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Society Despite the State: An Experiment in 'Counterfactual Statism'

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Abstract

Geography as a discipline has its foundations in colonialist, imperialist, capitalist and nation-building endeavours. The state has been central to its institutionalisation and has shaped in many ways the epistemic frameworks that continue to dictate how geographical knowledge is produced. This intervention is part of an ongoing project in which the authors seek to decentre the dominance of the state in geographical imaginations and reignite a critical self-examination of anarchist thinking on the state; a gaze the authors term post-statism. We contribute efforts to unpack and disrupt the prevalence of the state as an indisputable, intrinsic human institution that is essential to our contemporary and globalised world. This paper builds on radical and anti-authoritarian perspectives to interrogate how the state could be expounded from multiple purviews. In order to convey the latter, we examine a fundamental moment in the state's understanding and representation through a *counterfactual* engagement with statism. We draw on non-academic sources (sci-fi literature) to question what may have happened if we had not invented the state. This point seeks to dislocate statist thought through critiques and imaginaries that question our reality – indeed, the separation of reality and fiction itself – and bring into focus other worlds.

Keywords

Anarchism; statism; counterfactualism; literature; imagination



Introduction

A Man stands, bent over, with the world on his back, a small globe surrounded by layers and layers of the long history of human oppression. The image, from an issue of *The Match!* anarchist journal (Woodworth, 1999), is labelled a “fantastic burden”, organized through *authority, power, control* and *coercion*, inscribed on a belt that squeezes all together, so the Man remains on bended knee. On top we notice “Discard Statism” in red; we read then other futures, those that have been halted by the “fantastic burden” that the Man has built over his shoulders¹. Nonetheless we also read a future that reflects a past built unambiguously, where our “fantastic burden” remains an irrevocable and visible fact. The image speaks to both the sense of totality of power emanating from the state, but, balanced on the Man’s back, also hints at its artificiality and precariousness. So, in order to concretely think through the toppling of these spheres, and what lies beyond them, what if we turn around to reflect on “What might have been if the state had not been invented?”. How might such an exercise help us to understand the state and statism better, and find paths beyond it?

This paper focuses on alternatives to the state through an exercise in *counterfactual statism*. We approach the latter reflecting on anti-authoritarian/ left-libertarian sci fi literature, specifically the novel *De cuando en cuando Saturnina. Una historia oral del future* (Spedding, 2004), as a salient example in the genre that interrogates the supposed inevitability of the state. We frame this intervention through counterfactualism as a productive and positive approach (Lundy 2013) that opens up horizons that problematize our reality, and even to disrupt the same distinction of reality/fiction that has taught us not to dare imagining other worlds. We make use of this as a lens that draws attention to the open possibilities of histories and geographies; an approach that reiterates the contingent nature of history, and in doing so, the state’s contingent nature too. Counterfactualism challenges conventional accounts of new societal possibilities not by confronting existing reality but by exploring how “things have been (and could be) different,” specifically, in this case, concerning the state’s ubiquity. We turn to the potential of counterfactual imagination “to disrupt the stability of that which is imagined away” (Day 2010, 260). The stories we reflect on convey left-libertarian, anti-authoritarian geohistories that “unmake the state” and explore alternatives to the Man’s burden in our opening passage.

In the remainder of the text, we explore this disruptive character of counterfactualism and underline its value as holding cognitive and affective power. The possibilities that it produces for imagining and developing alternative configurations to the state, reaffirming its contingency, and developing prefigurative processes and insurgency, is where we argue counterfactualism offers a meaningful space into nurturing other worlds, other futures. This intervention reflects on such aspects in two ways: first, it delineates and problematizes popular understandings of the state in which our take on counterfactualism is grounded, and then it frames the literary works we examine, exploring in depth counterfactual statism as an analytical tool for questioning the significance of such approach.

This intervention adds to a larger project the authors are conducting to decentre the dominance of the state in geographical imaginations and reignite a critical self-examination of anarchist thinking on the state, through both a reappraisal of canonical anarchist texts and the use of other anti-authoritarian or left-libertarian viewpoints, a gaze the authors term *post-statism* (e.g. Ince and Barrera 2016). We argue that the state and geography have been central to each other’s institutionalisation, and the state has shaped in many ways the epistemic standards that continue to dictate how geographical knowledge is produced.

¹ <https://diatropbooks.com/woodworth-f-the-match-an-anarchist-journal-issue-94-summer-1999/>

Counterfactual statism is proposed here as a tool that helps us not only signal such dominance, but as a meaningful approach in the continuously becoming process to “discard statism”.

