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“We Are the Inferno”

A Conversation on the Anarchist Roots of
Geography

Alexander Reid Ross and Simon Springer

August 10, 2017

In the 1970s, radical geographers expanded the discipline to study the interplay between spaces and social relations, focusing on the spatial dimensions of inequality and oppression. Since then, the radical geography has come to encompass a wide range of tools—yet Marxism remains the most common framework. In this conversation between scholars in the field, Alexander Reid Ross interviews Simon Springer, author of *The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation*, who argues that a truly radical geography must oppose the state and all notions of command and control.

Alexander Reid Ross: Your book, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation*, transgresses traditional concepts of geographic space and time by introducing the effects of communications technology, as well as grassroots networks based on issues rather than location. However, you do not go so far as to rule out place-specific identity as hegemonic and formidable in one way or another. In this precarious balance (or rather struggle) between relational geography in time

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and place, can you elaborate on the dynamics of rural and urban today? What would you envision for the future?

Simon Springer: There is no real separation between urban and rural. To put it bluntly, this is a false dichotomy that is read onto the world rather than being a reflection of anything intrinsic to the organization of human beings on the planet. We are told we are living in the age of urbanism, and this is true to an extent. More and more people are living in cities. But to suggest that this means that there is some sort of firm division of the so-called urban from the so-called rural is problematic because the wealth and so-called prosperity of urban locales is almost entirely reliant upon the rural frame. While we are witnessing more intense forms of financialization and knowledge-based economies, the accumulation of capital still primarily functions as a form of extractivism. The hardware that enables the circuits of financial capital to flow is still very much material and there seems to be an insatiable appetite for more gadgets to keep this network buzzing in cities, which represent the heart of this system. What this means is that the control and plundering of resources matters very significantly to the viability of the urban sphere. In terms of relations of solidarity, there is much to be said here, too. Urban peoples can't afford to ignore the kinds of violence that are being meted out against rural peoples, primarily in the form of forced eviction and land grabbing, because this malevolence always comes home to roost. In Cambodia, where I have done most of my empirical work, this "payback" is often in the form of migration to the city. People rendered landless through the onslaught of capitalism's soldiers of fortune have nowhere else to go, so they flee, making their way to cities in an attempt to find employment. Owing to a variety of bureaucratic roadblocks that prevent them from working in the formal sector, most often people end up begging on the streets. Fearmongering and the criminalization of homeless people perpetuates this cycle of violence, where for nearly a decade now Cambodia has

been arbitrarily detaining street-engaged peoples in what municipal authorities euphemistically refer to as “re-education” or “opportunity” centers. The rhetoric doesn’t match the reality, and having seen firsthand the conditions that people are exposed to, what we are really dealing with are contemporary concentration camps. So the preferred solution for dispossession is effectively internment.

If the level of violence at a structural level wasn’t already enough to make your head spin, at the level of the body the cruelty is that much more acute. People are regularly beaten by guards, fed starvation diets, kept under lock and key in small rooms for twenty-three hours a day, forced to labor, made to sleep and live in their own excrement, and women are not only raped, but gang-raped by their captors. The impact on urban people, besides needing to expand their circle of empathy to care for the rural people caught up in this apocalyptic nightmare, is that it has resulted in a much stricter authoritarian order in the city, where people problematically come to accept heightened levels of surveillance and policing. In such a context, it is hard to imagine how solidarities can be built, as the situation provides significant barriers to greater community engagement. This scenario is not unique to Cambodia, of course, as the surveillance state has crept into the lives of people all around the world. What I would envision for the future is an end to this dynamic of separation and a more holistic integration of people within the biophysical landscapes of the places that they live their lives. In this respect, we have a great deal to learn from the indigenous peoples of the world. Sadly, rather than learning alongside these groups, the history of capitalism is characterized by their genocidal extermination.

ARR: What fascinates me here is the parallax nature of identitarianism and indigeneity in this case. The UN classifies indigenous peoples as maintaining a continuity between today and the time before the current prevailing societies gained power in their territories. However, such a definition is

twisted, by European ultranationalists for instance, to produce a kind of post-modern identity returning to pre-Roman times as a paligenetic rebirth of internal consciousness of land and territory. This movement attempts to gain a kind of credibility that would be useful in a struggle against liberal multiculturalism, as well as NATO and the EU, because for ultranationalists, those structures remain embedded in the historical consequence of the defeat of fascism in 1945. The demand remains paradoxical, as the movement against a multicultural empire simply turns toward a kind of global apartheid (“France for the French, Algeria for the Algerians!”) that even some leftists have embraced in their desperation. Yet, in terms of genuine indigenous struggles that do not insist upon a kind of “spiritual empire” of Europe alongside ultranationalist regimes elsewhere in the world catalogued according to dominant ethnicity, a deeper affinity exists with the left and particularly anarchism. You catalogue anarchist theorists who have drawn on indigenous ideas while presenting a kind of parallel solidarity, rather than an attempt to integrate indigeneity and anarchism. It would appear that this is a deft attempt to keep a broadly-speaking European political tradition at something of a distance from global movements that would speak autonomously in their own name, while avoiding the retrenchment of anarchism as specifically embedded in European interests. How are the efforts of, for instance, the Elsipogtog and Standing Rock Sioux significant in geographical terms? How do you see anarchism in relation to their efforts, and what are the theoretical insights and lessons you might take away from their resistance?

