

# Demodernizing Anarchism



THE "VICTORIA" ANARCHIST READING  
CIRCLE GATHERS BI-WEEKLY TO  
DISCUSS ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN AND  
ANTI-OPPRESSION LITERATURE ON  
UNCEDD L'KWUNGEN TERRITORIES

VICTORIAANARCHISTREADINGCIRCLE.CA

@VICANARCHOBOOKFAIR

FEBRUARY 16TH 2025

VARC READING

JESSE COHN (2022)

VICTORIAANARCHISTREADINGCIRCLE.CA



Wynter, Sylvia. "Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis?: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overtturn: A Manifesto." Unpublished essay.

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| How Not to Demodernize Anarchism . . . . .   | 7  |
| Thinking Anarchism with Animism . . . . .    | 10 |
| Anarchism and #LandBack . . . . .            | 17 |
| <i>Socialismo Mágico</i> . . . . .           | 19 |
| What about Science and Technology? . . . . . | 22 |
| Toward a Nonmodern Anarchism . . . . .       | 24 |
| Author . . . . .                             | 26 |
| Works Cited . . . . .                        | 26 |

- in the Coast Salish Territory.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2018, pp. 453–64.
- Peat, F. David. *Lighting the Seventh Fire: The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American*. Carol Publishing Group, 1994.
- Perlman, Fredy. *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!: An Essay*. Black & Red, 1983.
- Proudhon, P. J. *Oeuvres complètes*. Edited by Célestin Charles Alfred Bouglé and Henri Moysset. Slatkine, 1982.
- Quintana-Navarrete, Jorge. “Biopolítica y vida inorgánica: La plasmogenia de Alfonso Herrera.” *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2019, pp. 79–95.
- Regier, Terry, and Paul Kay. “Language, Thought, and Color: Whorf Was Half Right.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 10, Oct. 2009, pp. 439–46. ScienceDirect, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.07.001>.
- Richards, Howard. *Letters from Quebec: A Philosophy for Peace and Justice*. International Scholars Publications, 1996.
- “sacred, adj. and n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/169556](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169556).
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011.
- Taibo, Carlos. *Anarquistas de ultramar: anarquismo, indigenismo, descolonización*. Los Libros de la Catarata, 2018.
- Taylor, Michael P. “‘Indians MUST Organize’: Reimagining Indigenous Modernity through the Writings of the National Council of American Indians.” *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus*, Johns Hopkins University Press, March 2021. [modernismmodernity.org](http://modernismmodernity.org), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/taylor-indians-must-organize>.
- Warburton, Theresa. *Other Worlds Here: Honoring Native Women’s Writing in Contemporary Anarchist Movements*. Northwestern University Press, 2021.

———. “pomskute, pomaskute.” *Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Language Portal*, <https://pmportal.org/dictionary/pomskute-pomaskute>.

Galeano, Eduardo. “The Blue Tiger.” *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*, edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson. Rethinking Schools, 1998, pp. 177–78.

Graeber, David. “What’s the Point If We Can’t Have Fun?” *The Baffler*, no. 24, pp. 50–58.

Gross, Lawrence William. *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*. Ashgate, 2014.

Hill, Rick. “Talking Points on History and Meaning of the Two Row Wampum Belt.” *Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign*, Mar. 2013, <https://honorthetworow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/TwoRowTalkingPoints-Rick-Hill.pdf>.

Ingold, Tim. “Being Alive to a World without Objects.” *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, edited by Graham Harvey. Acumen Handbooks, 2013, pp. 213–25.

Janicka, Iwona. “Who Can Speak? Rancière, Latour and the Question of Articulation.” *Humanities* vol. 9, no. 123, 2020, pp. 1–16.

Jineoloji Committee Europe. *Jineoloji*. Mezopotamien Verlag und Vertriebs GmbH, 2018, <https://jineoloji.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Jineoloj%C3%AE-English-v2-Final.pdf>.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. “Speaking of Nature.” *Orion Magazine*, June 12, 2017, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>.

Landauer, Gustav. *For Socialism*. Translated by David J. Parent. Telos Press, 1978.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. Basic Books, 2008.

Lyons, Scott Richard. *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Marker, Michael. “There Is No *Place of Nature*; There Is Only the *Nature of Place*: Animate Landscapes as Methodology for Inquiry

I should begin by acknowledging my positioning: I am writing as a white settler anarchist on land stolen from the Neshnabé (Potawatomi) in so-called Northwest Indiana, and I intend here to address mainly other settler anarchists of North America/Turtle Island. I feel that we are laboring under some unhelpful and indeed harmful habits of thought when it comes to imagining how we might relate our traditions to the far-older ones of Indigenous peoples everywhere and of Native Americans in particular.

