

Introduction: Anarchist Geographies and Epistemologies of the State

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Abstract

This special issue intends to deepen into the question of and explore epistemic avenues in knowledge production about the state in geography. This issue assembles papers and interventions that drawing on anarchist and anarchist-inspired geographies interrogate and challenge state narratives and effects through empirical and theoretical analysis. The collection situates current debates in this field conveying the potentialities and values of its epistemic tools to attain a nuanced understanding of the state and its intersection with other forms of oppression. The contributions extend the critique and reflection around the state in geography focusing on a state-decentering epistemological move, one that takes seriously the multiplicity of creative force shifting our gaze towards oppressive structure and everyday forms of subjugation. As well, the works explore fruitful cross-pollination between different ways of knowing the state from anti-authoritarian perspectives.

Keywords

Anarchist geographies; state; anti-authoritarianism; epistemologies; statism



Introduction

This special issue follows a growing literature that engages with anarchist and anti-authoritarian perspectives in rethinking the state's certainty in geography and reflecting on the possibilities of spatialities emerging beyond statist logics (e.g., Clough and Blumberg 2012; Ferretti and García-Álvarez 2017; Springer 2012, 2016; and White, Springer and Souza 2016). This introduction highlights these discussions around anarchist geographies concerning the key aspects engaged by the authors. I do not intend to present a comprehensive analysis of this emerging field in geography (as others have presented lately (e.g., Ince 2019; Springer 2016)); instead, I reflect on the special issue's articles' and interventions' contributions to the field. The goal of this special issue was to assemble a series of works that set epistemic avenues in knowledge production about the state in geography, drawing from anarchist and anti-authoritarian frameworks. The intention of this collection is thus to provide evidence of the potency, nuance, and sensibilities offered by these frameworks pointing to the variety of approaches that are reshaping anarchist geographies.

The contributions collected provide empirical, theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches to interrogate state narratives and effects. I hope that this issue continues previous efforts in bringing this lively field in radical geographies to mainstream geography and stimulates conversations to improve our understanding of the state. Ranging from the decolonial intersection with an anarchist critique of the state, the analysis of settler colonialism through an anarchy-feminist lens or questioning statist gaze through ecological sensibilities, to interventions on the epistemic concerns regarding citational practices and counterfactualism, the works assembled here signal paths to stretch geography's state-centric epistemic constraints. Therefore, I hope that the works collected provide avenues to multiply our epistemic tools and conceptual foundation to decenter the state in geography. Finally, I hope the issue demonstrates the potentialities and value of anarchist and anarchist-inspired geographies, as well as denotes the fruitful cross-pollination between different ways of knowing the state.

This introduction aims to present an overview of anarchist and anarchist-inspired geographies' trajectories and avenues in questioning the state's place in geography. However, my intention is to point to some of the discussions and themes within this field that are addressed by the authors in this special issue. In that sense, this introduction is limited in its scope to describe and contextualize the main topics and arguments in the field and does not engage thoroughly with this wide and dynamic field. Also, this introduction briefly engages with the intersections, critiques, and cross-pollination between anarchist and other anti-authoritarian perspectives. The latter requires an in-depth and nuanced discussion that I am not able to provide here. Instead, I hope to indicate the possibilities but also the limitations that these intersections have exposed, searching for spaces of solidarity towards a state-decentering epistemological move in the discipline. Along the same lines, I hope this special issue contributes to the field of anarchist and anarchist-inspired geographies with empirical and theoretical cases that widen epistemic avenues to examine and challenge the state. As such, the intent of this collection is to provide and contribute to extent radical and critical geographies opening of new directions in which anarchist and anti-authoritarian perspectives offer a nuanced approach, but also a shift towards state dissolution. Like any other collective work, this special issue combines the work of many people. First, the idea of this special issue emerged from a conference session at the American Association of Geographers, which took place in Washington, DC, USA in 2019, entitled "Anarchist Geographies and the Epistemologies of the State". The works presented here were discussed in this session. Convened by Federico Ferretti, Richard White, and myself, the session aimed to expand radical geographies' point of view on the production of geographical knowledge about the state, and was thus a continuation of previous sessions that engaged with anarchist geographies.

Anarchist and Anti-Authoritarian Geographies

Anarchist geographies are a wide and diverse field that draws on the intersections of anarchism, as a heterogeneous political project and a set of day-to-day practices that opposes all forms of oppression (White and Williams 2012), and the analysis of human-nonhuman spatialities (Springer 2016). Even though this field (re)emerged in the last decade, it comes from a tradition that originated in the 19th century which contributed to shaping radical approaches around pedagogies, epistemologies, and practices of the discipline of geography and of anarchism (Ackelsberg and Breitbart 2017). The importance of these genealogies has been stressed by many authors (e.g., Ferretti 2017; Springer 2013b), highlighting anarchism and geography's intersecting relevance in producing conceptual frameworks, epistemic approaches, and practices to problematize and engage with spatialities of hierarchical structures and day to day power dynamics (Ince 2019).

