

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



More Modesty All Around: on Barclay's *The State*

Bob Black

2007

Bob Black
More Modesty All Around: on Barclay's *The State*
2007

Originally published in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #63,
Spring/Summer 2007, Vol. 24, No. 2.

theanarchistlibrary.org

According to Harold Barclay, a retired Canadian anthropologist,¹ if his book *The State* is unique, it is unique in analyzing the nature and origins of the state by combining the perspectives of anarchist theory with empirical anthropology (9).² Readers of Kropotkin, one of the founders of Barclay's publisher, Freedom Press, might question that. Professor Emeritus Barclay knows better; he has elsewhere discussed Kropotkin's ethnological theories. In his *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchism [PWG]*, Barclay was more modest: "There are similarities between what is proposed for this investigation and some of the works of Kropotkin, namely, his *The State: Its Historic Role* and *Mutual Aid*."³

¹He taught at the University of Alberta from 1966, where he is now professor emeritus, until some recent date. On the last page of the book under review, after dismissing anarchist revolution as impossible, Professor Barclay endorses, among several anarchist gestures, the rejection of government employment. He worked for the Alberta provincial government for almost forty years.

²Numerals in parentheses are page references to *The State*. In my footnotes, asterisks (*) identify texts which are not listed in Barclay's bibliography.

³Harold Barclay, *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchism*

Really he should carry his modesty still further. It is also possible to say that there are striking similarities between Barclay's *The State* and Barclay's *PWG* — pp. 17–21 of both books, among other passages, are virtually identical. Barclay believes that the anthropological evidence sustains anarchism, but to find it, you have to read the earlier book, which is somewhat better, or less bad. This one may fortify the faithful but it will not convert anyone. In fact its implications for modern anarchy are discouraging.

Unfortunately, prefatory objections of form and format must be stated. Even if it made every word count, a 97 page “pocketbook” could not do justice to its announced topics, the nature and origins of the state. The discussion of the nature of the state is hopelessly brief and superficial (11- 25), and lifted without acknowledgment from the earlier book.⁴ Barclay's excursions into European and American history are remarkably inaccurate, but will not be dealt with here.⁵ He makes occasional oddball remarks, such as, that in modern societies “policemen invariably wear special dress” (18) — an opinion tragically at variance with the recent infiltration of American environmental activists by undercover operatives.⁶ This

(London: Kahn & Averill with Cienfuegos Press, 1982), 148 (eleven page references to Kropotkin in the index; the bibliography lists *Mutual Aid** and *The State: Its Historic Role**, as this book's bibliography does not). With the usual abysmal production values it shares with AK Press, Freedom Press misstates PWGs subtitle in the bibliography to the new book! (107).

⁴Ibid., 17–31 (including the discussion of sanctions, with the same diagram reproduced).

⁵Barclay believes, for example, that urban democracies emerged from the Renaissance and Reformation (43–44) — two very different phenomena! — actually a period when transient urban democracies like Florence were overthrown and most self-governing (but not democratic) city-states succumbed to domestic or foreign monarchies. By 1600, when the Renaissance and Reformation had run their courses, nothing in Europe resembled democracy except a few rural Swiss cantons.

⁶See, e.g., “Hie Feds Can't Imprison Our Spirits: Free the Cascadia 3,” *Slingshot*, 89 (Winter 2006), 1, 6*; “Activists Get the Heat Breathing Down Their Neck,” *Slingshot*, 91 (Summer 2006), 6*.

book is poorly thought out, badly organized, and carelessly written, even though the author has had two decades to polish some of his prose. Inexcusably, it has no index — but then, an index would dramatize its disorganization.

Barclay discusses desultorily the decline of states (33- 37) before he discusses their rise (51–98). He toys with a couple of factors in the state’s origin, drops the topic, and later starts over with a list of eleven “significant elements in state development,” (55), in no particular order, neither chronological nor in the order of their hy-

⁷Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (updated ed.; Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003), chs. 9–11 (first edition 1968); Allen W. Johnson & Timothy Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State* (2d ed.; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3 (first edition 1987).

⁸Ronald Cohen, “Introduction,” *Origins of the State: The Anthropology of Political Evolution*, ed. Ronald Cohen & Elman R. Service (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978), 3–4.

⁹Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Paths to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Books & Montreal, Canada: Black Rose Books, 1991), 54*.