In my book about the history of global anarchist resistance culture, *Underground Passages*, I found an astonishing degree of coherence between the newspapers, songs, poems, visual art, and novels produced by anarchists in Chile and China, Argentina and Australia. From one perspective, this similitude is a remarkable cultural achievement; from another, the cultural expressions of these non-European militants did not significantly deviate from those of their European counterparts for over a hundred years, and innovations flowed largely from center to periphery. And in *Anarquistas de Ultramar: Anarquismo, Indigenismo, Descolonización (Overseas Anarchists: Anarchism, Indigenism, Decolonization)*, Carlos Taibo attempts to come to grips with the fact that while anarchy—mutual aid, direct democracy, communism, and so on—is to be found in the practices and concepts of nearly every culture (provided one looks far enough back), anarchism as a doctrine appears to arrive “overseas” as a modern European import.

“Import” is, of course, a euphemism: if the migration of working-class European anarchists into the Americas was pushed along by waves of capital, we have to admit that this emigration was also a form of colonization. Moreover, these arrivals—settlers, invaders—most often carried with them the sense that science was superior to traditions, that emancipation was linked to modern progress, and that these things meant not only the advance of technology but the dethronement of gods and the subsequent placement of humanity at the center of the universe. In short, the colonizer culture was Eurocentric, anthropocentric, and resolutely

modern—opposed in every way to the native cultures being displaced.

It might be fairly objected that contemporary Indigenous peoples *are* modern. Certainly, the myth of the “vanishing Indian” must be vehemently opposed; Native Americans have adapted to modernity and survive and sometimes even thrive within it. The Ojibwe/Dakota scholar Scott Lyons argues for “embracing modernity and resisting essentialism” (xiii), suggesting that even the “consent” of Native Americans to modern “concepts, policies, technologies, [and] ideas,” even when “contaminated and coerced,” has sometimes led to positive change (2–3): for instance, as Michael P. Taylor observes, even the genocidal institution of the Indian boarding schools had the perverse result of “revitaliz[ing] ... a transindigenous network of Indigenous solidarity.” The suppression of traditional Native American dances likewise led to the invention of transindigenous powwow culture, now a key institution of Native resistance culture. It was at one such powwow that the transindigenous term “Two-Spirit” made its debut. None of what follows is intended to argue for a return to “pure” Indigenous identities, or to suggest that all that is traditional is simply good in contrast to an all-bad modernity. I would rather affirm, with Eduardo Galeano, that it is not a matter of “believ[ing] in traditions simply because they are traditions.” Instead, as he expresses it,

I believe in the legacies that multiply human freedom, and not in those that cage it ... I am not proposing a return to the sacrificial rites that offered up human hearts to the gods, nor am I praising the despotism of the Inca or Aztec monarchs. (177)

However, it must be recognized that crucial institutions of Indigenous cultures, notably traditions of land tenure and property relations, are absolutely excluded by the modern state, which still

- . *Re-enchanting Humanity: Defense of the Human Spirit Against Antihumanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism and Primitivism*. Cassell, 1995.
- . *Toward An Ecological Society*. Black Rose Books, 1980.
- Burley, Shane. *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It*. AK Press, 2017.
- Chalmers, David J. “The Puzzle of Conscious Experience.” *Scientific American*, vol. 273, no. 6, 1995, pp. 80–86.
- Colectivo “Alas de Xue.” *Una historia del anarquismo en Colombia : Crónicas de utopía (apuntes, momentos y páginas selectas para una historia del movimiento libertario americano)*. Fundación de Estudios Libertarios “Anselmo Lorenzo,” 1999.
- Colombo, Eduardo. *L’Espace politique de l’anarchie: Esquisses pour une philosophie politique de l’anarchisme*. Atelier de création libertaire, 2008.
- . “El anarquismo ante la crisis de las ideologías.” *Acción Directa* vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 15–17.
- Creagh, Ronald. “Le Huron et le Jésuite.” *L’Imagination dérobée*, Atelier de création libertaire, 2004, pp. 69–90.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley et al., University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Deloria, Vine. *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Fulcrum Publishing, 2003.
- Escauriza, Bettina. “That Which Will Become the Earth: Anarcho-Indigenous Speculative Geographies.” *Journal Des Anthropologues. Association Française Des Anthropologues*, no. 152–153, Apr. 2018, pp. 83–106. [journals.openedition.org, https://doi.org/10.4000/jda.6884](https://doi.org/10.4000/jda.6884).
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2010. pp 2.
- Francis, David A., et al. “pemskutek, pemaskutek.” *Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Language Portal*, <https://pmportal.org/dictionary/pemskutek-pemaskutek>.

Odawa (Ottawa) and Ojibwe (Chippewa) peoples, as well as in the larger culture of the Anishinaabe, which linked them with the Algonquin, Mississauga, and Nipissing. In the years before their Removal, they joined in Tecumseh's much vaster Confederacy to fight the settlers. Their experience has much to say about the lived experience of democratic confederation—how to establish effective unity between disparate social worlds, how to achieve the coordination of action and the coexistence of plural truths without the imposition of uniformity from above.

None of this is really possible if we cling to the project of modernity, with all that it entails. Let's demodernize anarchism!