This special issue appears 150 years after the Paris Commune, installed at the end of March of 1871, which represented one of the major popular emancipations of the time, as well as a reminder of systemic state terror. The Commune was, as Ferretti (2009) examines, a crucial event in the emergence of anarchist geographies due to its defiance of state oppressive organization through a display of popular and spontaneous self-emancipation that was definitive in the organization of the anarchist movement. Moreover, the Commune's experience deeply influenced figures like Elisée Reclus in developing his social geographic approach, and the later formation of a circuit of anarchist geographies that, for example, "played a key role in establishing relations between anarchism and feminism." (Ferretti 2016, 68) Anarchism's origin is then situated geographically and historically to the West, however its iteration across the globe marked differences, evidencing the "placed-based diversity of anarchist approaches." (Clough and Blumberg 2012, 340) As a set of practices and theories, anarchism is multiple (ranging from individualistic to social/communitarian perspectives) and in continuous change embedded in social struggles (Roman-Alcalá 2020). Risking simplifying the multiplicity and open-ended character of anarchist projects, some of the shared tenets identified include its opposition to orders based on hierarchy and coercion, instead proposing horizontal organization based on mutual aid and prefiguration that seek to create through daily practices, relations, and structures: new realities that serve as the basis for more equitable futures (Ince and Barrera 2016). Even though several works have examined anarchism's relevance and contribution to geography, including works collected in *Antipode's* volumes 10(3) and 11(1) in 1978, these perspectives remained largely disregarded and overshadowed by Marxist approaches in radical geographies until recently (Springer 2016).

Considering the variety and trajectory, as well as the location from which anarchist perspectives articulate their onto-epistemic critiques of social oppression, it is crucial to contextualize and historicize anarchisms. Moreover, questioning the state requires us to reflect on the limits and potentialities of anarchism that, even though it represents one of the main schools of thought from which to draw ideas and inspiration to engage with the state, it carries a particular history and legacies with gendered, racialized notions about the human social and territorial organization (Lagalissee 2019). However, as Ferretti (2017) has shown, the anarchist tradition in geography posed a significant precedent in challenging the "big 'metanarratives' of state, metaphysics, religions, and capitalism" (908), attending to the "complexity of the 'myriads' of diverse phenomena" (894). Anarchism therefore contests linear progress, racism, and colonialism, as well as essentialist purviews stressing, instead, individuality, and variety (see also Clark and Martin (2013) on the work of Elisée Reclus).

Even though anarchist geographies offer avenues to problematize hierarchical social formations and focus on the possibilities that exist in the *here* and *now* towards more horizontal organization (Springer 2016), this field draws, as any other, from a set of purviews that are necessary to acknowledge. As many of the 'anarchist' ideas and values are shared with other *anti-authoritarian* perspectives that question oppressive social organization, such as Indigenous, Black or feminist perspectives, it would be

a mistake to subsume the latter into anarchism (Barrera-Bassols and Barrera 2017, Clough 2014; Taibo 2018). Furthermore, anarchism is far from a homogenous political project; instead, it rests in its inherent multiplicity that bursts into myriad ideas and practices. In that sense, following Ramnath (2011), anarchism should be situated as part of an extended family of *anti-authoritarian* perspectives that may intersect with different trajectories and encounters with the (left-)libertarian traditions and practices in addressing coercive and hierarchical structures. The latter has been addressed productively, bringing to the fore cross-pollination and becoming part of the ongoing struggles for more equitable societies. Instead of a self-congratulatory approach, although adhering to the anarchist rejection of a superior form of understanding the world, this issue turns to the epistemic landscapes that expand the possible analytics of the state and challenge its certainty in the ways that we understand human spatialities.

The works assembled in this special issue follow a growing interest in anarchist and other left-libertarian perspectives from the last two decades and from within activism, social movements, and the academy, signaling anarchist relevance in challenging contemporary hierarchical structures such as, for example: capitalism (el-Ojeili 2014). During this time, a series of meetings, conferences, and sessions have included or focused on anarchist geographies and geographers, bringing together a diverse group from all over the world, added to a growing literature that has shown the conceptual, methodological, pedagogical, and practical possibilities of the field of anarchist geographies. The growth of this field is demonstrated by special issues published in *Antipode* (Springer et al. 2012), and *ACME* (Clough and Blumberg 2012), collective books (White, Springer and Souza 2016), and two International Conferences of Anarchist Geographies and Geographers.