¹⁰Umberto Eco, “Interpretation and Overinterpretation,” in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 51*.

¹¹E.g., Henri Claessen, Pieter van de Elde, & M. Estellie Smith, eds., *Development and Decline: The Evolution of Sociopolitical Organizations* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985); Henri J.M. Claessen & Peter Skalmk, eds., *The Early State* (*The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1978*); Henry J.M. Claessen & Peter Skalmk, eds., *The Study of the State* (*The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1981*); Timothy Earle, ed., *On the Evolution of Complex Societies* (*Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1984*); Johnson & Earle*; Grant D. Jones & Robert R. Kautz, eds., *The Transition to Statehood in the New World* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution* (*New York: Norton, 1975*). Readers who have been out of college for some time may suppose that theories of cultural evolution are stone cold dead. In fact, they currently flourish in ethnological and especially in archaeological theory, which have drawn close in recent years. Johnson & Earle, vii-viii (Preface to the Second Edition)*.

¹²E.g., (53); Lucy Mair, *Primitive Government* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1961)*. Presumably this is the book; it’s the only text by Mair in the PWG bibliography (at p. 141).

pothesized importance. It is nothing but a trait list, reminiscent of the meaningless eclecticism of Franz Boas.⁷ Theorists of the state usually shun the trait list approach.⁸ And is there something circular about asserting that “hierarchy is built upon a number of factors,” No. 10 of which is “hierarchic social order”? (55) Murray Bookchin committed the same logical blunder,⁹ but he had only a high school diploma, not a Ph.D in anthropology. Umberto Eco characterizes as mystical that mode of understanding wherein “a consequence is assumed and interpreted as its own cause.”¹⁰

Citations are sparse and uneven; sometimes corresponding to references, sometimes not. The very short bibliography is not annotated; it omits most of the important modern materials,¹¹ even texts Barclay alludes to,¹² and it does not provide the reader with what, by then, he badly needs: a guide to further reading. The earliest states, for instance, were Sumerian. But there is not a single source reference to Sumer, about which Barclay says little. In his text, Barclay mentions Franz Oppenheimer’s conquest theory of the origin of the state — critically (66), but as if it were a current theoretical contender, as the innocent reader would suppose since the bibliography listed a 1975 edition. The Oppenheimer book was originally published in 1908,¹³ and nobody now accepts its thesis.

There are countless definitions of the state.¹⁴ The choice of definition is important since, as with definitions of law,¹⁵ definitions of the state are typically inseparable from theoretical conclusions about it. It is important to avoid the abuse of definition, the question-begging “definitional stop.”¹⁶ Barclay does not discuss the

Barclay despises “the great mass of people [who] so eagerly and willingly submit to the state” (9) — but why should he, if the state is here to stay? He upholds fatalistically the consensus opinion. His anthropology of anarchism is nothing but nostalgia. His anthropology of anarchism is actually anthropology against anarchism. His story implies — and he makes the moral explicit — that anarchists should abandon their revolutionary fantasies and indulge in feel-good reformist activities which, while changing nothing, will give them a great big hug (105–106). Barclay should stop pretending to be an anarchist, as Murray Bookchin finally did. More important, he should stop pretending to be an anarchist anthropologist, because his anti-anarchist conclusions find no support in anthropology.

¹³Franz Oppenheimer, *The State: Its History and Development Viewed Sociologically*, trans. John M. Gitterman (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1914), iii*. Barclay references an edition from a short lived anarchist publisher (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975).

¹⁴Herbert S. Lewis, “Warfare and the Origin of the State,” in Claessen & Skalnik, *The Study of the State*, 209 (“hundreds” of definitions)*.

¹⁵H.L.A. Hart, “Definition and Theory in Jurisprudence,” *Lara Q. Rev.* 70(277) (Jan. 1954), 37*.

¹⁶H.L.A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law*

ever did or ever will. What a silly thing to say. Society has to abolish the state. But Barclay declares categorically: “There are no cases of a society once having been organised as a state reverting to an earlier anarchy” (37). There may be no cases he knows about, but that is not saying much. He may be an anarchist and an anthropologist, but he is not an anthropologist of anarchism.