## Author

*Jesse Cohn is part of the Institute for Anarchist Studies. He teaches in the Department of English at Purdue University Northwest, in Indiana. He is the author of Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848–2011 (AK Press, 2015), translated, A Little Philosophical Lexicon of Anarchism from Proudhon to Deleuze (Minor Compositions, 2019), and has published other books and essays, including in Anarchist Studies, Fifth Estate, and Radical Philosophy.*

## Works Cited

- Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Random House Publishing Group, 2011.
- Bakunin, Mikhail Aleksandrovich. *God and the State*. Dover, 1970.
- . *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism*. Free Press, 1974.
- Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Black Rose Books, 1991.

sends military forces in response to any effort to assert them, as we have seen in the current cycle of protests against petrochemical pipelines running through tribal lands and waters. Modernity cannot allow any exception to the laws of the state and the laws of the market to stand alongside it, much less outside of it. Modernity's statism and capitalism, consumerist individualism and ideology of progress, stand as obstacles to decolonization and re-Indigenization.

If "decolonization" is now a watchword, calls to "decolonize anarchism" must run up against the insistence of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang that "decolonization is not a metaphor," nor is it exclusively or even primarily a matter of changing mindsets. Instead, they argue, non-Indigenous anarchists help to decolonize when they fight to restore land and autonomy to Indigenous peoples. However, as they point out, some conceptual updates might make it easier to join in those struggles. The lingering attachment of non-Indigenous anarchists to modernity is an obstacle to the construction of bonds of solidarity and to shared struggle with Indigenous counterparts for whom modernity has been an almost completely unmitigated disaster. It is necessarily difficult to join hands with people whose spirituality one has labeled as naive and foolish at best, whose culture one regards as merely particular and parochial, and whose identification with the land one sees as a quaint but misconceived projection of human qualities onto an indifferent nonhuman world.

Accordingly, we might want to explore ways to *demodernize* anarchism.

## How Not to Demodernize Anarchism

First, however, we should identify some possible false starts and cul-de-sacs. To begin with, we must not be mystified by discourses of the "traditionalist" Far Right that identify "modernity" with such

supposedly debauched notions as feminism or queerness (Burley). On the contrary, such fascist ideologies, which we must absolutely refuse, wish to immortalize what Taibo argues is “one of the first marks of modernity,” in spite of modernity’s egalitarian self-image: namely, “the consolidation of a world of hierarchies and separations” (107). Thus, women, queer and trans folks, and nonwhite people find themselves in the crosshairs of fascist entrepreneurs such as the so-called Traditionalist Worker Party or the National Anarchist Tribal Alliance. Nothing can be more disgusting than the spectacle of white people such as Jacob Chansley, known as the “QAnon Shaman,” cosplaying as Indigenous, whether to appropriate Native American identities or—all the worse—to make parallel identitarian claims for “Western peoples” “reclaiming” European “ancestral roots.” Key to these arguments, as journalist and author Shane Burley notes, is “a caricature of leftist ‘identity politics’” that imagines identity in terms of ancestral “blood” or an authentic racial “essence,” rather than in terms of one’s position within structures of power or one’s experience of oppression. Wherever we encounter anti-modernists like these, we encounter not allies but enemies: self-mythologizing white supremacists and would-be patriarchs.

So-called primitivist and anti-civilizational anarchists have indeed militated against modernity, but theirs is a “modernity” defined primarily by its technological base. They have imagined a “natural” human being who emerges only when stripped of technological externalities (which Fredy Perlman memorably imagined as “masks and armors”). This seems to me a misidentification of the problem. I would rather begin with the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s recognition that everything is simultaneously “nature” and “machines.” The question is how these nature-machines are to relate to one another: Must they be organized hierarchically, with some of them harming and destroying others and cutting them off from their possibilities? An anarchist wants to answer in the negative. We must question the very distinction be-

and beside the point: “The issue is not for an individual to become something they are not, but rather for a centering of other ways of being in the world that may make our final years on this planet—however many or few there may be—ones worth living” (102).

We may dimly recognize these “other ways” as the source of our own best ideas. Bakunin and Proudhon came of age politically in an intellectual environment stimulated by accounts of the New World and of its peoples, who seemed not to recognize the kinds of distinctions drawn by the colonists, soldiers, and missionaries who encountered them, testifying to the possibility of radically different worlds. Modern anarchism, as developed in Europe, was a codification of practices already found in nonmodern cultural repertoires, practices which anarchism imperfectly but usefully translated into the conceptual idiom of modernity: mutual aid, communism, affinity groups, direct democracy, consensus, direct action.

This is not to say, of course, that all Native American societies were anarchist in the modern sense of the concept. Clearly, some adhered and still do adhere to hierarchies of their own. We should not regard these as a permanent feature of these societies, either (indeed, to say “society” is to call any “permanent features” into question); some were acquired as a direct result of colonization, and others have been and may yet be called into question by a process of immanent critique. Such processes of self-reconstruction emphatically do not require colonization. If it is anyone’s turn to listen respectfully, to give thanks, and to show solidarity, it is white settler anarchists vis-à-vis our Indigenous counterparts.

