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COMMENT



## Our Own Power to Act

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### Introduction

I am not an anarchist, but I often get mistaken for one. That is probably because I advocate for a political position that insists that the State is necessarily a relation of domination. We should refuse the State, I argue, and engage in an active search for other forms of political community in which we manage our affairs for ourselves. I call this political position “democracy” (Purcell, 2013). Most people conflate democracy with the liberal-democratic State, in which people, instead of governing themselves, elect a small group of representatives to govern them. That small group is subject to a constitution that limits their power (to some extent) and guarantees certain rights to each individual. That understanding is a corruption of what democracy means. I persist in using the name democracy in the way I do in order to recapture the kernel of its meaning – that people manage their affairs for themselves – and to reject the baggage of a limited (liberal) government that democracy has been spuriously saddled with ever since Locke plied his trade.

As you might imagine, my way of understanding democracy resonates with most anarchists. Anarchism, of course, is a very diverse political tradition with many different variants. But I think it is fair to say that a broad swath of anarchists share the conviction that the State is necessarily a relation of domination, and that people should, as much as possible, seek to manage their affairs for themselves. Anarchism, understood that way, resonates almost entirely with what I call democracy. In that sense, I am simultaneously a democrat and an anarchist. So during the course of this essay, I will take up the role of an anarchist, and understand ‘anarchism’ to mean the refusal of State domination and the search for an alternative political community in which people manage their affairs for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

I will also conceive of ‘planning’ in a particular, though fairly conventional, way: as a State-led project to manage the complex processes of urbanization, purportedly in the ‘public interest’. I know some people want to imagine other ways to understand planning, ways that allow for the possibility of planning that exists beyond State domination. The most well-known example of this is of course Colin Ward’s work (e.g. 1976, see also Banham, Hall, Barker, & Price, 1969), and a more recent example is Saul Newman’s (2011). I don’t want to argue against that idea of planning. I am not saying that planning is necessarily a State-led activity. I am just training my attention on State-led planning, and I find in anarchism a radical critique of planning in that sense.

This critique is radical because it allows us to see all forms of State-led planning as necessarily counterproductive. Our goal, from an anarchist perspective, is to engage in the project of becoming democratic. That is, we should, over time, actively cultivate our ability to manage the affairs of the city for ourselves. The State, and State-led planning, necessarily works against that goal. Even though it

can often deliver desirable urban outcomes,<sup>2</sup> State-led planning inhibits, always and everywhere, the anarchist project, which is the project of democracy.

## Hobbes, the State, and Planning

To see why State-led planning is counterproductive, we need to consider the State more closely. I apologize in advance to those who will find my approach in this section archaic, but I think the best way to understand the State, and the political relation it institutes, is to read Hobbes' *Leviathan*. I am aware that quite a few people have written about the State since Hobbes, but I think they have mostly occluded, rather than clarified, what the State is. For me, reading Hobbes' elegant and nakedly honest book strips away the cruft that has built up around our idea of the State, and it gives us the most clear-eyed look at what this "coldest of all cold monsters" is trying to do.<sup>3</sup>

For Hobbes, the State is a political arrangement in which people choose to surrender their power to an invented entity that is both other than and above themselves. Such a choice strikes most people as inadvisable to say the least, and so Hobbes spends most of the book trying to convince us why we should do it. The natural condition of human beings, he says, when we live without a State or any kind of organized society, is utterly unbearable. In that condition, we are more or less equal to each other in terms of our intelligence and physical strength, and we are all enjoined by natural law to do what is necessary to survive. As a result, each of us has what Hobbes (Part One, Chapter XIV) calls a "right of nature," which is the right to undertake any act that will preserve our own life. There are no other codes, no moral injunctions that limit our actions in any way. And so, in this natural condition, gathering plants for food is no different from killing our neighbor to gain access to his storehouse of wheat. The only guiding question is whether the act will contribute effectively to our survival. Both acts are entirely within our rights as human beings in the natural condition. Therefore, any person can potentially harm any other at any time. There are no social strictures, and no governing authority, that will stop them. This condition is what Hobbes calls the "*bellum omnium contra omnes*," the war of all persons against all persons.<sup>4</sup> This *bellum* is not meant to be imagined as a hot war in which everyone is actively fighting everyone at all times. Rather it refers to a state of mind in which each person understands that anyone *could* attack him at any time. It is a permanent cold war of all against all. This life, Hobbes tells us (Part One, Chapter XIII), would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," and it is hard to disagree.

So for Hobbes, the problem in this natural condition is the right of nature, which is to say the fact that each person retains his or her own power to act. It is precisely people having their power to act that is the problem. And so, Hobbes insists, the solution to the *bellum* is for each person to surrender his or her power. To whom? Not to another person, since persons having power is the problem. Another person or persons would simply use our surrendered power to further their own survival, and quite possibly threaten ours. Instead, we must all surrender our power to what Hobbes calls an "artificial person," an invented entity that is precisely not a person like we are, that is other than the multitude of persons (Part One, Chapter XVI). This artificial person is, of course, the State, or what he sometimes calls Commonwealth, or Leviathan. Its purpose is to use the power we surrender to it to prevent *bellum* – to enforce, instead, a condition of prevailing peace.