SS: I don't want to position anarchism as a colonizer of any particular groups or their ideas. Anarchism is a lens that makes sense to me, but I don't assume the arrogance of suggesting that it works for everyone. I can see the expression of what I would call “anarchism” in the patterns of association and mutual aid among many groups, whether indigenous or otherwise.

seems to be swallowing everything we've ever known. The fire has not yet been extinguished. For me, anarchism is the light of liberation, the ember of emancipation, and it continues to glow. I'm convinced that if we are willing to cultivate the cinders of compassion and care, they will eventually burst into a brilliant and beautiful flame that can't be extinguished. In time, the conflagration of our passions, our desires, and our hopes for a better world will spread like wildfire, burning all existing hierarchies to the ground. We are the inferno, and the time has come for a politics of arson.

that we find the problems of gentrification generating racial animus while feeding the structural realities of racial segregation and alienation. One sees these processes at play on a far more exaggerated level in the Bay Area, where hipsters ironically mock the cultures they displace while they produce an often openly misogynistic and racist “counterculture” against hegemonic interest in equality and freedom. That Silicon Valley millionaires are also buying up regional farms in the midst of drought, while some even support the “neo-reactionary” credo of the Dark Enlightenment and its call for a mix of genetic engineering, eugenics, and the corporatization of the state, gives a hint of some of the emergent political positions we will be contending with over the next twenty years, and how this pertains to the coming spacio-temporal changes. We have also neglected the ranchers and Patriots, who perhaps we can discuss at a later date. Regardless, thank you very much for laying out the foundations of flat ontology, and the “anarchist roots of geography.” This work will stand as a pivot-point for theorizing strategy and tactics of the anarchist movement.

SS: You’re absolutely correct that the rise of fascism presents one of the most terrifying threats of the contemporary political moment. Trump’s rise to power in the US is certainly an indication of the horror that is to come, where misogynists, racists, and homophobes have become emboldened in a way that we’ve not seen in such an overt way in decades. Thinking even more widely, we also have to contend with the fascism of climate change, and the anthroparchy that underpins the intersection of capitalism and the state as the planet is choked into submission by these institutions. I have three children and I would be lying if I said I didn’t worry that they may not have the opportunity to live out their natural lives owing to some catastrophic planetary disaster. But perhaps because I am a parent, I simply refuse to allow nihilism to take hold of my political outlook. I have to cling to hope, as precarious and naïve as that may sound in a context where an impending darkness

Yet for me to impose this particular viewpoint onto ways of knowing and being in the world that have vastly different historical trajectories than my own understandings of the world would be really problematic.

In the spirit of anarchism, I think it is important for any group of people to define their own politics, and not simply be told what it is by an outside agent. While I may see expressions of anarchism in what many indigenous peoples do, or even in the actions of the Cambodian people I do research with, there may also be significant breaks with anarchist modes and it isn’t really my place to tell anyone what is anarchist or isn’t.

It would be a contradiction where I would be replicating a certain form of authority and encouraging a hierarchy of knowledge. I get my fair share of hate mail. I suppose it comes with the territory of exposing my ideas to the world, but in some of this correspondence I’ve had people tell me I’m wrong about anarchism, and then proceed to tell me what “real” anarchism is all about. To me this mode of argumentation doesn’t sit well with how I understand anarchism. We have enough policing in our world already that we don’t need to be policing each other about the ostensible “correct” and “true” form of anarchism. To me the ethos of anarchism should be one of experimentation and affinity, and that’s precisely what indigenous groups are actively engaging, and have been for centuries. But they are doing so on their own terms, using their own language to define it, which is the crucial piece. So my view on this seemingly congruent movement is that there are important synergies between anarchists and indigenous activists, but they can’t be assumed or imposed. Any sense of alliance has to develop out of mutual respect and understanding, and often the best position for an anarchist is to simply be an ally and listen

carefully. The theoretical lessons to be learned from indigenous peoples are very practical. In North America there has been 500 years of oppression, met with 500 years of solidarity and resistance to settler colonialism. Indigenous peoples have not given up, and they refuse to bend and bow to the impositions of the modern state. The threats that they are presented with are manifold. Capitalism has in the past and continues into the present to actively steal their land, abuse the young, and rape and murder the women. This is not hyperbole, but a tangible reality of the lived experiences of indigenous peoples in the province I call home. Mainstream society responds with ambivalence because the racism runs so deep in Canadian society, and yet indigenous peoples persevere in spite of the indifference and scorn they are presented with. I come at this from the perspective of having grown up in British Columbia, where white people look at racism as something that only happens south of the border. Meanwhile there are deeply rooted prejudices that show no sign of letting up right here at home. So something seemingly as simple as pushing for an indigenous hire in my department at the University of Victoria is met with suspicion, doubt, and even contempt. Those of us working on the principle of wanting to redress the historical marginalization of indigenous voices on campus and within our curriculum have been accused of being racist for even proposing such an idea. There is no understanding that what is actually racist is the suggestion that working towards corrective equity is racist. It is an inverted argument that is intensively afraid of diversity, and expresses that anxiety through a kneejerk reaction that fails to understand that racism is much more than simple categorization. It is a form of systemic violence that is cultivated through the maintenance of privilege and disadvantage. There is no willingness to admit that the playing field is not and has never been even, and that there are significant societal barriers that indigenous people have to contend with that white people never have to consider. At base, it represents the clas-