This growing literature in the discipline is placing anarchism at the center of its pedagogies, methodologies, and theories to push forward new understandings of territory (Ince 2012), the history of geographical thought (e.g., Ferretti 2014), political ecology (with a forthcoming collection of three volumes), violence and property (e.g., Springer 2013a), geography pedagogies (e.g., Springer, Lopes de Souza, and White 2016), and the role of the state in public spaces and autonomous occupations (e.g., Ince 2019; Ferrell 2012; Springer 2016), to name some examples. This body of scholarship also includes important critiques and reappraisals of anarchism and anarchist geographies' core tenets and contribution to social struggles, and acknowledges its constraints (Mansilla 2013), while also acknowledging its trajectories intersecting struggles and perspectives within the anti-authoritarian family in, for example, Latin America (Cusicanqui 2016). All these works denote the avenues opened by this field in stretching the boundaries of radical geography.

The analytical framing of this special issue focuses on a state-decentering epistemological move, one that takes seriously the multiplicity of creative force to shift our gaze towards oppressive structures and everyday forms of subjugation: an epistemic move in which anarchist and anti-authoritarian perspectives are in an advantageous position to advance. However, they are not unique by incorporating anarchism's ideas and practices that oppose social formations based on hierarchy, inequality, and coercion.

Decentering the State in Geography

As Springer (2016) describes the connections between geography and anarchism, he notices this bond gives these geographies a considerable "potential to haunt the state". Such potential focuses not only on the state as one of the main coercive structures we live in, but the myriad everyday statisms emerging throughout institutions, social process, and personal relations (Ince 2019). The significance that anarchism gives to the state as the epitome of hierarchical organization—as a mode of authoritarian relations—has been considered the primary target of anarchist politics. This simplification misleads from anarchists' broader concern on the critique of authority and hierarchical organizations (Ince and Barrera 2016). The latter was also decisive in the left though the schism between (left-)libertarian and Marxist

traditions, a debate that persists today in geography (Ackelsberg and Breitbart 2017; Harvey 2017; Springer 2014). The focus on hierarchical organization situates the anarchist “lens” as well suited to look at and challenge the state’s certainty (Roman-Alcalá 2020; Scott 2012) in its relations with capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and other forms of social oppression. Thus, anarchist geographies are interested in examining “the broader set of asymmetrical social and power relations typified, justified, and institutionalized by the state forming a pervasive organizing logic within society” (Ince and Barrera 2016, 11-12). This ‘statism’ becomes a central feature to better understand the system of domination, allowing a “distinct narrative and epistemology that makes a notable shift in thinking by positioning the state as, essentially, ‘artificial.’” (Ince and Barrera 2016, 11-12)

The papers and interventions featured in this collection engage with the question of how to decenter the state in re-examining the praxis of geography. In this special issue, the authors interrogate theories and praxis of anarchism and draw attention to other anti-authoritarian traditions that engage with alternative notions and understandings of the state and its territorialities. Contributions in this issue draw on decolonial thinking and feminism epistemologies, which have brought insights to further the critique on statism as well as to interrogate anarchism by signaling the radical importance of its contextualization and historicization (e.g., Jeppesen, Kruzynski, and Sarrasin 2012; Lagalisse 2019; Rivera Cusicanqui 2016; Ramnath 2011). Joshua Falcon and Jacklyn Weir’s articles connect debates around decoloniality and settler colonization with anarchist perspectives.

Colonialism has been historically confronted by anarchist geographers, for example, by Elisée Reclus (Ferretti 2013). The colonialism-statism nexus is particularly relevant here. As Springer (2012, 1607) argues, there is no significant difference between “colonialism and state-making other than the scale upon which these parallel projects operate”. This re-framing of the state as colonial allows acknowledging the history that entangles these two and deepen the critique of the state as a neutral, or even state-led decolonial project vessel. Similarly, settler colonialism has received attention within the field of anarchist geographies (Barker and Pickerill 2012). However, the relation of anarchism and the settler-colonial project has been contentious, as anarchists and anarchist organizations have many times reinscribed and incorporated narratives and practices that have furthered Indigenous dispossession and failed to build solidarities (Warburton 2020; Lagalisse 2019). This is why the contextualization of anarchist and anti-authoritarian’ theories and praxis is crucial to understand and situate them. The latter is also important concerning the locus of enunciation of those of us writing in this issue who are located in the global north, either living or studying, which requires us to reflect on and situate the perspectives we are conveying here.

