (2023) *Gustavo Esteva: A Critique of Development and Other Essays* (trans K Dix). New York: Routledge
- Fabbri L (2017 [1922]) Anarchy and “scientific” communism. In Friends of Aron Baron (eds) *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* (pp 13–46). Oakland: AK Press
- Gelderloos P (2017) *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*.

Oakland: AK Press

Harvey D (2017) “Listen, anarchist!”: A personal response to Simon Springer’s “Why a radical geography must be anarchist”. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7(3):233–250

Scott J C (2017) *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Springer S (2017) The limits to Marx: David Harvey and the condition of postfraternity. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7(3):280–294

Springer S (2018) Who’s afraid of the big bad anarchist? rejecting left unity and raising hell in radical geography. *Anarchist Studies Blog* 28 January
<https://anarchiststudies.noblogs.org/whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-anarchist-rejecting-left-unity-and-raising-hell-in-radical-geography/> (last accessed 29 August 2024)

Alexander Dunlap
Institute for Global Sustainability
Boston University
aadunlap@bu.edu

October 2024