One thing that Indigenous knowledge can impart to a nonmodern anarchism is a long experience of linking disparate societies with different traditions in democratic confederations. Probably the best known of these is the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), a confederation that linked first five and later six nations, an assemblage of considerable power and influence. The Neshnabé, who were forcibly expelled from Indiana a little less than a hundred years ago, participated in the Council of Three Fires with the



entism proposed to bridge the supposed gap between human and natural realms by studying both with the same tools. Historian Arif Dirlik writes of some of the early Chinese anarchists that they “valued science to the point of scientism,” in part precisely because it offered to dissolve the respect for traditions that held the social hierarchies inherited from Chinese “state civilization” in place—a major source of oppression for them (108). In practice, however, scientism also degrades the spirit of scientific inquiry into “an ideology for viewing the world as an ethically neutral, essentially mechanical body to be manipulated” (Bookchin 1991, 268)—as well as for so viewing the human body and mind. Most shamefully, anarchists’ embrace of scientism led us, for a long time, to endorse eugenics (47). Freed from scientism, the sciences become one highly valuable mode of knowing among others. Better still, Western sciences are freed to encounter *other sciences* on egalitarian terms.

The possibilities for combining Indigenous and modern technologies are similarly wide open. Neither refusing technology completely as bad nor embracing it in toto as good, we could blend horticultural techniques, architectures, and practices of medical and psychological healing, for instance. No longer committed to modern technology as a whole, we might instead practice many convivial technics, both old and new. Again, this would necessitate a rejection of the normative developmentalism that indiscriminately discards traditional ways of knowing and doing as obsolete on the assumption that there is only one culture that is “new” and that only the new can be better.

## Toward a Nonmodern Anarchism

We settler anarchists must acknowledge our complicity with colonialism, and we must not turn living, breathing Indigenous people into our fantasy objects. As the Guaraní activist Bettina Escauriza writes, it is impossible for settlers to become Indigenous,

tween the natural and the human worlds, which sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour (a problematic thinker, but I’ll follow him this far) claims is *the founding distinction of modernity*. It is the “premoderns,” he argues, who insist on treating “natural” beings as part of the “human” social world, thanking animals after taking their lives and listening to speaking stones. We moderns, on the contrary, can only encounter “nature” as a silent, essentially alien other that makes no social demands of us and listens to no entreaties.

Some anarchist theory is so modern as to regard listening to “nature” as the very sign of human self-enslavement. The late political philosopher Eduardo Colombo, extending a line of thinking derived from Cornelius Castoriadis, regarded human freedom as a project of “autonomy” imagined as the refusal to allow anything other than human decision making to determine the outcome of decisions—not God (as in Western theology), not the economy (as under capitalism), and not nature (as among “premoderns”):

Since the vanished obscurity of ancient times, human thought, in order to constitute itself as such, had to separate, to distinguish, to oppose, to unify. It had to organize the flux of perception and construct discrete and determinate representations; it had to make a cosmos out of chaos. Human beings instituted the earth and the heavens, created the gods and all things. Humanity – the human collective – created itself, and in the same movement subjected itself to the heteronomy of its own creation. Everything came to us from beyond, from on high, from the center. We, as creatures, are seen as dispossessed and dependent. (2008, 14)

Here Colombo relies on the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for which human beings are indeed those who impose structure on the world through language, the world in itself

being without meaningful form or clear demarcations. The classic example of this transformation of “chaos” into “cosmos” is the color spectrum, a continuum that different languages “carve up” in sometimes wildly different ways (Lévi-Strauss 92–94). Structuralist theory predicted that the speakers of those different languages would in fact *see* different colors. However, it seems that while language “influences” visual perception (particularly in the right field of vision), the hypothesis that language determines perception is at best only “half right” (Regier and Kay).

Deleuze, following the philosopher Gilbert Simondon, would point to the dependence of this kind of language-centered theory on “the hylomorphic schema,” a model of reality as divided into shapeless matter (in Greek, *hyle*) and intelligible form (*morphe*). At least since Bakunin, anarchist theory has found this model to be incipiently hierarchical and dominatory, since it asks us to imagine a world of masters bestowing form on lump-like slaves. In *God and the State*, Bakunin writes that “the *vile matter* of the idealists,” having been “stripped by them of ... intelligence, life, all its determining qualities, active relations or forces, motion itself,” was “indeed a stupid, inanimate, immobile thing,” unlike “the matter of which materialists speak, matter spontaneously and eternally mobile, active, productive” (12–13). Such a conception of matter, as anthropologist Tim Ingold notes, takes as its basis a different theory of reality: “This is the ontology of animism” (214).

## Thinking Anarchism with Animism

Can anarchists be animists? Murray Bookchin seems to briefly entertain the idea in the first edition of *The Ecology of Freedom* (1983), where he writes with admiration of the “outlook” of Indigenous societies:

I am eager to determine what can be recovered from that outlook and integrated into our own ... perhaps

historical condition, to the Middle Ages or to some imaginary Wild West; its utopian dreams, when they do not similarly cast backward for their images, often represent the shiny new future—as Bookchin once observed—as just more of the same: taller skyscrapers, faster cars, and so on (1980, 277). This is cruel, because it forecloses the imagination of other futures, and impossible, because it offers *more* of the same, continuing the project of extraction indefinitely on a finite earth. Anarchist visionaries have had to struggle to imagine different futures, often reproducing these modern tropes.