that we need to start considering ways to bring about greater inclusion and a stronger sense of community. We are of course competing with all sorts of gadgets and screens, where social media placates our feelings of being alone, but these are only ever poor substitutes for genuine togetherness and the touch and warmth of another human being. So in this age of the spectacular, where the mundane and the monumental are increasingly indecipherable, we need to encourage our children and ourselves to disconnect from the machine and reconnect with the planet and each other. This may sound somewhat spiritual, but only because in a certain way it is meant to be. It is not religious, which enters new forms of hierarchy and anxieties about “Others,” but as an atheist, I take spirituality to mean a broad consideration of bonding without bondage. For me, spirituality is also a willingness to express humility for our place in the fabric of space and time. My view of anarchism is consequently integral, whereby I think everything is connected to everything else, not in a universalizing sense, but as a processual unfolding in the way that Doreen Massey encourages us to think about space. To eradicate fascism then, we need to simultaneously work towards ridding ourselves of all the other logics of domination that frame our lives. From sexism to homophobia, racism to misopedia, and carnism to the state, all of these ideas fragment our ability to connect with others and thereby undermine the potential of mutual aid, which is nothing more and nothing less than our collective birthright.

ARR: Okay, well I wish we had time to enter into more depth with regards to the strange varieties of fascism emerging as rebellions against the very authoritarian conservatism that has attempted to harness their energy and power. I’m thinking in particular of fascism associated with the alt-right, incorporating misogynistic and homophobic forms of queer culture, as well as vegetarianism and what I call “fascism of the boutiques.” It is here, amid the struggling lower-middle classes,

business dealings of the bourgeoisie. One can see similar relationships in Venezuela's opposition, and in somewhat different contexts in Turkey and India, for instance. What has produced this troubling rise throughout the world, and how is it to be confronted on the geographic level?

SS: I think it is an outgrowth of neoliberalism. People are disconnected, bewildered, and isolated in the current moment of ever intensifying individualism. We've lost touch with our families, our communities, and the earth itself. And so there is a longing to belong to something. Amid all the feelings of hopelessness and desperation, people lash out. This shouldn't be surprising to anyone. It's easy to be consumed with fear and anger when your life is severed from meaningful interaction with others and a strong sense of inclusion has never been part of your lived experience. Younger people are that much more fragile because they don't remember a time of freely exploring the outdoors, or wandering in their neighborhoods with friends without adult supervision. Everything is compartmentalized and planned in our contemporary lives. Kids don't walk out the front door to play with whoever might happen to be around that afternoon, they have play dates set up for them, and so the chance to encounter alterity with childlike curiosity is severely limited. This has resulted in considerable societal anxiety. The fear of the "Other" is intensifying for this exact reason, but it's also being cultivated through the discourses that are being circulated in society about migrants, indigenous peoples, Muslims, and so on. The bottom line is that the rise of extremist groups on the Right represents a reflection of this fear and an innate desire to belong to something. Fascist groups asserting themselves is obviously contextually specific and the level of susceptibility to this outgrowth of isolation and individualization is going to differ across space, but what's frightening is that these expressions of hate are so common. They are the canary in the coalmine that something is seriously wrong with our current path and should tell us

sic scenario of blaming someone for their own poverty, while ignoring the fact that you've fixed the game to ensure their impoverishment.

ARR: On a global scale, European ultranationalism often pretends to identify with the struggles of decolonization and national liberation, insisting on the liberation of Europe from the structures of capital, and its replacement with a national variety of socialism that clearly excludes outliers based on ethnicity or "culture." It is here that we find Alexander Dugin's greatest inclinations toward "geopolitics," which he gleaned from such National Bolsheviks as Jean-François Thiriart and Nouvelle Droite ideologues like Robert Steuckers. Dugin views geopolitics in terms of broad metaregions like Eurasia, producing a spiritual empire from Lisbon to the Pacific, and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean, in which regional sovereignty is actuated by national communities defined by cultural traditions, even while being linked in a greater chain of what he views as a kind of new Internationale. Unfortunately, even if often unknowingly, much of the largely-Marxist left wing of the broad-based anti-imperialist movement posits a kind of Duginist position wherein Russia becomes, if not an ally, then a kind of lesser evil or useful "enemy of an enemy" in the struggle against multiculturalism and liberal capitalism. A lot of these politics are reflected in notions that Bashar Al-Assad is holding down some semblance of stability in the midst of encroaching chaos, so his regime ought to find support among leftists who loathe Washington's interventions in Iraq. They also tend to identify North Korea as a similar ally in anti-imperialist struggle, due to the DPRK's skillful propaganda machine's ability to deploy left-wing critiques of capital and US imperialism while downplaying its own nationalist self-image as the "cleanest race." In geographic terms, how do you see this geopolitical positioning of allies and enemies? An unsophisticated game of Risk? A kind of armchair geopolitics? A threat to the left or to the right?

SS: The geopolitical map of allies and enemies is one of futility and hubris. It doesn't surprise me that many Marxists would paint the world with such monochromatic strokes. There is so much about Marxist politics that rubs me the wrong way, and some of this comes out in my book.

The bottom line is that we are talking about states and sovereign control. On the basis of this alone there is nothing worthwhile to support from an anarchist perspective.