On the very same page, he writes: “[Jesse L.] Byock has argued that early Iceland underwent decentralisation in establishing a new society as compared to its homeland, Norway (63 ff)” (37). Contrary to Barclay, Byock is clear that despite some incipient state features, Iceland was anarchist, a “devolving” social order: “The immigrants who founded Iceland became participant in what in some ways was a headless or stateless society. Early Iceland can be so described because its leaders, the go’ar, wielded little executive power and did not rule over territorial units.” Its leaders often acted like Big Men, but are better characterized as chiefs.⁶⁷ Where there are only Big Men or chiefs, there is no state.

But even if Iceland is an equivocal example of devolution to anarchy, other cases are unequivocal. Among the general features of the collapse of early state societies are the transition to a much lower level of sociopolitical integration, not reverting even to the chiefdom stage from which they originated, but devolving into segmentary, “tribal” societies.⁶⁸ Examples of civilizations reverting to anarchy are the Minoan, Mycenaean, Indus Valley, Classic Maya, and possibly Old Kingdom Egypt and Tiahuanaco in Peru.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 63 (quoted), 63–66; see also Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 3–5*.

⁶⁸Colin Renfrew, “Systems Collapse as Social Transformation: Catastrophe and Anastrophe in Early State Society,” in *Transformations: Mathematical Approaches to Cultural Change*, ed. Colin Renfrew & Kenneth L. Cooke (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 484, 504*; see also Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988)*.

⁶⁹Renfrew, 486*

issues or explain his choice of this definition, which he takes, as he did in his previous book, from S.F. Nadel writing in 1942.¹⁷ It is a poor choice, and one which does not figure in contemporary discussions of state origins. Nadel proposes three criteria, and in his version, unlike Barclay’s paraphrase (21–22), you can at least tell where one criterion leaves off and the next begins. The second criterion is for Nadel, “centralized machinery of government,” and for Barclay — typically more verbose and evasive — it is “apparatus of government” which is “to some degree centralised.” Either formulation begs the question, unless government is defined as something different from the state, which neither Nadel nor Barclay does. Barclay is ambiguous about whether the state has or is an apparatus of government (21–22). This is a longstanding source of confusion in the literature.¹⁸ In an anarchist anthropologist writing in the 21st century, it is unpardonable. Errico Malatesta, the anarchist’s anarchist, after discussing the terminological confusion, sought to dispel it by asserting that, *for anarchist purposes*, government = the state.¹⁹ In *PWG*, Barclay likewise implied that government = the state.²⁰ But in *The State* (53), he refers to “states with governments.” Are there states without governments? The very need to ask the question, condemns the book.

In a book intended to relate anthropology to anarchism, one would expect some treatment of anarchist definitions of the state, if only to make sure that conclusions drawn from anthropology have some relevance to anarchism. There is almost no anarchist theory in Barclay’s booklet.

(New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 5–6*.

¹⁷S.F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of the Nupe in Nigeria* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 69.

¹⁸Henry T. Wright, “Toward an Explanation of the Origin of the State,” in Cohen & Service, 52.

¹⁹Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy* (London: Freedom Press, 1974), 14*. Barclay cites only three or four avowed anarchists aside from himself (107–109).

²⁰*PWG*, 11–12.

The core of the book is the eleven “significant elements” (55),²¹ All do figure in various contemporary theories of state origins. So do several others omitted.²² But the elements are not, all together or in any combination, theories of the origin of the state, they are only components of such theories. The theories themselves are mostly not mentioned; or if mentioned, merely mentioned; or if more than mentioned, misrepresented.

On the rare occasion he does summarize a real theory, Barclay garbles it, as he does Robert L. Carneiro’s theory of the origin of the state.²³ For Barclay, the theory is simply that increased population leads to expansion by conquest (66) — although this contradicts Barclay’s correct rebuttal to Oppenheimer, that conquest presupposes a state. It’s a travesty of Carneiro’s theory, which is still influential without commanding the field,²⁴ whereas nobody would have ever taken it seriously in Barclay’s dumbed-down version. The rebuttal is, of course, if there are too many people, why don’t some of them just move away? Because the key concept of the theory, which Barclay does not mention, is *circumscription*. The state arises, Carneiro argued, where population increases but natural or social barriers to lateral expansion also exist; people have nowhere to go. The state emerges along with other intensifications

²¹ 1. (Population); 2. (Sedentary settlement); 3. (Horticulture/agriculture); 4. (Redistribution); 5. (Military organisation); 6. (Secondary significance of kinship); 7. (Trading); 8. (Specialised division of labour); 9. (Individual property and control of resources); 10. (Hierarchic social order); 11. (Ideology of superiority/inferiority).