Nonmodernity, as we might develop it, does not offer to return us to an imaginarily perfect past, though it does entail surrendering the land back to Indigenous peoples; it is not a simple inversion or negation of modernity, much less a simple extension of modernity into the future. It would seek something else—a retrieval of past possibilities that is also a “new emergence,” in the words of Missisauqua Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. As such, it would explore previously foreclosed possibilities for the development of sciences and technologies (always to be understood in the plural). After all, Indigenous peoples have not been incurious about the universe or lacking in inventiveness. Indeed, for as much as settler archaeologists like Elizabeth Weiss and projects like the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on sacred Mauna Kea portray Indigenous people as obstacles to scientific knowledge, we can and do speak of Indigenous sciences and technologies.

A demodernized anarchism would not have to abandon the sciences, but it would abandon scientism. Scientism—the insistence that scientific method is the only legitimate means of access to truth, and that therefore it can be applied everywhere and always without regard for social or cultural context—has promised to liberate us from all the traditional forms of oppression associated with what the Jineoloji Committee Europe identifies as a five-thousand-year-old patriarchal “state civilization”; where that civilization disrupted relations between humanity and nature (97), modern sci-

in which saying something makes it so. “Within Indigenous science,” writes theoretical physicist F. David Peat, “to say something is to create an objective event and release a process of energetic vibrations that enter into relationships with the other powers and energies of nature” (226). As much as this might sound like New Age nonsense, it need not be understood in a supernatural sense, for in fact, we are always making things happen with words. Linguists refer to these events as “speech acts,” one of the most common species of which is the making of promises. Here, rather than *describing* some real state of affairs in the world, a description that could be verified or falsified by inspection, the words uttered actually *perform* the act of promising, thus creating, when successful, a *new* state of affairs—a social relationship. The classic example is the wedding, in which “I do” creates spouses. Promises, when successful, create new states of affairs; they bring together partners, alliances, federations. It seems, then, that mere words *can* create (social) worlds.

Granted, this redescription of magic as a kind of speech act may not please everyone equally. Surely it does a little rationalization as well, although I hope that it does not disrespect Indigenous self-understandings. But pragmatist accounts of such things as spirits and magic may be one effective way of translating between cosmologies, allowing us to unsettle some of our own assumptions long enough to listen and learn—perhaps even long enough to jointly construct a *socialismo mágico* that defies what British theorist Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism.” (2)

## What about Science and Technology?

One of modernity’s ideological articles of faith is that there is but one path to futurity, and that it runs through modernity. Modern images of the future, of course, sometimes include mournful, apocalyptic dreams in which the world reverts to some previous

we can achieve a way of thinking and experiencing that involves a quasi-animistic respiration of phenomena—inanimate as well as animate—without abandoning the insights provided by science and analytical reasoning. (14)

By 1991, however, Bookchin felt compelled to add:

Without a sense of contrast between the human and nonhuman, people are limited to the bedrock existence of seeking mere survival, to a way of life so undifferentiated from that of other living things that they know little more than the unmediated confines of their limited ecological community. This way of life is bereft of purpose, meaning, or orientation, apart from what people create in their imagination. And it is a way of life that no human being could endure except by ceasing to think. (xlv)

The lives of animists thus go from being represented as full and rich, a source of renewal and inspiration, to impoverished and empty even of thought itself. In subsequent years, Bookchin would double down on “civilization, progress, and science” with *Re-enchanting Humanity* (1995), wherein he insists that “it was primarily in Europe that a remarkable constellation of historical and ideological factors converged to produce a common emphasis on reason, the importance of the individual, and a healthy naturalism” (4, 249).

If commitments to humanism can lead someone as smart and imbued with libertarian ethos as Bookchin or Colombo into the crassest endorsements of colonial ideology, maybe we ought to listen once again to the postanarchist critique of humanism’s presence in the anarchist genealogy. Colonialism may go unmentioned in the classic texts of the postanarchists, but perhaps we dismissed

their concerns about humanism too quickly—or perhaps they located this humanism in the wrong place. Bakunin, for example, is indeed too canny to embrace the simple-minded notions of a “good human nature” that the Anglo-American postanarchists attributed to him; his conception of “the human” surely includes the potential for domination as well as for freedom. However, he never pays anything like sufficient attention to the realities of colonial genocide and enslavement, and he repeatedly assumes, like Bookchin, that Europe has been the privileged locus for humanity’s development—a development that must take us away from “fetichism” and “the primitive religion of savages” (1974, 110). Once you’ve accepted that the Enlightenment spelled out, for once and for all, the future of humanity, you’ve accepted a Eurocentric ideology of progress.