Acknowledging the pervasiveness of statism and its historically contingent organization that intersects with asymmetric and oppressive social relations (Ince and Barrera 2016), Falcon’s and Weir’s articles highlight gender-ed and colonial intersections with the state. Falcon explores the possibilities of classic psychedelic drugs and experiences as anarchic agents that can assist in decolonizing the spaces of consciousness in the context of the U.S. war on drugs. As statism-colonialism configures spatial epistemologies and ways of relations that naturalize sanctioning the superiority of knowledge and experiences, Falcon’s argument pays attention to the decolonization of consciousness to help challenge the heritages of these hierarchical and oppressive arrangements. The cognitive resistance of the psychedelic experiences portrayed by the author speaks to the horizons towards geographies that could grapple with and unsettle epistemic violence that pervades the discipline. On the other hand, Jacklyn Weir draws on anarcho-feminist thought to examine the relations of power and authority of the state with the legacies of settler colonialism in rural imaginaries and womyn’s separatism in the U.S. Her work signals the intersection of state mechanisms and state violence in the production of spatial imaginaries of nature and gender, and points to complex ways in which statism imbricates into the landscape of social relations.

One of the challenges in examining, unsettling, and overcoming the logics of statism is the same abstraction that the state entails. Taussig (1997, 3) dissects the ‘magic’ of the state, by starting to question “[h]ow naturally we entify and give life to such”. The state is an example of those “abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with life-force of their own, transcendent over mere mortals” (Taussig 1997, 3). Instead, it is crucial to recognize the complex, fluid arrangements through which states become, its relationality following Gustave Landauer’s (2010) definition of the state as “a social relationship, a certain way of people relating to one another” (214). Attending to the plurality and complexity of the state also allows one to question its naturalization and ubiquity. Simon Springer (2016, 48) argues that “the perpetuation of the idea that human spatiality necessitates the formation of state is writ in a discipline that has derided the ‘territorial trap’ on one hand [...], yet, on the other hand, has confoundingly refused to take the state-centricity critique in the direction of state dissolution.”

In this sense, Francisco Toro’s paper reflects on the possibilities of decentering the state to examine its role in environmental governance, drawing on the different ecological sensibilities or green criticism particularly from anarchists’ perspectives. Such ecological sensibilities present in the earlier works of anarchist geographers like Reclus remained obscured until the second half of the 20th century with the growing awareness of the ecological crisis. Thus, Toro considers the potentiality of this critique as a tool to problematize the naturalization of the state in the relationship between people and their territories, and going back to Springer’s comment, to explore the state’s unsustainable spatial models. The paper addresses the dynamic intersection of anarchism and ecological perspectives that has provided an array of theorizations and conceptual tools, but also elements for the praxis of new social organization, as in the Kurdish region of Rojava (Biehl and Bookchin 2015; International Commune of Rojava 2018)

Regarding the praxis of geography, Joshua Mullenite addresses the problematic citational practices of the anarchist geographies in relation to epistemic violence in the production of geographic knowledge. As Mansilla, Quintero, and Moreira-Muñoz (2019) discuss in what they name ‘geography of absences’ following Boaventura de Sousa’s *Epistemologies of South*, the coloniality of being and knowing continues to bound geographic epistemologies. The authors assert that invisibility of other geographies and the rejection of other possibilities of knowledge production continues to define intellectual colonialism in geography. Mullenite calls for engaging with other sources, particularly other anarchists “who aren’t professional geographers,” that have remained marginal in the anarchist geographies. His argument pushes us to expand the purview of these geographies and to overcome hierarchies in the production of knowledge about the state enmeshed in the academic practices. Along the same lines, Anthony Ince and my intervention in this issue is an exercise in counterfactual statism drawing on literary texts. Our reflection is part of our previous work where we argue for more nuanced examinations of statist epistemologies in geography, something we term post-statism geographies (Ince and Barrera 2016). We contend that state ubiquity is supported by the perceived linearity of time and the colonial project that establishes the path to the future of ‘civilized’ social formations. Thus, this intervention draws on sci-fi literature interrogating the state’s supposed inevitability, reaffirming its contingency, and using counterfactual writing as an analytical tool in nurturing other worlds and dislocating ‘statist’ thought through socio-spatial imaginaries that do not emerge from the logics of the state.

Final Thoughts

This brief introduction seeks to show the fertile contributions to the field of anarchist geographies that have been growing in recent years, bringing to the fore the epistemic and practical tools and left-libertarian conceptions of the world to examine people’s relation with their territories and question the practice of geography (e.g., Springer 2016; Ferretti and García-Álvarez 2017, and White, Springer and Souza 2016). This special issue incorporates critiques and possibilities towards rethinking the place of anarchist geographies in the critique of the state-centric mode of thinking in geography. Moreover, it

signals intersections, limitations, and horizons in the configuration of analytical tools to enhance our understanding of statist logics and to challenge the practices of geographical knowledge production. The texts presented here point to the traces of geography's statist-colonialist history that persist in how we write about the state (Ince and Barrera 2016, 10), but mostly signal epistemic routes ahead. Following Springer (2016, 176-177), I hope this collection serves to “cast our view toward the horizon,” to “suggest a direction and a future but never a restriction of our movement,” as a contribution to other geographies that prefigure more liberating and equitable horizons.

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