²² Such as fission, food storage, circumscription, external ideologies, irrigation, esoteric wealth, and primogeniture. See Timothy J. Earle, “The Evolution of Chiefdoms,” in *Chiefdoms: Power, Economy, and Ideology*, ed. Timothy J. Earle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–15*; Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization*, 71–80*.

²³ Robert L. Carneiro, “A Theory of the Origin of the State,” *Science* 169 (1970): 733–738*. Unbelievably, Barclay does not reference this article.

²⁴ There are data from Peru and southwestern Iran which contradict the theory in its specific original form. Jonathan Haas, *The Evolution of the Prehistoric State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 135–36.

most of the attributes of civilization — yet somehow innocent of statehood — and now some illiterate village bully, a Big Man with thirty, fifty, maybe even a hundred goose-stepping armed gardeners behind him, marches onto the scene and creates the first state!

But... didn’t Barclay assure us that primitives do not wage war, so there was no war before the state? And didn’t he tell us that conquest is not the origin of the state, because it presupposes an already state-organized conqueror?

Obviously Barclay does not understand the Big Man concept. By no logic is it possible to derive the state directly from the Big Man collectivity. The sociopolitical chasm is too vast to overleap in a single bound. There is not even any known case of a Big Man society developing into a chiefdom.⁶⁴ And even “the prospect of a chiefdom to grow into a state seems much better than that of a ‘Big-Man system to grow into a chiefdom.’”⁶⁵

From an anarchist perspective, Barclay is defeatist and demoralizing, because he believes that, now that states prevail everywhere, anarchy is forever impossible. And yet, inexplicably, he is both reprinted and favorably reviewed in #61 of this very journal.⁶⁶ He contends that “there are no cases of the state abolishing itself in favour of a return to a pristine anarchy” (100). Of course there are no cases of the state abolishing itself. No anarchist ever thought it

⁶⁴ Alex T. Strating & T. Christian Uhlenbeck, “An Explanatory Model for Structural Change of a Political System,” in *Private Politics: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to “Big Men” Systems*, ed. Martin A. van Bakel, Renee R. Hagesteijn & Pieter van de Velde (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), 143. One theory holds that Big Men are only fallout from collapsed chiefdoms. J. Friedman & M.W. Rowlands, “Notes Toward an Epigenetic Model of Civilisation,” in *The Evolution of Social Systems*, ed. J. Friedman & M.J. Rowlands (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1977), 213.

⁶⁵ Edward Ch. L. Van der Vliet, “‘Big Man,’ Tyrant, Chief: The Anomalous Starting Point of the State in Classical Greece,” in van Bakel, Hagesteijn & van de Velde, 118.

⁶⁶ Harold Barclay, “The Origin of the State,” *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* 24(1), #61 (Spring/Summer 2006), 48–57; Ben Blue, “Breaking It Down,” *ibid.*, 26, 28.

the Big Mouth: “Some became Big Men through their ability to talk and manipulate others, through supernatural powers, through overt force” — as opposed to covert force? — “or their ability to gather a body of clients in large part” — what’s the smaller part? — “by making the less successful indebted to them” (63) But in what social circumstances is this possible? Barclay’s next sentence is, unbelievably, this: “The Big Men became then the landlords; agriculture reinforced hierarchy” (63). But Big Men do not exist in agricultural societies. They exist in horticultural societies, as in Melanesia, or sometimes among pastoralists such as the Nuer or — but these might be chiefs — among sedentary foragers like the Northwest Coast Indians. States never developed out of such societies. A Big Man operates on the local level, drawing his following from a single homogeneous village of perhaps 300–500 inhabitants.⁶¹ States are based on agriculture and consist of many local communities, with at least two supra-local levels of governance, with populations at least in the hundreds of thousands and usually more.⁶²

Barclay discusses some of the conditions (finally, he gets specific) for the emergence of the state in the Near East: agriculture, metallurgy, pottery, irrigation, writing, elaborate division of labor, etc. (Writing of course was a distant consequence, not an efficient cause of the pristine state.⁶³ Also, there was the increasing size and heterogeneity of a population “that was not related by kinship, residing in congested areas like cities” (71). “Into this situation,” relates Barclay, “some Big Man, some pre-eminent, ranking person with adequate resources and clientele marches onto the scene” (71). Here we have substantial populations already living in cities, with

are impossible in local-scale egalitarian societies. As Hobbes wrote: “For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.” Hobbes, 183*.