Glen Coulthard, a scholar of Indigenous studies, helpfully names this ideology “normative developmentalism” (9); it is a fault Bakunin shares especially with Marx, for whom “primitive communism” must necessarily give way to all the other historical stages leading to a second and final communism. This Eurocentrism, this ideology of progress, this imagination that takes just one of the “genres of being human” as the universal (Wynter 26), could not fail to taint European anarchists’ anticolonial commitments, and historically, as Taibo reminds us, the anarchist anticolonialists tended to tacitly accept “the superiority of Western civilization and, with it, of a significant part of the colonial discourse” (117). In the end, he finds, “although anarchists sharply criticized the many excesses that characterized colonization, it seems as if they accept that the latter constituted a natural process justifiable under the scientific and technical superiority of Western civilization, hand in hand with an argument that could not but remind many of Marx and Engels’ assertions on the subject” (117–18).

What might anarchism look like if it really gave up on the notion that, as our fascist enemies have it, “the West is the best”? Perhaps it might follow Bakunin’s suggestion and (in spite of him) become animist. Proudhon had already hinted at something like

am past the point where I expect every word to refer to a thing.

This social account of the reality of spirits, Richards notes, yields “a greater access to the wisdom of traditional peoples, who almost invariably are found by anthropologists to enjoy communing with spirits” (142).

Deloria cautions against an overly literalistic interpretation of Indigenous magic, such as those promulgated by skeptics and “representatives of other religions seeking to discredit tribal religions” who deliberately violate their sacred places in order to demonstrate the non-reality of spirits—reflecting “a strange non-Indian belief in a form of mechanical magic that is touchingly adolescent” (280). Indeed, they are treating Indigenous *Geist* as if it were something rigid, like a dogma. As the Colombian comrades of the *Alas de Xue* collective point out, modern theories of magic, from Francis Bacon to Paul Radin, tend to represent it as a primitive phase of human development, something to be transcended in favor of rational cognition, or at best, as a means of coping with “economic insecurity” (116). “Unity in diversity,” they argue,

means respecting individuals and peoples who dream their utopias based on their own traditions and myths; this respect must arise from a study of ethnic and cultural diversity, incorporating their contributions and expectations, accepting difference as a driving force towards the construction of Magical Socialism. (121)

Despite the poetic flourish of the phrase *socialismo mágico* (a play on the literary phrase “magical realism,” perhaps), the direction suggested by the collective is essentially practical, aimed at making do with what we have together. From a pragmatist perspective, magic, like spirit, is what it does. We might understand magic in a very broad sense as the efficacy of words—the phenomenon

terialists, we reason that spirits, immaterial beings, cannot exist; as disenchanting descendants of the Enlightenment, we fear that according any reality or truth to enchantment will drag us back to the Dark Ages. And yet, as we have seen, the spirits of Wendat cosmology, for example, are never allowed to drift away from the living materiality of the natural world, to become transcendent authorities reigning over life. Spirit does not have to supply that which the body supposedly lacks, to represent an eternal reality outside of the world; as the Sioux scholar Vine Deloria points out, “the afterlife was not of overwhelming concern to people of the tribal religions... No highly articulated or developed theories of the afterlife were ever necessary, and certainly none projected a life radically different than that experienced on Earth” (179). Before dismissing Indigenous cosmologies because of their magical content, we ought at least to ask: What is the social content of this magic?

The answer is bound to vary widely among the more than five thousand Indigenous peoples. However, we might find many conceptions of spirit not drastically different from the atheist Landauer’s. For Landauer, spirit (*Geist*) is simply that which unifies people (33); it does not need to be regarded as a *being* as much as a *doing*, an action. In social scientist Howard Richards’s words,

Spirits comfort, bring joy, inspire, keep families together, win football games, carry patients through illnesses, move the hardhearted to forgiveness, unite friends, put charity fundraising campaigns over the top, give courage to the weak, bring life to parties, energy to concerts, success to business enterprises, and do a million and one other things, even though a spirit is not a thing, and if one were obliged to answer the question, “What exactly is it?” one would have to answer, in all honesty, “Nothing.” But having to answer, “Nothing, no-thing,” no longer bothers me. I

this when he wrote that “intellect sleeps in the stone, dreams in the animal, reasons in the man” (3:267). In the early twentieth century, anarchist journals devoted substantial print to the scientific theories of the “plasmogenists,” which suggested something strikingly similar: if, under the right circumstances, even inorganic chemicals could be observed behaving in a quasi-animate fashion, why draw a distinction between dead or inert matter and the biochemistry of life (Quintana-Navarrete 88–89)? Why not attribute an incipient motion, liveliness, intelligence, even consciousness to all kinds of material beings?