The discourse of "lesser enemy" is a ruse, and we should be suspicious of this black and white rendering of the world. It plays itself out in electoral politics, where hawks like Hillary Clinton are supported in a facile attempt to stave off other monsters like Donald Trump. It represents an apathetic acceptance of false choice, and so we shouldn't be surprised to see its manifestation in other arenas like geopolitics. Is this a threat to the Left? Yes, without question! I think Marxists in general are a threat to the Left, because they are so self-assured in having the right answers about the world. This might get me in trouble, but I'm far past the point of caring about assuaging the egos of Marxists. For anarchists I think there is a much more humble and unassuming understanding of what anarchism can offer. This is not to say anarchists are naïve or incapable of solutions, but rather that we are much more willing to see things work themselves out in the process of unfolding through our collective efforts, subject to ongoing revision and revitalization, rather than following a set course towards some imagined end goal. David Harvey has lamented that I am somehow trampling on the possibility of Left unity, asking me to listen to his plea, but what he is really mourning is that the Marxist position has been toppled on the streets and its citadel in the academy is now actively being stormed.

in particular, I don't want to pretend that I have the correct answer. I do however have complete faith in human possibility. We made capitalism, and so we can unmake it. What is required is the concerted and ongoing willingness to struggle among those who want to see themselves removed from under it, and a desire to offer our solidarity in whatever terms we are asked to contribute. This has to grow organically, and most importantly it has to be guided by the communities themselves, not the hubris of "great men" with "great ideas."

ARR: Can these communities, themselves, really stand a chance against coordinated fascism, though? In geographic terms, returning to Duginism, we are confronted with a fascist movement far more integrated and extensive than we have seen since 1945. A spread of fascists and parafascists exists where the radical right has become particularly strong. For this reason, I do not draw absolute distinctions between the three, but see them rather as semi-permeable and interpenetrating. From the rise of Dugin in Moscow, there are the connections between third positionism and the AfD in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; there is the Front National's historic support for Nazi skinheads in the past and current incorporation of fascists like Christian Bouchet; there is, of course, National Action and the Northern League in Italy, both of which integrate the Casa Pound fascist squatter network; let's not forget the rise of UKIP and its tacit, though downplayed and often denied, connections with the English Defense League (and the latter's similar denial of Nazi involvement). Similar relationships exist from Poland to Ukraine, of course, where the EU-supported government that overthrew the Yanukovich regime has links to the Nazis of Azov, who have recently been accused of leading an ethnic pogrom. It appears that fascists today once again serve as the useful idiots of authoritarian conservative regimes, which develop fascist trappings in order to maintain street-level credibility while also remaining equipped to handle everyday

mains. Bill Warren picked up on this tenor of Marx's work in his book *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism*, arguing that "imperialism was the means through which the techniques, culture, and institutions that had evolved in Western Europe over several centuries—the culture of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution—sowed their revolutionary seeds in the rest of the world." Imperialism as an outgrowth of capitalism is construed as a "necessary evil" on the path towards some greater good. On this point some Marxists crucified Warren, but he was really just revisiting Marxism proper. Marx condemned the violence of primitive accumulation while also retaining a view of such violent expropriation as important for the furthering of human possibilities. It's really quite appalling when you think about it. This politics of suffering is predicated on placing non-industrialized people on the altar, while their European "saviors" have meanwhile convinced themselves that they are saving the world by spreading their filth. Clearly to clean up a mess, first you have to make one. So, is there a global strategy to anarchism? Absolutely not. I don't want to paint a picture of what a global revolution might look like because to do so would be to illustrate a plenary image that is little more than a reflection of my own positionality. I can't speak for the masses in a way that Marx or Harvey assume they can. Point blank, there is no universal subject position of the worker. People want different things in different places and it is up for them to decide collectively in each location what it is they want and what it is they are willing to fight for. I see much potential in Proudhon and Kropotkin's ideas of federalism as a means of linking autonomous communities together. Murray Bookchin of course elaborated this idea and Colin Ward articulated it very well when he spoke of the global postal service, oriented not around a hegemon or point of authority, but around voluntary networks of association. Why couldn't our political associations function in the same way? In terms of overcoming capitalism

The rise of anarchism in academia in recent years is merely a reflection of the politics of the world, a world that is in desperate need of new ideas beyond the narrow possibilities of the state.

This is after all an institution that repeatedly proves itself to operate not out of concern for the collective of humanity, but in the interests of an elite. Marxists continue to beguile themselves with the idea that one set of elites (i.e., their vanguards) will do better than the current set of elites, and then after their astute wisdom leads us to the so-called Promised Land in the aftermath of revolution, they will suddenly give up the reigns and full communism will blossom. We've heard this story before, and we've put it into practice. It is a cypher for our disempowerment, and a dangerous crutch that continues to shackle the Left to statist politics, a politics with no hope of ever being emancipatory because its very premise is hierarchy and control.

ARR: To clarify my own politics in light of this larger discussion between you and Harvey, I can find sympathy for both positions. I am greatly indebted to Marxist mentors in the past, such as Vijay Prashad and Kazembe Balagun. I am also drawn, as an anarchist, to the autonomist analysis of both social movements and capital, hinging on Rosa Luxemburg's text, *Accumulation of Capital*. However, I want to push back against the position, advanced by people I deeply admire like Andrew Cornell, that anarchism lacks the tools to attain its desires. I see anarchism as a strong but humble practice, rather than a kind of pure analysis in the sense that scientific socialism and other milieu are presented. Unfortunately, I have found Marxist-anarchist syntheses to be painfully lacking and often self-destructive in their aporia—in particular, a general belligerence and reductive self-criticism that produces winners and losers on the Left. The winner is the last man standing through the hail of accusations and reflexive

insults, while the loser is the one who bows out and accepts a kind of quiet normalcy in defiance of collective methods of punishment and discipline. Nobody is happy at the end, but the party has not been built and the newspapers aren't selling—which I suppose is a good thing in the end. You seem to adopt an antiauthoritarian analysis that is inclusive and community-oriented; something I would perhaps identify as a bit of an oxymoron: a populist-insurrectionism. Would you say that this is accurate?