In order for the State to enforce this peace effectively, its decisions must rise above the warring imperatives present in our natural condition. The State must be sovereign; its authority must be final. Hobbes achieves this sovereignty in two ways. First, he makes the State's power quantitatively greater than all other powers. It is a "power able to overawe them all" because it is the collection of all our surrendered power (Part One, Chapter XIII). But he also insists, second, that the State is qualitatively

greater than other powers; its power is superior to ours in kind. When our power is collected in the State, it is no longer an earthly power, like our power was, but a power that hovers over the earth, a power that is above all other powers. The State becomes a “mortal god” whose power transcends all other powers (Part Two, Chapter XVII). This is the unmistakable message of the frontispiece of the book, in which an enormous sovereign figure, holding a sword and scepter, his body made up of the bodies of the people, looms above the tiny town below. Behind his head are the words from the book of Job: *non est potestas super terram quae comparetur ei*: there is no power on earth that can compare to it.<sup>5</sup>

And so, tunneling down into Hobbes brings us to face to face with the purpose of the State: we fear being together with each other, and so we invent an entity that is other than us and above us, and we surrender all our power to it. This entity uses our power to control us, to prevent us from falling into the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The purpose of creating the State is to effect a fundamental transformation: it transforms the immanent power within the bodies of actual people into the transcendent power of the State.<sup>6</sup>

This act of surrendering our power to an artificial person makes sense in the context of Hobbes’ argument, because of the *bellum*. The State’s transcendent, sovereign power, Hobbes tells us, is the only thing that can overcome the *bellum* and maintain peace. As such, it offers a seductively useful tool to solve an acute problem. When you have an important problem that must be solved, and solved right now, it is extraordinarily useful to have an overarching authority that cannot be questioned. In the case of State-led planning, planners are not dealing with Hobbes’ *bellum*, of course, but they nevertheless have countless important problems that must be solved: the crowding, pollution, and disease of the industrial city; the sprawl of the post-war suburbs; the ‘blight’ of the ‘inner city’; or, more recently, the scourge of the automotive city. For planners, the problem typically manifests as the uncoordinated activity of the private wills in the city, wills that, when left to their own devices, produce collective problems. And so, for planners, private wills must be transcended by a public will, a ‘public interest’ that stands apart from and above private interests, in just the same way Hobbes’ Leviathan stands apart from and above people. This ‘public interest’ is no less artificial or invented than the artificial person of the Leviathan. And it is extraordinarily useful, to the point of being necessary, to have this public interest backed by a transcendent authority that can enforce the public interest, just as the Leviathan enforces peace. So, if we want to be saved from the inferno of the industrial city, or sprawl, or automobility, we must surrender our private interests to the public one. We must transform the immanent power within the bodies of people in the city into the transcendent power of State-led planning, and we must obey the State as it enforces the public interest.

### **Anarchism as Democracy: Refuse the State**

Anarchism and democracy, as I am using those terms here, stand against this transformation of our power. They refuse the Hobbesian bargain to surrender our power to the State in order to end the inferno, and they insist that we keep that power and use it ourselves. Ironically, there is in Hobbes’ work itself a remarkable intellectual resource that can help in this project. We tend to think of the State as the given, as our default condition, and imagine that refusing the State and building a life beyond it would take an unimaginable amount of work. But in Hobbes, our starting or default condition is, essentially, anarchism. In our natural state, people possess their own power. It takes an artificial and unnatural movement to separate people from their power. It is the State that takes work. It requires tremendous effort to maintain the separation between people and their power. And so, if we follow Hobbes on this point, a move toward anarchism and democracy is not so Herculean: we simply need

to refuse the assumption, the Hobbesian assumption, that we agreed to surrender our power to the State in the first place. Without this assumption, the State evaporates, and we see that our power has always been ours.

But this negative task of refusing the State is only the first part of what is required. Once we unassume the State, and we realize that our power to act is available to us, we then need to begin using it to manage the affairs of the city for ourselves, to produce for ourselves the kind of city we want. This task is not so easy, because we have been separated from our power for so long. We are not accustomed to using it. What we will do with that power, once we reclaim it, is undetermined. Hobbes assumes that when we have our power, we will fall into *bellum*. While we can certainly reject this assumption, we should not fall victim to its opposite, the assumption that we will necessarily live together in peace. We are, instead, capable of anything. Hearing this indeterminacy, many of you will rush to pose the question of outcomes, to ask what such anarchism, such democratic self-management, will result in. The answer is we do not know. But in any case it is the wrong question. It is a question that assumes, with Hobbes, that the ends justify the means. The question, from the point of view of anarchism, and democracy, is not 'what will we do with our power?' but 'how can we develop our ability to manage our affairs for ourselves?' And if we agree to ask the latter question, we will realize quickly that the State is precisely that thing that prevents us from developing this ability. Anarchism, or democracy, is precisely that way of life that most fully allows for this development. But developing that ability will take time, and practice. We will need to experiment with new arrangements, and learn from those experiments. We don't know what concrete urban outcomes this way of life will produce, but we do know that they will have been brought about by us, by realizing, and developing, our own power to act.

## Notes

1. This is just temporary. I will return to using "democracy" as soon as the essay is over. I think we desperately need to reclaim democracy from its Lockean corruption and advocate for it insistently. It is our idea, and it is the idea we need.
2. Planners all know the list well: mass transit, affordable housing, walkability, density, mixed-use, equity, social justice, etc.
3. Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part, Chapter XI, "The New Idol."
4. The Latin phrase appears in his *De Cive*, in the Preface.
5. This quality of transcendence is what I consider to be the reason why many capitalize the 's' in State, a convention I adopt throughout this essay.
6. Spinoza calls the former *potentia*, the potential in our bodies to effect change in the world, and he calls the latter, following Hobbes, *potestas* (see Holland, 1998).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Mark Purcell* is a professor in the Department of Urban Design and Planning at the University of Washington. He studies cities and democracy. His most recent book is *The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy* (Blackwell).

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