The late anthropologist David Graeber was moving in just such a direction when he published the essay “What’s the Point If We Can’t Have Fun?” in *The Baffler* in 2014. Drawing on the vast ethnological literature about the prevalence of play in species other than ours—even ants, he points out, “not only engage in frivolous activities as individuals, but also have been observed since the nineteenth century to arrange mock-wars, apparently just for the fun of it” (52)—he goes on to speculate about matter itself, including, for instance, the seemingly capricious behavior of electrons under certain circumstances:

If one wants a consistently materialist explanation of the world—that is, if one does not wish to treat the mind as some supernatural entity imposed on the material world, but rather as simply a more complex organization of processes that are already going on, at every level of material reality—then it makes sense that something at least a little like intentionality, something at least a little like experience, something at least a little like freedom, would have to exist on every level of physical reality as well. (57)

This hypothesis, sometimes called “panpsychism,” has been increasingly widely entertained by philosophers of science in recent

years, who find in it an alternative to “emergentism,” the doctrine that mental phenomena are not visible in but somehow arise from micro-scale material like electrochemical exchanges between neurons. While satisfying in some ways, emergentist explanations of mind seem to mystify rather than resolve what cognitive scientist David Chalmers calls “the puzzle of conscious experience” (80). How far are such speculations, really, from the theories—labeled, in the colonizers’ language, “spirituality” or “religion”—of the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), or Diné (Navajo) peoples? In fact, what is “religion,” and if we oppose it, why?

“Blasphemy,” writes Colombo, “is perhaps the first point of rebellion against the established order,” insofar as a society that locates the source of its own norms in the sacred—that is, in the mythical deeds and words of gods, heroes, or ancestors—is by definition heteronomous rather than autonomous, since those norms then are “dictated once and for always,” and the “symbolic-instituting power” that established them is sealed off in a transcendent beyond (2006 15–16). Surely this seems like a good description of the way that the sacred has served the interests of power in Western history, at least. Yet the best examples we know of self-managing communist societies with long duration were Indigenous. Sociologist Ronald Creagh suggests a possible solution to this seeming paradox in a study of seventeenth-century Jesuits’ perplexed accounts of the Wendat (Huron) and Innu (Montagnais) people. Agreeing with Colombo, in essence, that the problem with religion has to do with this “theft ... of humanity’s symbolic-instituting power,” that is, the “power to organize society for ourselves” (Colombo 2006, 16; Creagh 75–76), Creagh warns against a too-hasty understanding of Native American religion in terms of Western concepts of the sacred:

The struggle between the missionary and the sorcerer is nothing other than the manifestation of a conflict between two different approaches to the sacred. Because

What might be harder for settler anarchists to understand, given our universalistic biases, is the way that land is tied to experience, memory, understanding, and hence knowledge. In trying to explain “the Indigenous experience with a layered sense of place that is at one and the same time ordinary and holy,” Arapaho scholar Michael Marker proposes that “the methodology for learning about powerful forms of consciousness and visions cannot be extracted from the ‘being in places’ where the powers exist” (462–63, 456). Indigenous place-based epistemologies yield not an abstract Truth, to be applied everywhere regardless of context, but localized, particular, context-sensitive truths. When Bookchin reads of an Ojibwe elder listening to the anthropologist’s question, “Are all the stones we see about us here alive?” and answering “No! But *some* are” (Hallowell 24), he is constrained to hear this as “a very shrewd response,” a cynical hedging of bets: “Aboriginal peoples are not so absurd as to view stones and horses ... as equally alive. However, ‘animistically’ they regard the natural world in theory, in practice they apply their animistic views with considerable discretion” (1995, 135–36). In pragmatist terms, a difference in discourse without a corresponding difference in behavior is empty verbiage. But clearly, animistic discourse among Indigenous peoples *does* make a difference in how they interact with the landscape, just as one might expect. For Indigenous people, some truths only obtain partially, locally, within a particular place, precisely because that place is another “sentient being,” not only a “known” but simultaneously a “knower” and a *condition* for knowing (Marker 457, 461).

## ***Socialismo Mágico***

It is still more difficult for modern anarchists to trust those who believe, as is commonplace among Indigenous peoples, in various forms of what we call “magic”: spirits, sorcery, and the like. As ma-

under modern communism. Many Indigenous languages have the advantage of being verb based (unlike European languages like English, which require nouns to fill the role of subject in a sentence), so that this agency of land is more self-evident (Kimmerer). In Peskotomuhkati-latuwewakon (the Passamaquoddy language), for instance, the English noun “field” is rendered instead as a verb, *pomskute*, “a field goes along”; instead of saying that the berries (a substantive) are growing *in* the field (a location), one attaches a kind of quasi-adverbial expression, *pemskutek*, as if the berries were growing fieldishly (Francis et al.).

It is not only whiteness but a white supremacist modernity that makes it difficult for white anarchists to understand the Indigenous slogan “No socialism on stolen land.” “Stolen” seems to presuppose a regime of private property rights, and aren’t we against private property? But this is a misunderstanding (even if, to some extent, a willful misunderstanding). The point of the demand for the return of sovereignty over Indigenous lands and waters has never been to simply change one set of proprietors for another; it is, rather, a reassertion of a very different kind of land tenure, one that falls outside the bounds of capitalist property relations, in part because the “property” in question is a living agent, not an individual but a web of *relations* in which Indigenous humans are already enmeshed.