The State We Live In (Post-Statism)

Sebastien Faure commented in 1924 (2018, 191) that “history proves to us that the state always and everywhere was a social system that definitely established, legalized, and defended inequality, property, and the exploitation of the labouring masses.” The state has been central to anarchist and left-libertarian thought; still, its definition and explanation have always found limits as its complicated conformations and ambiguous configurations reveal that narrow or simplistic views of what it is and does only serve to reify it. Additionally, although the state has such primacy as arguably the archetypal hierarchical institution of recent centuries, its articulation and intersection with other forms of authority has nourished multiple patterns of domination (Volcano and Rogue, 2018). In light of the intersecting trajectories and axes of statist domination, our approach drawing on a post-statist view focuses on interrogating continuously, *how the state could be expounded from multiple purviews*. Instead of establishing a single approach as the only valid one, we focus on diverse understandings of the state and coercive authority to enhance our perspective on the basis of *plurality*.

Imagining and building “an elsewhere in the here,” futures beyond the bounds of state-centred purviews, represents also the performance of other worlds. Overlooking the intricacies of state, as a continual process of securitization of coercive power, advances a narrow conception that neglects the contradictory elements and strategic alliances that generate “unanticipated patterns of domination and their transformation” (Sivaramakrishnan 1999, 7). Simon Springer (2016, 81) invites us to reflect that domination should be considered multifarious, a reading that geography actually demands, and to consider there is no single site of oppression but multiple. *Post-statism* draws on such approximation to critically engage the plurality of experiences that historically have fought back and prevented the emergence of hierarchy and coercive authority, and rejected state formation altogether.

Beyond fiction or fetishization, we look at the Man whose reality obscures any alternative to state-based existence. Sebastien Faure indicated the complexity of such reality considering that “whoever would suppose that the state is something fully real and definable would be crudely wrong. Every attempt to define the state precisely, scientifically, and clearly has failed, at least up to the present” (2018, 189), a point which almost one hundred years later, remains pertinent. Beyond technical dimensions of the state, *the state we live in* – our lived experiences of the state – becomes enmeshed with multiple forms of oppression and hierarchical institutions that could only be overcome through manifold and dynamic anti-authoritarian perspectives.

It is through the profusion of forces that we seek to endorse counterfactual statism, as it can contribute to the variegated possibilities to imagine an elsewhere in the here. Societies despite the state (and capital) have been always present; and the traditionally Western-based anarchist perspective has imbricated manifold currents from the Global South coming from different experiences and worldviews. We turn to these approaches to learn and recognize the possibilities that are opened through, for example, the radical alternatives of decolonization and indigenous autonomies. The latter, for example, following Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), is built through forms of organization in the absence of coercion, multiple forms of hierarchy, and authoritarian power. Since dispossession has been the definition of indigenous people’s relationship with the state, decolonization entails an anti-state perspective and a call for “relationships based on deep reciprocity, respect, noninterference, self-determination, and freedom” (2017, 8).

In this intervention, despite both holding affinity with the struggle against capital and state, we cannot fully explore the complex and often contradictory intersections between anarchist movements on one hand, and indigenous/ peasant movements and the decolonial struggle on the other. Needless to say, in Latin America and other parts of the world anarchist ideas have travelled and transformed because of particular circumstances, patterns of networking and exile, and worldviews (e.g. Maxwell and Craib, 2015). Moreover, as Lagalisse (2019) highlights, the intersection between indigenous movements and anarchist perspectives have been many times antagonistic due to a secularization of social movements and masculine arrangements through which sexism, privatization of religion, and racism lingers. In contemporary Latin America, decolonial and autonomous movements have generated new conversations on the possibilities of reigniting left-libertarian ideas drawing on their own historical struggles against colonialism and their worldviews. In this sense, for the case for Bolivia in which the novel we examine takes place, Rivera Cusicanqui has engaged with anarcho-syndicalist and left-libertarian thinking oral history in Bolivia. Through this analysis, she reflects on the link between ideas of community and indigenous identities with anarchism, and how unions took inspiration from left-libertarian ideas to interpret their life experience (Rivera, 2016). We see a close link between this oral history and the way Spedding conveys her story, for instance the non-linear temporalities and reinterpretations of left-libertarian perspectives.

Such views recognize also that resistance may remain aligned to a state-centred vision, a hierarchical relation between oppressed and oppressing. Certain forms of resistance can serve to reify and reinforce that which one refuses: for example, state socialist resistance to the capitalist state fails to challenge the fundamental logics of the state. Instead of resistance, a post-statist perspective seeks to develop a refusal of statist relations and structures that does not normalize hierarchical relation or victimization, but upholds a critical and dynamic form to convey an *elsewhere in the here*. Refusal of state as an indisputable, intrinsic human institution; the refusal of that reality of the Man on bended knee. Can we *refuse* such reality? Can we abolish what is perceived as inevitability? In this regard, we must recognize finally that the state lingers in the more fundamental scale of human relations, and as Landauer (2010, 214) argued: “The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently. [...] We... must realise the truth: we are the state! And we will be the state as long as we are nothing different.” To refuse such constraints, we seek a sociospatial imaginary that does not begin with the logics of the state, but with a search for other logics altogether.