⁶¹Johnson & Earle, 34*; Sahlins, “Rich Man, Poor Man,” 287*.

⁶²Johnson & Earle, 304*.

⁶³Haas, *Evolution of the Prehistoric State*, 6.

of existing patterns and practices of agriculture, hierarchy, specialization and force, to contain the social explosion which conditions were building up to. Some societies may have exploded. The ones that found another way, found it by founding pristine states.

There are two broad categories of theories of the origin of the state. You might think that Barclay might mention this if he mentioned anything, but he doesn’t. One category of theories may be variously referred to as coercion, conflict, class, or radical theories. The other consists of integrative, coordination, benefit, consensus, contract, or conservative theories.²⁵ The best-known modern theorists on each side are Morton H. Fried for the coercion theory and Elman R. Service for the benefit theory. The former theory maintains that leaders took power; the second, that they were given it. The benefit theory is that the state originated, not coercively, but because of the services it provided to a grateful society. The state is on this theory just a further beneficent development of the social division of labor later celebrated by Adam Smith. The coercion theory maintains that the state may have bestowed some benefits sooner or later, which puzzles Barclay (9–10), but that is not how or why the state originated. The state is first and foremost self-serving. And the state is *the* decisive discontinuity with basically free forms of society. As Fried writes, the state is “a source of revolutionary transformation of culture in general.”²⁶

The onset of coercive hierarchy marks the qualitative break in social development which should primarily interest anarchists. The transition from the autonomous village community to the subordinated villages of regional chiefdoms, and then to subjection on a wider scale to the state, for the vast majority represents a decline in freedom and a lower standard of living. So, “The essential question is, why do so many people accept from a few a social contract

²⁵Haas, *ibid.*, 20; Elman R. Service, “Classical and Modern Theories of the Origins of Government,” in Cohen & Service, 21–34.

²⁶Fried, “The State, the Chicken, and the Egg; or, What Came First?” in Cohen & Service, 36.

that is clearly disadvantageous? The only conceivable answer is that it is not a matter of choice, but the process that leads to stratification is coercive, mechanistic, and highly predictive.²⁷ One of the other elements which may be involved in state origins is war. Continuing the Freedom Press tradition of tweedy Anglo-Canadian anarcho-pacifism, Barclay finds war so distasteful that he cannot discuss it dispassionately. But since war is the health of the state, it is something anarchists should try to understand. They will get no help from Barclay, who barks: “War was invented by the state”²⁷. Without (as usual) defining his topic, war, he asserts categorically that it is different from feud (also undefined, so what has he told us? nothing). War, in the anthropological sense, is “armed conflict and associated activities and relations between independent political units in all types of societies.”²⁸ There is clear evidence — rock art and projective points in human bones — of at least occasional prehistoric warfare.²⁹ What they did was, Barclay insists, not war, notwithstanding superficial resemblances, such as armed men getting together to go off and kill the people of other groups. Noble Savages would never do that: it’s so terribly uncivilized. In his political correctness, Barclay is a typical academic leftist. You have to swallow a heroic dose of delusional ideology to pretend that what the stateless Cheyennes or the stateless Yanomamo chronically did to their neighbors was not war.³⁰ As Levi-Strauss has written: “While often inclined to subversion among his own people and in revolt against traditional behaviour, the anthropologist

²⁷William T. Sanders, “Pre-Industrial Demography and Social Evolution,” in *On the Evolution of Complex Societies*, 15 (quoted)*; Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Urizen Books, Mole Editions, 1974), 169.

²⁸Jonathan Haas, “War,” *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 4:1357*.

²⁹Keith F. Otterbein, *How War Began* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 71–77*.

³⁰Grinnell; Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yanomamo* (4th ed.; Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1992)*.

situation returns to an acephalous or anarchic condition” (53). The ethnographic literature contains examples of murders of overreaching Big Men, but no example of a failed putsch. More important, it contains no example of a successful, literal coup d’état.