SS: I guess. If that label works for you, then I'm fine with it. As I said before with respect to indigenous peoples, I'm not too hung up on what you actually call things. I prefer the word "anarchism" because I think it encapsulates the kind of politics I want to advocate for, namely mutual aid, self-management, voluntary association, horizontality, direct aid, cooperation, and decentralization. That is, I want a politics for us, by us. I use the term "democracy" only in its radical, direct, or etymological sense of *demos* and *kratia*, or people power, not in the misappropriated and diluted version that really should be called "electoralism" instead. With respect to insurrection, I like this term because I think it speaks to a continuity of resistance, where unlike revolution, the temporal frame is one of perpetuity.

Life is struggle. We know this from an early age. What we come to learn as we get older is that the moment we give up that struggle is the precise moment we die under the heel of our oppressor. This is why Marxism is fundamentally a necropolitics, because it assumes an end state, a utopia in the aftermath of revolution instead of recognizing that politics continue unabated.

And so people died under Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot en masse because they were rendered vulnerable by the Marxist fallacy

kind of reaction and challenge to the totality of such geopolitical relations, insofar as they declare a spiritually mandated zone already in existence in Southwest Asia, as defined by their traditional, imperial constructs rather than the modern nation-state. Of course, the opposite side of the same challenge to geopolitical totalization is the Zapatistas, which you discuss in *The Anarchist Roots of Geography*. In light of these maneuvers to overturn the map of nation-states, we are left with the 19th century model of revolution as contemporary but perhaps wanting. Marx famously believed that the most industrial state would lead the revolution, while Lenin importantly insisted that the "weakest link" would be the fastest to snap. In either situation, the Trotskyist notion takes hold that countries that have undergone a revolution ought then to spread the revolution elsewhere, since true communism will not exist anywhere until it exists internationally. Yet when we see the political geographies of conflicting territorialities amid global relations, the notion of revolutionary transformation in time and space regarding borders and the content of what is retained within those borders becomes quite transversal. Does your flat ontology include a broader political strategy in terms of advantage and opportunity with regards to the overcoming of capitalism, or is it too spontaneous for such predictions?

SS: I think you've now answered part of my critique of the Marxist reading of Rojava. There is a deep Eurocentrism in Marxist thinking that goes largely unacknowledged. I don't think Marxists have ever resolved this or confronted it in a sustained manner. It structures the world in a way not too dissimilar to colonialism, where there is a distinct "core" and "periphery," and it assumes the same problematic position of a benevolent caretaker. The white man's burden is threaded through Marxism, and capitalism for its part is strangely seen through a lens that is actually somewhat celebratory. Marx tempers this by saying it is a stage to pass through on the way to communism, but that character of espousing capitalism re-

ical reach means citing the Angkorian Empire as the locus of Khmer identity, but that imagined line that separates Cambodia from Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam is a reflection of the colonial encounter, not an Angkorian inheritance. National borders and nations themselves can accordingly be thought of as perpetuations of a colonial logic, as this was the origin of their birth. Imagine a village that sits right along the Cambodia-Thailand national boundary, and perhaps even two neighbors that become separated by this line. Despite the villagers on either side of this line having shared familial lineages for many generations, the now-separated neighbors are informed via nationalism that they are not the same ethnicity. Moreover, they are told that they are more distant from one another than they are from other people who live thousands of miles away from them but are said, by the state, to be their national brethren. It's really quite an absurd proposition, but this is the way the institution of the state encourages us to think about the world. The state has appropriated local identities under a national banner, where the population is then compelled to think, act, and even speak in a national way. This is one of the primary functions of schooling: To convince people that they are indeed part of a nation and to teach them to speak the same language, which becomes standardized through things as seemingly mundane as correct spelling. The state then is actually far more insidious than explicit forms of colonialism because it operates at the level of ideology, where people's sense of themselves and their very subjectivity is transformed. This scenario is as true of Cambodia as it is of Canada, Colombia, Cameroon, and Cuba. The state is cut from the exact same cloth as colonialism, where the only real differences are the scale upon which they operate and the tactics that are employed to ensure the capitulation of those they oppress.

ARR: One of the troubling things about the post-colonial map (if we can use that term) is that it retains many of those colonially imposed borders. Perforce, we might see ISIS as a

that promised the delivery of a better life instead of recognizing that our only possibility of changing the world is to continue to actively engage with it. Transformation requires an eternal vigilance and is possible only insofar as we are willing to do the hard work ourselves instead of entrusting the responsibility for our lives to others. So I suppose this is where the populist part that you mention would come into play. The point is that for me the term "anarchism" is just a placeholder for a set of ideas that are subject to experimentation and interpretation based on how different groups are willing to employ them. We need language to communicate ideas, but it also constrains our political imaginations in particular and problematic ways. Elsewhere I have been asked if those who label their thought "feminist intersectional analysis" should be made to call it "anarchism" because of the synergies I envision. My answer was absolutely not, even if there is something intrinsically anarchistic about what they do. You can call this "anarchism," "critical anti-hegemonic iconoclasm," "paradigm destabilizing recalcitrant analysis," "nonconformist insurgent praxis," "don't tell me what to do theory," or, as you've suggested, "populist democratic insurrectionism." It doesn't really matter to me, as the overarching point is that we are talking about a mindset of breaking archetypes, tearing up blueprints, and scribbling over leitmotifs. I like to simplify this and just call it "anarchism," while recognizing an inevitable mutability to the idea.