Counterfactual Statism. Destabilizing the Here and Now

“The intention of insurrection is what might be referred to as revolution of the everyday, where individuals become ‘insurgents’ by *refusing* the existing structures of domination and walking their own way” (Springer 2016, 84). These words are echoed in the distant future of a decolonized Bolivia in *De cuando en cuando* where Saturnina, an anarcho-feminist hacker, who, against the renewed order, stands to declare “somos la revolucion permanente” (“we are the permanent revolution”) (Spedding 2004, 82). Her fight is not only against the old colonial order, but the emergent patriarchy that has been renewed under a declared egalitarian society. Through this sci fi novel, as well as in Ursula Le Guin’s (2004) *The Dispossessed*, we travel to places where the Idea (Anarchy) is not just suddenly realized as if it would be possible to seize in completeness; on the contrary, we are placed in horizons where left-libertarian perspectives proliferate alongside their inconsistencies. Distancing themselves from eighteenth and nineteenth century literature that many times connected with Enlightenment aspects of classical anarchist cosmopolitanism, the characters of recent novels complicate anti-authoritarian futures and places, acknowledging the intersection of a variety of patterns of domination not as a whole to be simultaneously abolished but as a set of intertwined social relations that can only be worked at unevenly. Instead of

magical horizons, these representations of “societies without a state” engage creatively with alternative forms of social organization that generate new possibilities. Clearly neither contemporary nor classical accounts can overcome a long history of subjugation in one novel or story. Additionally, “utopian texts never fully escape the conditions of their production” (Bell 2016, 143) – indeed, nobody really does. What we can do is to read such texts to question anarchism’s limits and ‘rough edges’, and to hold on to the work they do in our world, in disrupting what is thought to be inevitable; to question the same stark distinction between reality and fiction, between actuality and dreams.

In *De cuando en cuando Saturnina*, the Zona Libre is the liberated territories that comprise most of actual Bolivia and a region of Peru. Here, an indigenous and campesino movement, labelled as a racist movement or as “indigenist expansionism” by governments of other countries, proposes to establish a model based on “not a New Power but the counter-power” (Spedding 2004, 102). Even though there is no national government, Saturnina explains to us, “that does not mean that there isn’t a certain social control institutionalized” (Spedding 2004, 125). Additionally, a fundamental autarchy and isolationism has given the Zona Libre an aura of mystery as sympathizers or not find it extremely difficult to know what is happening inside. We will not go into details here, as there are other papers that examine other aspects of the novel and its complex organization (e.g. Burdette 2011). We will just emphasize here that the book is structured following a series of interviews and testimonies of women that give us the opportunity to open the “Andean Iron Wall” and know this brave people.

As Saturnina explains to Alejandro Valdes (a sympathizer who wants to expand the Zona Libre to other parts of South America): “In the Zone we are not the heaven of workers (obreros). If you said you know the history, you know then that Left served us as badly as the Right. If you are one of those groups that shuffle in their name with words like Revolutionary, People, Red, Liberation and Army, you know where you can put your suggestions” (Spedding 2004, 123). Over a pair of 4X beers in an Australian bar, Saturnina explains that Zona Libre operates without state government, and how each union deals with its own business. Alejandro answers:

A: “Anarchism in the Andean way”

S: “Is that how we are classified from the outside?”

A: “Is that wrong?”

S: “Well, it is better than intolerant indigenist or racist exclusivism, I guess” (Spedding 2004, 125).

While there is a strong tradition of anarchism in Latin America, with strong engagements with Indigenous movements, we see here how the label of anarchism is questioned as a concept applied “from the outside”. Both Saturnina and Shevek (the main character of *The Dispossessed* written by Ursula K. Le Guin (2004)) manifest through different registers renewed possibilities towards societies refusing the state. The creation of such worlds, as Lundy (2013) asserts, tells us something significant about the ubiquity of certain causal chains that define our reality (or our conception of it); about the contingency of history and its becoming. Moreover, as *De cuando en cuando* shows through a non-linear perspective, such assertions of worlds without states are based on thousands of years of acquired knowledge. This is a “pre-existing knowledge” that challenges specific cause-effect relations and serves as experiential antecedent to expose the limits imposed on our own image of the state (and its abolition). Particularly, in this Zona Libre, we found ourselves exposed to our own *past-futurity* (pasado-futuridad) (Burdette 2011) to understand the incidence of coercive structures of power in the statemaking process but also prior to it. This “pre-existing knowledge” emerges in the case of Zona Libre through campesino and indigenous standpoints, a past-futurity that projects how could it be if Bolivian society regains autonomy

and a communitarian ethic (Burdette 2011). These radical alternatives to the (colonial) state are equally expressed by Indigenous researchers, such as Simpson (2017), via the decolonizing perspectives that are renewed among Nishnaabeg communities as *they have always done*; as part of the continual decolonization process as anti-state practice.