But Barclay sputters on: “Why don’t all these societies ridden with their domineering elders, their Big Men, their shamans and powerful mediators readily become states with governments?” (53). Because no such societies have ever existed. None of these menacing elements appears on the trait list because they play no part in any theory of the origins of the state. Gerontocracy is a myth; shamans are not political figures; and “powerful mediators” by definition act by consent and lack coercive power. “Perhaps the main reason is that none of these individuals have any adequate ideological, economic, technological or organisational base” (53). In other words, they are not seeds of the state at all.

To personalize the origins of the state in this way is childish. This is a throw-it-against-the-wall, see-what-sticks methodology. For Barclay, any expression of individual merit — any superiority in ambition, ability, intelligence or strength — is the demon seed of the state. In other words, the state is the hellspawn of excellence. Could any statist ask for better credentials for the state? This book reassures the powers-that-be that there is no truth to the idea that anarchy is revolutionary, or that it should be, as Barclay denied in *PWG*, “equated with chaos or seen as some crackpot scheme advanced only by bomb-throwing maniacs.”⁵⁹ No, a thousand times, no! Rather, anarchists shall quietly bag groceries at the food co-op, decline to vote (like most people), recycle our trash, reject state employment (unless it is tenure-track), and generally stay out of trouble (106).

Without ever telling us what a Big Man is, Barclay later explains the origins of the Big Man as, along with his being the Big Bully,⁶⁰

⁵⁹Barclay, *PWG*, 11.

⁶⁰The Big Bully construct can be dismissed by just using common sense. Tyrants

perhaps bravery in war and feud.”⁵⁷ Note that any warrior prowess he possesses is contingent and secondary: the Big Man is not, as such, the Big Bully. His power, whatever its source, is purely personal, not institutionalized, and vanishes at his death, if not sooner. According to Sahlins, what, then, is the role of the Big Man in the emergence of advanced hierarchy? He doesn’t have any! His personal quest for power is self-limiting if not self-defeating: “Developing internal constraints, the Melanesian big-man political order brakes evolutionary advance at a certain level. It sets ceilings on the intensification of political authority, on the intensification of household production by political means, and on the diversion of household outputs in support of wider political organization.”⁵⁸ The Big Man collectivity (it hardly qualifies as a polity) is thus an evolutionary dead end. It is not a seed of the state.

It is time to pull together, as Barclay does not, his story about the Big Man. And then pull it apart. His remarks are scattered here and there, widely spaced. The first reference (53) is in the context of his vain appeal to Lucy Mair’s authority. Big Men have clients whom they may sometimes shall quietly bag groceries at the food co-op, decline to command, but their authority is ephemeral and exercised over a small number of dependents, not over the community through a corps of dependents. “With the Big Man” — but what is he? — “anarchy can degenerate into tyranny. What sometimes occurs” — when? where? — “may be seen as an abortive attempt to introduce a governmental- state system. It is a failure in part because there is an ambivalence in the community towards authority” — sic: no ambivalence: the community rejects authority — “so that if established it regularly inspires rebellion and the Big Man who tries to be the bully is most often murdered. Thus, the

ed. Thomas G. Harding & Ben J. Wallace (New York: The Free Press & London: Collier Macmillan, 1970), 205–210*.

⁵⁷Ibid., 290–91* (emphasis added).

⁵⁸Ibid., 293–94 (quoted); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 135–38*; Service, *Origins of the State*, 293–94.

appears respectful to the point of conservatism as soon as he is dealing with a society different from his own.”³¹

There was no war between simple agricultural village communities.³² There was endemic war between multi-community chiefdoms, which are “stratified societies] based on unequal access to the means of production.”³³ It is out of chiefdoms that the state evolved. Barclay admits that he finds the concept of chiefdom very hard to understand (87). It isn’t, but that goes to show why Barclay’s book is worthless. According to Barclay, differences of social status are distinctively statist (24). That error alone is enough to vitiolate his argument, if he can even be said to have an argument, as opposed to a few pet peeves.

The concept of the chiefdom, which is relatively recent (first formulated in the 1950s, popularized by Morton H. Fried in the 1960s³⁴), is critical to nearly all current debates about the origin of the state. In an article which, for a change, Barclay professes to have read, Robert L. Carneiro calls the rise of the chiefdom “the most important single step ever taken in the course of political development... Within a few millennia of the rise of the first chiefdoms — indeed probably within a few centuries — the first states emerged, and shortly thereafter the first empires.”³⁵

For Barclay, legal sanctions are “the signs of a true state” (28). That would get him into the definitional quagmire, to which I have alluded, of the meaning of law, except that as usual he does not

³¹Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John & Doreen Weightman (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 437*.

