ON ANARCHIST ANTHROPOLOGY
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Fragments of an anarchist anthropology **BY DAVID GRAEBER**

Archeology of violence **BY PIERRE CLASTRES**

Anarchist thought and practice has left its mark on a series of high-profile social movements over the past few years, perhaps even rivalling or supplanting Marxism as a source of inspiration for radical struggles. The camp outside St Paul's Cathedral, less than a mile from where I write, is presently entering its fourth month of occupation after an extraordinary and turbulent year of popular protest, in which the decentralised Occupy and Anonymous movements, among others, have sought to embody in their own organisation and sensibilities many of the principles they espouse for a fairer society.

Academic anthropology has embraced Marxism in a way that it never embraced anarchism, and Graeber – who has been closely involved in the Occupy movement – puts this down to the latter's natural orientation towards ethical practice rather than universalist or "high" theory. This same fragmentary quality may, of course, help to account for anarchism's intellectual appeal in an era marked by scepticism towards grand narratives. While part of Graeber's short and self-consciously fragmentary book rehearses critiques of capitalism, exploitation and alienation that are essentially those of Marxism, he also asks after the potential application of anarchist ideas to anthropological research. This in turn raises questions about the relationship between anthropology and political theory and practice more generally. How can, or should, anthropology contribute to promoting change at a grassroots (rather than policy) level?

To begin with, it might do so by exploring the workings of proven strategies for resisting, evading or neutralizing power in its many forms and guises, for example as cultivated by ostensibly egalitarian or stateless societies from the Tsimihety of Madagascar to the Nigerian Tiv or the Amazonian Piaroa. As Graeber acknowledges, this is a line of enquiry pioneered by Pierre Clastres, whose classic *Society Against the State* put forward the argument – provocative to this day – that Amazonian chiefs were essentially stripped of any real power to impose their will on others, because their respective societies were set up systematically to undermine anything that could potentially give rise to a state. Clastres' work subverted narratives of state formation that assumed their inevitability and/or their association with more 'advanced' forms of civilization. If native Amazonians lacked anything resembling a state, it was certainly not because they were primitive or backward, but rather because they did not want one.

A preference for withdrawing from potentially coercive relations, rather than confronting power head on, may also resonate nicely with modern autonomist movements in the West. Yet it must be said that non-state societies are often no strangers to violence, even if they do sometimes project it outwards in the form of an ethereal world of fantastical monsters, menacing witches, or other evil spirits that constantly threaten to overwhelm human society. Graeber suggests this may be a kind of "spectral counterpower" that can become a resource when needed, by enabling a rapid moral re-evaluation of potentially oppressive social relations. In highland Madagascar, for example, slavery and monarchy were legitimate and accepted parts of life until the French conquest of the island in 1895, after which time they were roundly condemned as evil or immoral. This rapid reshuffling of priorities following the imposition of colonial rule was possible thanks to the creative reservoir of concepts of

witches and sorcerers, which were deployed to redefine coercion and inequality as distinctly foreign or "un-Malagasy". In other words, having a ready supply of concepts of evil linked to oppression or coercion in the imaginary domain may allow for a more robust and prompt response when such relations threaten to intrude into everyday social life.

Thought-provoking though this is, one does wonder about the classical anarchist preoccupation with the state and with repressive forms of power more generally in light of certain recent practical as well as theoretical developments. States are clearly no longer the only entities that wield vast power, and it doesn't seem adequate to target them solely. Secondly, and thanks in part to the work of anthropologists, it is now much more difficult to envisage the state as a monolithic entity, or a removable parasite on civilization, rather than as a bundle of everyday practices, with no clear boundary from society as such. Power is now often thought to be largely capillary rather than top-down in its workings, and invested in norms or hegemonic forms of discourse – rather than in concrete figures of authority who can be more easily grasped and therefore disobeyed. Graeber himself is dismissive of these trends, suggesting that power is more closely related to ignorance than to knowledge, and insisting on its ultimate grounding in violence. Yet challenges to the assumptions of liberal humanism, including the Enlightenment humanist narrative that the human subject naturally desired freedom, have been among the more stimulating and provocative contributions of anthropology in recent decades. It seems to me that an anarchist anthropology for the twenty-first century might usefully consider how repression and coercion articulate with even more pernicious forms of power, many of which may be productive in their effects: giving shape to people's sense of self; producing certain forms of dependency and subjective bonds to authority; or enabling rather than simply opposing agency.