ARR: Considering anarchism, I think you are setting up a geographic position that enables strategic discussions to take place outside of "geopolitics" (i.e., rather than plotting which nation-states are best pitted against one another for the final outcome, whatever it may be, you are presenting a kind of political geography of radical movements). At the same time, I think you make it clear that there is not much that distinguishes your political thought from the groundwork created by, for instance, Emma Goldman. It is quite clear, from that, how your differences with David Harvey emerge. In *The An-*

archist Roots of Geography, Harvey is the scholar you critique perhaps the most, next to Marx. In particular, you struggle against his assertion of hierarchy and his belief in a revolution of tomorrow instead of an insurrection of today. How does this critique inflect your ideas of “flat ontology,” horizontalism, and mutual aid over space and time, especially in relation to rural/urban dynamics?

SS: Harvey is so close to the letter and spirit of Marx, where other Marxist geographers have recognized his project as simply the continuation of the past into the present. As a geographer myself, Harvey represents somewhat of an easy target. Not because his ideas are worthless, but simply because he is the most famous living geographer. I’m happy to acknowledge that he’s done a great deal of good for our discipline. When for example I see geographers uncritically flirting with military funding I have to think that it is because they have stayed the course of the quantitative revolution in geography, and never heeded the warnings that Harvey drew our collective attention towards four decades ago. Harvey opened geography up to new possibilities, possibilities that were hinted at in other ways by earlier anarchist geographers like Peter Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus, but had long since been forgotten. So there is no doubt that Harvey is worthy of our collective thanks. Without his work it is highly likely that I would not be a geographer. The only reason I am an academic geographer today is because I recognized the possibilities for critique within the discipline, and the attention that feminist geographers in particular paid to social justice was something that captured my imagination and made me want to engage.

All this being said, I don’t think we should lionize Harvey. As an anarchist I don’t think anyone should be put up on a pedestal and then be sheltered from critique. I once had a reviewer tell me that they felt like I “would be better off with a picket sign standing out front of CUNY yelling at David Harvey. What I mean by this is there is an 800-pound straw person

a good thing for any given society. I think most anarchists would answer that question the same way: a resounding “no.” Have other countries done better? I suppose if you were to set up some sort of measure that could take the pulse of national opinion then you might come to that conclusion. But it really doesn’t matter in terms of the fundamental structure that is imposed. All states, including those who have freed themselves from the yoke of European colonialism, remain fundamentally colonial in their constitution. So in Cambodia, the capital city of Phnom Penh has merely replaced Paris as the occupying force. Identities are assimilated into a single vision of “Khmerness” that is produced, scripted, and oriented towards the will of the government in power. Today we are told that Cambodia is something like 90% ethnic Khmer, but what does that even mean? This is just a social construct that has, to at least some extent, been used to replace the earlier label of “race” by linking it to some idea of cultural content as well. But it doesn’t hold up to critical scrutiny. For example, my daughter was adopted from Cambodia, but she has spent most of her life in Canada, and before that New Zealand and Singapore. Is she ethnically “Khmer” or is she quite simply “human?” Going to the doctor’s office in New Zealand means you have to fill in a survey on ethnicity, and on one visit I entered in her details as “human.” This was unacceptable to the doctor because I was told that certain people are susceptible to different ailments. Suddenly this didn’t sound so much like a question of culture. What he was really asking was a question about her “race,” problematically rooted in a biological understanding. So nationalist narratives use ethnicity in such a way that is inherited from colonialism’s racialization of the world’s peoples, but then places culture alongside it. The nationalist narrative then reaches far into the depths of the past to accumulate its ostensible legitimacy, despite being a very recent phenomenon that, as Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, only arose in the aftermath of colonialism. In Cambodia, this histor-

this thinking “borderline religious,” stating that Marxists “believe that if anything is not written in the old books it will not happen,” and so the distortion of historical struggles to fit a Marxist narrative continues in Rojava.

ARR: So, it seems like you are saying that the paradigm of radical geography has not completely shifted with whatever left-wing support of Assad’s regime exists, but at the same time there is an ongoing struggle between anarchism and authoritarian Marxism (using the term “authoritarian” as a modifier, not as a necessary qualifier) over the conceptualization and actualization of political geography. With this struggle in mind, I want to return to a question of national liberation again, and the nostalgia for 1970s-type revolutionary groups, as well as major geographic transformations occurring over time. Like Sam Dolgoff and other anarchists, you target national liberation states as being reformations of capital and colonialism. Do you see them all as equally bad, some of them as better than others, or would you reduce the transformation to a reformation of the “world system” that remains fundamentally unchanged, despite improvements in infrastructure, quality of life, and human rights status in some countries in the South?

SS: I think the idea of improvements in infrastructure, quality of life, and human rights in the global south is highly contestable. This isn’t to say that there haven’t been changes that people have struggled to secure, but rather, I think we need to ask: who have such developments actually targeted and whose lives have been improved? I’m most familiar with the situation in Cambodia, where infrastructure projects have deepened the penetration of capitalism into the country, human rights remain fragile in the face of an authoritarian regime that shows no signs of loosening its grip, and quality of life is utterly abominable for many and perhaps even most. Meanwhile, a very small group of elites lives in the lap of luxury. An urban middle class has emerged, but it isn’t a significant percentage of the population and we should ask if such stratification is

as effigy that is depicted as David Harvey, when in fact many Marxist geographers find intellectual/theoretical value in some of the concepts that are lambasted.”