³²Otterbein, *How War Began*, 97 &cpassim*.

³³Johnson & Earle, 34,267 (quoted)*.

³⁴Morton H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1967). Fried also coined the term “pristine state,” which you might think, from reading Barclay, was Barclay’s idea (28–29).

³⁵Robert L. Carneiro, “Political Expansion as an Expression of the Principle of Competitive Exclusion,” in Cohen & Service, 207 (quoted); Robert L. Carneiro, “The Chiefdom: Precursor to the State,” in Jones & Kautz, 37–75*

define his terms, and when they are as essentially contested as this one, you really have to. By some definitions, any sort of dispute resolution procedure is law. Obviously Barclay does not think so, nor do I. But neither is law just orders backed by threats.³⁶ For contemporary anarchists, the critique of the state must include a critique of law — and a more sophisticated critique than we have so far produced. But law played no part in the origin of the state. It is, like writing, one of its later consequences. The earliest known evidence of law is at least a thousand years after the earliest state-formation.³⁷

Midway through his brief, yet subjectively interminable journey, Barclay opines: “The seeds of the state have been sown in every human society,” although “only a very few of these-seeds have grown to fruition” (51). What might this seedy, fruity metaphor mean? As so often, one has to turn to PWG to learn that by “seeds” (or “germs”) of the state he means simply leadership roles.³⁸ There were no states as recently as 6,000 years ago (13). Is his trait list a statist seed catalog? As Lucy Mair writes: “Earlier anthropologists made it their aim to reconstruct the development of institutions in an evolutionary series, from germs’ which were to be found

³⁶H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1961), 20–25*.

³⁷Morton H. Fried, “The State, the Chicken, and the Egg; or, What Came First?” in Cohen & Service, 44.

³⁸Barclay, *PWG*, 120. As this is a review of *The State*, not *PWG*, I can only briefly note the shortcomings of the latter’s 5 pages (pp. 122–27) on the origins of the state. The Big Man I discuss below. The Technician refers to proficient hunters among foragers and, in one example given, pastoralists. Foraging bands never develop states (56, 58) and neither have the pastoral Lapps whom he mentions. The Holy Man includes the so-called “leopard-skin chiefs” among the Nuer (pastoral) and the Eskimo shamaa forager). These are purely stateless peoples. “No Nuer will let any other address an order to him.” Mair, 65. There is no evidence that mediators or shamans ever formed states. No other anthropologist has ever said so. The Old Man is the senior male member of .the kin group, as among the Australian aborigines, who were foragers, and foragers never form states. What sense does it make to speak of “potential tyranny” (*PWG*, 122) where there is not a single known instance of the potential being actualized?

ber, and Art.⁵⁵ Why not to Bipedalism? Or instead of the Big Man, the Big Bang?

The reader might be impatient by now to find out what the hell a “Big Man” is, something she will never get out of *The State*, and *PWG* is only a little more informative. Lucy Mair’s account of the Nuer bull, summarized above, goes some way beyond Barclay on this point. The classic account is by Marshall Sahlins, in an article contrasting the Big Man (typical of Melanesia) and the chief (typical of Polynesia). The Big Man appears in some kinship/residential autonomous villages (“tribes”), usually horticultural. He holds no inherited or official office, but he enjoys unusual prestige and influence. He is a self-made (big) man, a pre-capitalist entrepreneur, who recruits a personal following usually based originally on close kin, often extended by strategic (perhaps plural) marriages, and by taking in the socially disconnected. He is typically a hard-working primary producer himself. He may represent his village in relations with other villages with their own Big Men in matters of diplomacy or trade. He is usually a fluent talker, and may be something of a con-artist in his dealings with lesser men who incur obligations to him which he calls in when he amasses goods for public redistribution. But his faction is incapable of collective action. He is “center-man” to his followers individually. His faction dissolves at his death, often sooner, because eventually he fails to maintain the delicate balance between rewarding his clients and exploiting them.⁵⁶

The Big Man is thus someone who “must be prepared to demonstrate that he possesses the kinds of skills that command respect — magical powers, gardening prowess, mastery of oratorical style,

⁵⁵John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* (2d rev. ed.; Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press, 1999), 15–71*; cf. Jesus Sepulveda, *The Garden of Peculiarities*, trans. Daniel Montero (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005)*.

