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A Review of Anarchy Works

James Herod

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I suspect that over time *Anarchy Works* will come to be known as one of the finest books ever written about anarchy. Its author, Peter Gelderloos, had been thinking about writing a book about what anarchy would look like, but then, in a slight shift of focus, thought it better to write first about what anarchy *has* looked like. So he scoured the historical and anthropological literature for examples of lived anarchy. Then he mined these case studies (around ninety altogether he says) for insights about the whole range of theoretical and practical problems facing anarchists, everything from crime to exchange to work. This is a book that is thoroughly grounded in reality, in actually existing anarchy, both past and present. It can be put on the shelf along side Colin Ward's 1973 classic, *Anarchy in Action*, which was also based on existing concrete social practices. As the title suggests, the book is an attempt (and a successful one) to refute the oft-voiced objection: Anarchy could never work.

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Peter was on tour promoting this book. He came to Boston in late May, and then headed on up to Vermont, and then to Canada. He gave two talks, on May 25 and 26, both at the Encuentro Five space in Chinatown. In the first talk, which was attended by about thirty-five people, he presented various themes from the book. During the second evening, with about twenty present, he told the story of the squatter's movement in Barcelona. Lively discussion followed each presentation.

Peter Gelderloos was born in Morristown, New Jersey, but grew up variously in Tokyo, Seoul, and a suburb of Washington, D.C., ending up in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley. After high school he enrolled in James Madison University in Harrisonburg, but bolted after only three semesters for more engaging activities elsewhere, including a six month stint in the slammer for his 2001 arrest for protesting the School of the Americas at Fort Benning. In recent years, he has spent considerable time in Europe. From July 2006 to April 2007 he biked and hitchhiked from Berlin to Barcelona, via Russia, Ukraine, and Greece.¹ Just as he was about to leave Spain to return to the United States, he was arrested on April 23, 2007 on trumped up charges of public disorder. This involved him in a two-year legal battle, during which time he was obliged to stay in Spain. He was finally cleared of all charges in March 2009 and was free to leave the country.²

Gelderloos is most famously the author (notoriously in some circles) of *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, first published in 2005.³ This is a blistering critique of the ideology of nonvio-

¹His travelogue of this trip, *To Get to the Other Side*, was published online in 2010 (222 pages) at: <<http://togettotheotherside.org>>.

²Links to accounts of this episode can be found in the Wikipedia article about him.

³The first edition in 2005 was self-published under an imprint Gelderloos created, Signalfire Press. The second edition was published in 2007 by South End Press in Cambridge, MA. (SEP has now moved to New York City.) This is a much revised and expanded version. It includes a new chapter, now the longest in the book, about anarchist revolutionary strategy.

lence, an ideology which is pushed relentlessly by the (very violent) ruling class and its corporate media, and adopted by large swaths of the opposition movement. He exposes the conservative functions this ideology serves. But the book is not necessarily an explicit argument *for* violence, especially as a matter of principle. In fact, one of the main themes of the book is that the habit of claiming that our choice is between violence or non-violence is a bad one. This is a false distinction which must be abandoned. Yet, the elimination of violence, even as traditionally defined, as a matter of principle, as demanded by pacifists, is also unacceptable. Moreover, standard definitions of what constitutes violence are especially skewed, as are comparisons of the relative weight and incidence of state violence versus revolutionary violence. His objective is to break the stranglehold that the ideology of nonviolence has over questions of strategy and to open up the debate, thus allowing consideration for a variety of tactics.

Peter has also written one of the better manuals on consensus decision making, which is quite popular in anarchist circles. It's called: *Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups*, published in 2006 by See Sharp Press. There is an archive of essays by Peter Gelderloos since 2003 on the web at *The Anarchist Library* (19 items so far).

Now back to *Anarchy Works*. After an Introduction in which the basic principles of anarchism are briefly described – autonomy and horizontality, mutual aid, voluntary association, direct action, revolution, and self-liberation – the book is organized into eight chapters, as follows: human nature, decisions, economy, environment, crime, revolution, neighboring societies, and the future. In each chapter a series of questions is asked, such as: Aren't people naturally competitive? Who will settle disputes? How will people get healthcare? Who will protect us without police? How could people organized horizontally possibly overcome the state? What will prevent constant warfare and feuding? Won't the state just reemerge over time?

It would be pointless here to recap his answers to these questions, that is, to summarize the substance of the book. You will need to read it for yourself. Let me just say though that overall his answers are spot on.

One of the things that I find most attractive about the book is the author's clear and uncompromising insistence that the existing society must be deliberately and vigorously attacked in every way possible. We can't just let things ride. We can't remain passive. We need to go after our oppressors. In fact, the book might be seen as a catalog of all the various ways different peoples have invented, over the centuries, to resist their oppressors.

There is one novel idea in the book I'd like to call attention to, one I've heard only once or twice before, and quite recently at that. The still existing so-called archaic societies (what used to be called "primitive" peoples) sprinkled around the world, especially those living in hill country or on other marginalized land, may not after all be just remnants of ancient societies that have somehow escaped the influences of civilization. Some of them may be contemporary instances of people who have deliberately rejected and escaped from nearby states. Gelderloos pays particular attention to how these various peoples have organized themselves and to the tactics they have invented to avoid domination by their authoritarian neighbors.

This is a hard book to fault. But after careful scrutiny I find that I do have a few quibbles, a couple of which I'll mention here. First, this is a very positive book, but I'm wondering if it is maybe a bit too optimistic. Gelderloos may be making it seem like we are farther along than we are (which actually may be a valid balance to the usual exaggerated negativism, and in particular, to my own personal propensity for doom and gloom). Sure, you can weave these ninety some-odd cases into a coherent whole *in a book*, but are they coalescing like that in reality? I had the same feeling after reading Chris Carlsson's *Nowtopia*. That book described a number of contemporary initiatives, like

urban gardening, permaculture, outlaw bicycling, and the internet commons. My questions were: Okay, these are all worthy projects, but will they ever converge or jell into a movement that can defeat capitalists? What would have to happen for them to do so? I have the same questions about *Anarchy Works*.

Second, throughout the book, Gelderloos treats capitalism and the state as separate entities. This happens in part of course because states existed long before capitalism appeared on the scene, so we get in the habit of thinking of them as separate things, especially in a book which makes a broad historical sweep, collecting cases from all ages. But for the past five hundred years, this conceptual separation is a mistake and hinders the anti-capitalist struggle. Capitalism does not refer just to an "economy," but to an entire social order. The international nation-state system is an integral part of capitalism (profit-takers + politicians = capitalism). So defeating capitalists *means* abolishing their states, without which the private ownership of the means of production would be impossible. Whatever.

It seemed that Peter enjoyed his visit to Boston. He likes to party and dance and stay up late. We threw a couple of good ones for him. Maybe he will come back some day. In the meantime, good luck with your current projects, Peter, and thanks for an outstanding and very stimulating book.