Take, for example, the problem of voluntary servitude, first raised by the 16th century French philosopher Etienne de la Boëtie, an important ancestor of contemporary anarchist thought. In answer to the question of why people obey, he pointed out that obedience to authority seems to come quite easily, while revolt against authority requires a very special and unusual form of discipline. Yet if we think about how the subject may be formed from the outset in a situation of dependency and subordination, in other words as an effect of power, it becomes clearer why people might seek to perpetuate their own subjection in order to secure the continued existence of their own identity. It is one thing to proclaim that people are objectively better off in the absence of government, or subtle forms of servitude for that matter, but whether they will necessarily be happier (however this might be defined) is another matter. What if greater freedom and responsibility do not actually promote subjective well-being? What if people turn out not to want what "we" want them to want? Exploring the relationship – including the tensions, if any – between subjective aspirations and well-being and the experience of living entirely free of masters would seem a useful endeavour, to say the least.

As a way of following up some of these issues, I would like to return to Graeber's notion of spectral violence and see if it might be taken further in the context of my own fieldwork experience with an ostensibly egalitarian and stateless people, the Amazonian Urarina. One of the most ubiquitous figures in Amazonian cosmology is that of the spirit "owner" or "master". Though the details vary from place to place and people to people, these beings are usually associated with particular species of animal or plant, or perhaps some other kind of entity, to whom they exist in an apparently hierarchical relationship. Also sometimes described as "mothers", in part because of their protective role, these powerful spirit "masters" assume responsibility for the defence of their wards, using violence if necessary to fend off potential threats, including, not least, from human hunters. Sometimes the owner is

all too real and material: the fierce biting ants which (as I eventually learned, the hard way) always inhabit tangarana trees, for example, were described to me as the latter's owner, much as the caiman is the owner of river rapids and whirlpools. But such physical masters were relatively rare; instead, most exist in a spiritual realm, invisible to the naked eye. Indeed, in my experience, virtually any entity with some kind of power or agency seemed to have its own spirit owner or master. This contrasted with how things seemed "on the ground", as it were, where relations of hierarchy were generally avoided at all costs, and no man was deemed master to another. The only exception was that some people invoked God as the master of humans, quite possibly an influence of Christianization. Could it be, then, that a spectral universe of masters, ever-present at the peripheries of consciousness, is the price to pay for a day to day social life largely devoid of them?

The next question becomes: could the ubiquitous figure of the spirit master actually be a form of counterpower, a consequence of (what amounts to) anarchist practice? In other words, could it be somehow mobilised as a resource for combating the actual incidence of subordination, by redefining or reconceptualising it? Perhaps, but not quite in the way Graeber (or Clastres) suggests. Far from seeking to avoid at all costs the state and its regimes of governmentality, the Urarina people with whom I worked seemed to actively seek them out. They eagerly elected local Lieutenant Governors with the power to punish, sought out identity cards, and spoke of becoming "civilized" through their incorporation into the state and transformation into good citizens. Rather than simply recognise this as the product of their autonomous political will, we would be better off exploring how this form of consciousness takes shape, including how states so successfully manage to associate the condition of being a citizen with the condition of being civilized – an illusion to which Amazonians are ultimately as susceptible as Westerners. The concept of spirit masters may have something to do with how and why the protection of the state – its putative role as a "mother", as it were – comes to be seen as a fair price to pay for subordination – its role as a "master" or "owner". In a similar vein, outsiders such as mestizo traders were explicitly assimilated to the category of master, and people did not hesitate to voluntarily indebt themselves in apparently hierarchical forms of bonded labour. Yet traders were also seen as a necessary evil, and certainly never as possible members of the community. Perhaps what was happening here was that the figure of the spirit master or owner was not used as a way of avoiding relations of mastery altogether, but rather as a way of recognising the ontological gap between master and subject. Masters may be a necessary part of life, a condition of being a subject as such, but they are not, and will never be, one of us.