Aside from being a comical defence of Harvey, we can unpack this a bit. Why would I want to yell at Harvey or present him with a picket sign? As an anarchist I’m committed to direct action, not to appeals to authority figures. I don’t want to yell at Harvey, but I would like the opportunity to debate with him. Despite several opportunities and invitations being sent for that very purpose, so far Harvey has refused to participate. I actually went to New York in February 2016 at the invitation of the Marxist Education Project, who wanted to host a dialogue between Harvey and myself. He declined, but I participated anyway and had a great conversation with Michael Lardner and some of the other Marxists who gathered about forced evictions in Cambodia. I thought I might be entering the lion’s den, but I was pleasantly surprised by the hospitality I was shown and the conviviality that ensued. Two nights later I gave a talk at CUNY, hoping again that Harvey might show up. He did, but unfortunately he didn’t have time for me afterwards. I had hoped to shake his hand, but the only words we exchanged were the question he asked about my talk and the response I gave. He seemed unimpressed, which is fine, I didn’t expect him to be. My colleague later invited him here to Victoria as part of our community colloquium “The City Talks,” where we ran a speaker series on the theme of “Anarchism in the City” in early 2017. The idea was to bring Harvey in to debate the merits and limits of anarchism and Marxism in the contemporary city. Unfortunately, he once again declined. He was then invited to participate in an author-meets-critic session for my book at the American Association of Geographer’s meeting in Boston in April 2017, and once again he turned down the invitation. But if not now, then when? This debate is, at least in my view, critically important.

I'd be happy to share a meal with Harvey and make him feel welcome here in Victoria. To me that's where unity matters. How we actually treat each other on an interpersonal basis. Regardless of what Harvey has to say about Left unity more generally, the fact that there are competing ideas on the Left is in my view indicative of a healthy politics. I fear the post-political moment where dissent is silenced and a universal consensus is evoked. It scares me that Marxists don't understand this, but such is the problem with Marxism. So returning to the reviewer's statement I had mentioned, what is particularly funny about this comment is that Harvey actually responded to me with a long lambasting of his own in an essay called "Listen, anarchist!" He did so despite the fact that I would hope many anarchist geographers find intellectual/theoretical value in the concepts I am using. The question then becomes, so what? It is perfectly acceptable for Harvey to critique me, and vice versa. I refuse to play the game of yielding to the elder statesmen.

Aside from the apparent hierarchy, what you can sense in this reviewer's comment is the appeal to paternalism and orthodoxy, which is what Harvey's work has come to represent. It has taken on such an assured and assumed role in critical geographical scholarship that it is akin to mother's milk. It is the *ex cathedra* word of our anointed leader. I don't blame Harvey or accuse him of having cultivated this himself, as instead it is a case of the cult of personality that rests at the heart of Marxism. The name of the ideology should tell you as much, having been named for a single man rather than a group of ideas that were fleshed out by countless individuals. In any event, my critique of Harvey's explicit advocacy of authority in *Rebel Cities* is seen as transgressive, which of course it should be. I am antithetical to the spirit of authority that haunts the Marxist project. The frightening question is why should Marxists find transgression to be such a dangerous idea? Why are they so self-assured that they consider their ideas as being beyond reproach? It is a curious conceit, given the fact that Marxism

to the elephant in the room isn't the construction of an "800-pound straw person," it is simply to tell it like it is, something that evidently makes Marxists very uncomfortable because so much of their identity is wrapped up in the very idea of Marx. I presented my paper "Fuck Neoliberalism" at the Association of American Geographers conference in San Francisco, where I sketch an anarchist politics of refusal, but never actually mention anarchism anywhere in the talk. You can find the video online where you'll see one audience member react very negatively at the end of the talk during the question period, suggesting that ideas like mutual aid and the free association of the commons all spring from Marx. He was incensed that I was turning my back on Marx, because in his view, this was the only inheritance that contemporary radical geography should concern itself with. Therein we see the orthodoxy, which I think is extremely dangerous. Etymologically, the notion of orthodoxy signifies the "right opinion" and consequently any given orthodoxy represents a truth claim that imposes itself on the world. What about all the pieces that don't fit with a Marxist reading? Why are the spaces of experimentation with methodology, epistemology, and ontology being closed off? Harvey's latest book is titled *The Ways of the World*, which I think is pretty apt in how assuming this succinct statement is. It seems transhistorical and omniscient to me, as though apparently he's got it all figured out. The situation in Syria and particularly in Rojava is interesting insofar as I think it reveals the tensions between anarchism and Marxism. Harvey has said he wants to go to Rojava to see what's going on, but at the same time he's clearly already made up his mind. He views the PKK as the result of Marxist and Leninist thinking. But the situation isn't that simple, as there is tension where some would prefer to take an anarchist path in spite of the push towards hierarchical organization. Couldn't this alternative path be supported? For Marxists, they refuse to acknowledge that such a politics could emerge from places like Rojava. Zaher Baher has called

a smart and concise label on describing particular processes, but that doesn't mean the idea came to them like a bolt from the blue. Think today of all the attention around Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." Like "primitive accumulation," this is a great label to describe a very complex phenomenon, but Nixon didn't singularly come up with this idea of violence being diffused across time. A number of other scholars have been writing about the same sort of process for many years, both prior to and coinciding with Nixon's analysis. Kudos to Nixon for putting such a great and readily digestible label on it, but we should acknowledge that his doing so was only made possible by the conversations that were evolving among a community of scholars working on violence. He offered an excellent synthesis, but I want to reject the "great man" theory in all its guises. It isn't just Marx that is presented in this way, so I don't want to be accused of unduly picking on him. The same cult of personality surrounds poststructuralist figures like Michel Foucault, when in reality there is of course a genealogy to his work as well, some of which actually seems to draw quite explicitly from anarchism, but without proper acknowledgement. This doesn't mean that I don't think the idea of primitive accumulation, or Harvey's revamped "accumulation by dispossession" aren't useful, but that we should be aware of the other intellectual trajectories that both continue to inform and even contradict this idea. Writing about the Latin American experience and the intellectual traditions that have evolved in this context, Eduardo Gudynas for example has called the "great man" thinking or what he terms "Harvey fashion" into question, suggesting that it represents a form of intellectual colonialism. In that regard, Harvey is in good company, because this is precisely how I read the history of Marxism. Many of the ideas advanced by Marx are appropriations of Proudhon and other socialist thinkers of the time. Marx was a prolific and fantastic writer, but much like Foucault, he wasn't very good at giving credit where credit was due. To call attention