De cuando en cuando creates new forms of anti-authoritarian worlds, as have been argued in the case of Shevek's Anarres (Call 2007). Through these worlds, ours can be destabilised, and the possibility "that things might have been different" becomes visible, questioning "aspects of our world and its past that are usually assumed to be immutable, or more likely simply ignored altogether" (Day 2010, 260). For us, such counterfactual works are a destabilising strategy as well as a provocative tool to confront taken-for-granted reality, bringing with it a system of values and standards "undermining certainty, challenging the very concept of the normal" (Call 2007, 94). That is, the "fantastic burden" not only comprises the state and statemaking processes but also, by virtue of their oppositional position, anti-authoritarian standpoints with their various inconsistencies and assumptions. The insistence on possibilities beyond our actuality make it necessary for us to consider future spacetimes in the *here* and *now* in terms of multiplicity, open to contingency: it demands that we recognise other worlds already living among us. On the one hand, this surpasses essentialist notions that reify or victimize not only the oppressed but also anti-authoritarian perspectives and, on the other, it allows us to realize the becoming and dynamic nature of anti-authoritarian struggles.

We found these liberated worlds to be a critique of how different disciplinary tools and patterns of coercion persist or emerge even in such societies that have fought to regain autonomy and exclude authoritarianisms. How coercive power is secured, expressed, limited, and distorted tells us something not only about the dynamics of statemaking but also why no anti-authoritarian perspective is ever complete. These are not prefigurative of a final form or telos (Bell 2016); on the contrary they are always becoming. And what we think of as left-libertarian or anarchistic today will differ from future generations' understandings and practices. In these terms, decolonization, then, is a process that entails not only dismantling statism but other structural power asymmetries within communities such as patriarchy, capitalism and racism, which are all inherently intertwined (Burdette 2011). The anarchist or libertarian landscapes that come to exist in these sci fi works are represented in specific contexts and as part of permanent ongoing and open-ended debates about the possibilities of anti-authoritarian thinking. The insurgent "interplay of temporalities and spatialities" (Gilbert and Lambert 2010, 249) that register in these landscapes are a clear attack on teleological accounts and accumulative narratives that fix possibilities, instead of considering such spaces as something in process, as becoming (Kneale 2010, 299). Such critique can reveal not only the character of our pernicious reality under the "fantastic burden", but also provides some past-future manifestations of what a post-statist standpoint could mean in practice. The utopic horizon depicted in these worlds shows a horizon of continuous possibilities where we are asked to reflect on the silences, inconsistencies, contradiction but also on what could be if the state had been excluded from our lives. *De cuando en cuando* also demonstrates how "the institutionalization of insurrection, where counterpower becomes power, is where anarchy becomes a new horizon of possibility" (Burdette 2011, 125) instead of being *per se* a static, final result.

Final Thoughts

To explore the geographies of a post-statist world, we must open the horizon of possibility to other ways of instrumentalizing and organizing power (Burdette 2011, 128). Currently, it is important to rethink decolonization struggles and their intersection with anarchism particularly considering state-led schemes of 'multicultural' strategies and land titling strategies that have had consequences on indigenous people through reproducing and entrenching (capitalist, modern) state schemes of dispossession under

the guise of ‘recognition’ (Rivera, 2012). It has become clear that the abolition of the state is part of an even deeper process for more fundamental transformation of the relations that govern our lives. We have argued here that, to that end, counterfactual statism should pay close attention to the multiple forms in which anti-authoritarian experiences and worlds become. Through the world of Saturnina, this intervention provides additional insights to the analysis of the state beyond a narrow perspective that only centres on the state as a means to an end, or as a set of benign structures, and gives more analytic attention to the experience of multilayer and diverse realities that make it the archetypal form of hierarchical organization.

We have argued that counterfactual statism sets a stage to question the separation between reality and fiction, opening the possibility to visualize other worlds as lived and ‘peopled’ rather than simply imagined, and bringing together different worldviews through these lived scenarios and simulations. The latter becomes central to our case because within these cracks remain constituents to dare imagine other possible worlds. Furthermore, we suggest that in order to imagine and create these worlds, counterfactual statism is strategic in a prefigurative sense, as through it we can see both what is lacking and what other anti-authoritarian imaginations and purviews might be explored.

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