As many have pointed out, the demands of Indigenous peoples do not necessarily include the expulsion of the non-Indigenous or our return to our supposed “homes” in Europe, Africa, and so on. Other models of life after coloniality proliferate; among them, many look back to the Two-Row Wampum (*Teioháte Kaswenta*) that was created early in the seventeenth century to solemnize a covenant between the *Ögwë’ö:weh* (“original people”) and the *Skaghneghtaronni* (Dutch settlers) (Hill 1). Figured in the wampum beads are two canoes in the same river, side by side; neither tries to interfere with the other. Here is an Indigenous vision of peaceful coexistence, a direction not taken by history but which yet might be.

if, in the Catholic Church, this phenomenon is characterized by a recourse to transcendence, is it the same for “the Indian”? ...

[W]hile for Catholics the sacred and the profane refer to two different worlds, the terrestrial here-and-now and the hereafter, which communicate only through certain more or less sacramental acts and places, the religious type described by Mr. Eliade sees only one universe. The Montagnais, the Hurons and several of these tribes that the Jesuits meet are on the same level as the forces of nature; these “spiritual” intensities do not possess any ontological distinction from those which animate men. (84–85)

In short, Western religions “founded on transcendence” do not have the same social functions as “an Indian ‘religion’ for which everything can become hierophanic because *the sacred is immanent in the world*” (88). Note that this immanent sacred runs directly contrary to the root concept of sacredness in the Western tradition—“Dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose” (*OED*); in Hebrew, *kadosh*, translated as “sacred” or “holy,” signifies “otherness,” which can be read as indicating an apartness from the ordinary world (Armstrong 41). Amplified by combination with Platonist idealism, it was erected into the most thoroughly transcendent version of the sacred in Christianity. Yet the immanence of Native religious concepts and practices, in which “any object can become hierophanic, a sign of the ‘divine,’” denies any “disembodied beyond” (Creagh 85–86). Does this other, animist form of the sacred even belong, in the terms set out by anarchists from Bakunin to Bookchin, in the category of “religion”?

This approach to understanding animisms would entail a radical reassessment of our commitment to a strict atheism (or, as Bakunin dubbed it, “anti-theologism”). Religion scholar Paul-François Tremlett notes that while the majority discourse on

religion among anarchists is “modernist,” “broadly constitut[ing] religion and the past as conditions to be overcome,” there is a countervailing discourse critical of secular, scientific modernity, in which “religion emerges as a means of imagining the free, creative and autonomous individual,” of “re-enchant[ing] the present” (367, 377). Anarchist animism might then follow in the footsteps of thinkers such as Gustav Landauer, for whom it is the Marxist “science of history” that represents superstition (“Old wives prophesy from coffee dregs. Karl Marx prophesied from steam”), while the “glimmer ... of beauty” belonging to tradition is needed to break the spell of capitalist modernity: “Therefore let us be the type of innovators in whose anticipatory imagination, that which they want to create already lives as something ... anchored in the past, in primeval and sacred life” (65, 93). Such thinkers provide useful precedents for critiques of religion that are more sophisticated than blanket endorsement or reflexive condemnation.

Rather than presenting a contradiction in terms, an animist anarchism would be more consistent in its critique of instrumental rationality—the worldview for which all of nature consists of mere “raw materials” (or, at best, “natural resources”) set aside (as if by a transcendent God) for human beings to own and use. It might or might not adhere to veganism or vegetarianism—animism could provide a basis for this, but it most often does not—but it would be a more consistently ecological anarchism, as we shall see. And it would be better theoretically positioned to struggle alongside Indigenous peoples, no longer encumbered by a crude materialism for which it is self-evidently absurd to listen to nonhuman beings.

Can nonhumans speak? Iwona Janicka, author of *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism*, suggests that the question is not so much one of “who can speak?” as it is of “how best to listen.” Even human beings are enabled to speak (rather than simply emit meaningless noise) by the efforts of listeners to “translate” them. Accordingly, listening to nonhumans is a matter of constructing “human-

nonhuman assemblages” (5–6) capable of translating between, for instance, Algae and English or Ant Swarm and Swahili:

Humans do not “give meaning” to nonhuman entities as such or “interpret brute matter,” but rather they create favorable conditions in which nonhuman entities become visible. In order to do that, however, nonhumans and humans alike require a set of devices, gestures, settings, procedures, instruments, trials and sites. (7–8)

Such devices might include the apparatus given to Koko the gorilla to communicate with her human counterparts and the instruments currently being used to understand the quarrels of bats, but also the methods used to measure glacial formation and movement, the Bolivian *Ley de Derechos de Madre Tierra* that accords legal standing and representation to “Mother Earth”—and the customs and rituals that Native Americans have used for thousands of years (which, in spite of some episodes of overhunting, have worked quite well in most cases, at least insofar as “working” means functionally establishing balanced ecological relationships).

## **Anarchism and #LandBack**

One of the most concrete obstacles to mutual understanding between our movements arises when white anarchists balk at Indigenous demands for the return of ancestral lands. Here, too, anarchism is ill served by its fidelity to modernity. In the modern imaginary, land is an ownable object, a commodity; the *radical* modern demand has typically been a demand for redistribution of the commodity. We moderns have by and large not imagined land as an agent, a process that acts on us and interacts with us. We imagine that persons have rights, but that land only has value—exchange value under modern capitalism, or use value