cannot withstand the anarchist critique. It would seem that this is why Harvey would rather speak of Left unity than actually sit down and debate me in person. He gets to carry forward with his distortions and subsume the anarchist position under the banner of an ostensibly unified Left that looks exactly how he wants it to look. It reveals an imperializing impulse to Marxism that is in fact nothing new.

The attempt to subsume anarchism into a Marxist trajectory is something that Marxists have been doing since the First International. So if anarchists are skeptical of calls for Left unity, there is good reason for it.

Why do Marxists *prima facie* consider their concepts and theories as being more important than anarchist ones? Sadly, this is the geography we have inherited on the back of Harvey's legacy, and its authoritarianism should be clear. For the discipline to flourish and continue to bloom, it needs to concern itself with *undisciplining*. There shouldn't be fences and walls erected around what is considered possible in geography, what concerns are explored, and who is critiqued. With respect to flat ontology, my insistence is quite simply on horizontalism as a politics of possibility. When we start engaging in modes of being in the world beyond hierarchical organization, what might we accomplish? Harvey falls back on superficial examples like a nuclear power plant and flying an airplane with too many pilots in the cockpit, but he is purposefully conflating the authority of specialization with the authority of command and control. As Mikhail Bakunin argued, in the matter of boots, he refers to the authority of the bootmaker, but this is not a licensing or justification of the state as Harvey wants to argue. Consulting with or even deferring to specialization in certain instances is not the same thing as uncritically allowing an authority to impose itself upon you. It is a voluntary association,

where we freely listen to them in respect of their knowledge, always reserving the right to reprimand and rebuke. Such authority is not infallible, and absolute faith in a single individual or institution represents both the end of autonomy and the death of politics. Even in the case of a nuclear reactor, there is no reason to assume that a horizontally organized worker collective couldn't acquire the skills required to operate such a facility. This seems far less frightening than allowing people like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, or Kim Jong-un the inalienable right to have their finger on the trigger of global annihilation. The dynamics of such a flat ontology should be no different in the rural sphere than they are in the urban. Again, this is a false dichotomy, at least in part enabled by hierarchical thinking that privileges the experience of one group over the ways of being of another. The resistance to horizontalism is precisely why I think Marxism is such a stunted and in fact threatening political prospect. It suggests it will emancipate us, all while actively working to ensure that particular systems of oppression remain intact. To be blunt, Marxism is a charlatan politics selling snake oil.

ARR: Perhaps Harvey's most famous term is the "spatio-temporal fix," which I found useful to describe the switch from domestic real estate to foreign land grabs in 2008—a phenomenon that I also located within Marx's notion of "primitive accumulation" drawing on Rosa Luxemburg's concept of "the accumulation of capital" and Walter Rodney's "underdevelopment" thesis. Personally, I see this network of Marxian critique "from below" as useful to encounter differing traditions of left-wing thought emerging from the Third World movement and the post-colonial Global South that emerged in times and places in which Marxism was viewed as the ideology of universal liberation. While I don't share this ultimate concept of Marxism as the end-all, be-all of the universe, I do believe it becomes necessary to engage in the formative level of analysis that Marxism provides in

order to alloy left-libertarian and anarchist ideas with those that have been fostered within the Global South for decades independently of the anarchist movement from 1938 to 1989, which in reality cannot be seen as particularly influential on a global level (with some major exceptions). The "global land grab" is the focus of some of your work regarding Cambodia, if I'm not mistaken. (From what I know, the term was coined by activists linked to La Via Campesina taking place in the Global South as investors fled the US real estate market in 2008.) First, would you agree with this approach to Marxism in relation to modern paradigms of political geography, and second, has that paradigm reached a kind of a tipping point with the anti-imperialist support of regimes such as Assad's Syria?

SS: Marx's notion of primitive accumulation isn't actually Marx's. Again, in the identity politics of Marxism, a single individual is given undue credit for an idea that was being cultivated by a broad array of thinkers at the time. Yes, Marx wrote on this subject quite eloquently, but he was not alone. Marx was actually basing his ideas on Adam Smith's notion of previous accumulation, and Pierre Joseph-Proudhon's work on property was a huge inspiration on the young Karl Marx. Recognition for the processes of dispossession were evolving around the turn of the 20th century, where for example in *The Slavery of our Times*, Leo Tolstoy wrote "History shows that property in land did not arise from any wish to make the cultivator's tenure more secure, but resulted from the seizure of communal lands by conquerors and its distribution to those who served the conqueror." So no, I wouldn't entirely agree with the summary you've provided because it risks assigning priority once again to Marx. Part of what I am trying to show in my own work is that socialist ideas were born first and foremost of the people, where their theorization was not the preserve of a single person, but reflective of an ongoing conversation among a community of scholars. Someone always puts