Power and how best to deal with it is not the only issue for an anarchist anthropology that would hope to learn something from those who have managed successfully to resist assimilation into states. How to achieve consensus, and make collective decisions efficiently in the absence of delegated representatives, is an important issue and one not easily solved, as many participants in direct action movements are all too well aware. Graeber takes consensus decision-making to be not only highly preferable to majoritarian democracy, but "typical of societies where there is no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision". He also suggests that it may be the continual struggle to resolve conflicting principles and contradictory impulses in everyday life that gives rise to the spectres of war and conflict that pervade their imaginary constructions of the cosmos. This may well be true, but among the Urarina (and I suspect among many other Amazonian peoples often held up as model egalitarian societies), matters were rather more complex. To be sure, communal meetings were held on a regular basis, and at first glance these appeared to be forums for making decisions on matters of collective concern. People would speak at length on matters they cared deeply about: How should we procure sufficient classroom materials for the

coming school year? What should we do about our interfering neighbours encroaching on our territory? But I eventually realised that these meetings were little more than venues for publicly displaying a consensus that, if it existed at all, had been already established in the preceding days through a seemingly endless series of careful and almost covert discussions, mostly on a one-to-one basis. No-one ever voiced their disagreement in a public meeting, for to do so would be contrary to the aesthetic of social harmony that governs everyday life in Amazonian communities. But what kind of consensus cannot allow for open expressions of dissent? Despite strong appearances to the contrary, it turned out that many people disagreed in private with the official "consensus" on display at such meetings, and would simply decline to carry out whatever had been agreed – all the while solemnly nodding and voicing their emphatic agreement. This was possible because no-one was inclined to make them do otherwise in the interests of the group, thanks to the premium placed on personal autonomy. In other words, what is valued is a certain presentation of social harmony, rather than any genuine resolution of differences in moving towards a common will, a unity of belief or sentiment. In fact, I am not sure whether consensus as we usually understand it is even possible in Amazonian societies, given their inherently fragmentary character, always tending towards dispersal, to plurality rather than unity.

Similar issues are raised by Clastres' *Archaeology of Violence*, a collection of essays written shortly before his death in 1977 and recently re-issued in English. Here, he develops the theory that Amazonian societies are characterised by violence in the form of endemic warfare, and that this has an important function in promoting dispersal and territorial fragmentation. Warriors may accumulate glory, but their exploits lead to solitude and a prestigious but powerless death. As such, violence counteracts the centripetal forces, or consolidation of power, that could potentially give rise to a state. This is, in effect, the counterpart of his argument about a powerless chieftaincy: one which finds in external relations between groups much the same tendencies as underlie internal group politics.

Clastres does not acknowledge Evans-Pritchard's discussion of feuding among the Nuer as a principle of order in the absence of a state, though there are certain obvious affinities. That said, Clastres is not much interested in questions of order as such, and prefers a freewheeling, speculative style to the sober analysis of ethnographic data. There are other differences: for Clastres, segmentation was the effect of warfare, its intended result, while for the Nuer it emerged naturally from the kinship structure, and even descent is ultimately unifying, for there is always the totality of the clan or tribe. Such principles are mostly absent in Amazonia; as Hardt and Negri might say, there is no "people" here as such, only the "multitude".

Clastres' ideas were influential in postwar French political thought, especially on Deleuze and Guattari, whose own writings on multiplicity Clastres himself later cited enthusiastically. In his introduction to the volume, Viveiros de Castro develops this theme and posits Clastres' theory as the political counterpart of perspectival cosmology: anarchist bio-cosmopolitics against the Western (statist) metaphysics of "Being is One and the One is Good". There are decidedly Nietzschean overtones in Clastres and he does not hesitate in comparing violence favourably to the horrors of the modern, statist world. Yet if Nietzsche himself celebrated a vision of individuals freed from the constraints of guilt taking pleasure in imposing themselves on others, he certainly did not think such a life was for everyone. As political practice, anarchism has itself had an ambivalent and troubled relationship to violence, although most theorists assert the essentially peaceful nature of the anarchist vision. Clastres' book is provocative in positing that endemic violence (and not only the spectral kind) was an essential precondition of certain forms of maintaining independence

from the state. It is also a valuable caution against the idealistic projection of Western ethical values onto others.

One of Clastres' greatest enduring contributions to Amazonian anthropology may have been recognition of the need to take their political philosophy seriously. Yet it is also true that while much attention has been paid to such peoples' abhorrence of coercive power, much less has been paid to their strategies for avoiding forms of alienation, which are no less remarkable. Their seemingly effortless reconciliation of mutuality and personal autonomy is surely also of much interest, as is their apparent resistance to the principles of representative democracy. Why does it seem that speaking for or on behalf of others is largely alien to such peoples, and what are the implications? Of course, there are limits to how useful an examination of what has gone on elsewhere, or long before us, can be to the task of creating something altogether new in the here and now. But many people assume that capitalism will survive, at least for the time being, if only because there are no serious alternatives. To the extent that this represents a failure of imagination, anthropology has an important role to play in revealing the diversity of existing worlds in the service of conceiving alternatives.