⁵⁶Marshall Sahlins, “Rich Man, Poor Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5(3) (April 1963): 285–303*, reprinted in *Cultures of the Pacific: Selected Readings*,

This is what she really says, in Chapter 7, “Kings, Chiefs, and Peasants”: “In the discussion of the expansion of government [Chapter 4] it was shown how significant in this process is the building up of a body of persons who depend upon their leader in such a way that their first loyalty is to him. This relationship of clientage may well be the germ from which state power sprang.”⁵² That discussion of clientage clearly refers to chiefdoms if not states — not to Big Men collectivities: “Of course every leader has a following; it is tautology to say so. But what matters is the kind of following... But this first step [towards monarchical rule] has been taken when we find a leader who can keep permanently associated with him a body of retainers whom he can call upon to enforce his wishes, and who identify more closely with him than with any of the divisions of the population. This is the first essential of state power, in however rudimentary a form.”⁵³ This first step toward state power is at best a step after the Big Man, who is thus, at best, the prerequisite to the prerequisite to the state. But why stop, or start, there? The Family is earlier still.⁵⁴ Anarchist John Zerzan has taken his quest for the Fall, the onset of alienation, back to Time, Language, Num-

⁵²Mair, 166 (emphasis in original):

⁵³Mair, 108. The reader may notice how much zigzagging between pages is necessary to render Barclay and Mair minimally coherent. Also, Mair was not saying “monarchical” to limit or qualify the statement. It so happens that all East African states were monarchic. In fact, contrary to Barclay, who claims that early Sumerian states were at first oligarchies (38), probably all early civilizations were monarchies. Bruce G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilization: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73–74*.

⁵⁴Defending his disregard of patriarchy, Barclay earlier wrote that he would “stick to the strict meaning of anarchy as a polity without rulers,” *PWG*, 34–35. But that does not justify disregarding patriarchy in connection with the origin of the state, its seed, its semen, as he would say. Yet it is not on the trait list. And surely, before there was the Old Man, the Big Man, etc., there stood, erect as a phallus, The Man. “An ancient race,” according to “The Man” (a character portrayed by Charles Bronson) in the film “Once Upon a Time in the West.”*

in the simplest forms of society, and some of their conjectures have come to appear rather ludicrous in the light of knowledge gained later.”³⁹ Barclay’s metaphors and methodology are ethnological throwbacks.

For several million years, all hominid and human societies were stateless. There were, at their peak, in the late Neolithic or in the period of earliest state formation, by various estimates anywhere from 100,000 to 600,000 independent stateless societies.⁴⁰ There had been many before them. What does it mean to say that in all of them, in their hundreds of thousands, the seeds of the state had been sown? Even if this were true, how could anybody possibly know it? Even when we finally come to the chiefdom, the immediate antecedent of the state, it is clear that chiefdoms rarely evolve into states. In Egypt in the fourth millennium B.C., hundreds of villages were aggregated into⁴¹ chiefdoms (names) which were eventually incorporated into two states, then one.⁴¹ Barclay seems not to know this, although he also seems to know a little more about Egypt than any other early state, no doubt because he did fieldwork upstream in the Sudan⁴² and was thus expected to know the Nile Valley literature.

At the end of the book, Barclay finally makes a theoretical assertion — that the state arose out of the “interaction”⁴³ of the eleven elements (100), something he never even tries to demonstrate. Nobody has ever claimed that this set of traits, in or out of “interac-

³⁹Mair, 107*. Mair’s anti-evolutionism is, however, itself antiquated.

⁴⁰Johnson & Earle, 245 (estimate of 100,000)*; Carneiro, “Political Expansion,” 213 (estimate of 600,000).

⁴¹Carneiro, “Political Expansion,” 211.

⁴²Harold B. Barclay, *Buuri al Lamaab: A Suburban Village in the Sudan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964)* (a revision of his 1961 doctoral dissertation). It is his only book-length ethnography.

⁴³“Interaction” is synonymous with the anthropologists’s “own magical expression ‘interrelation!’” Jules Henry, “A Theory for an Anthropological Analysis of American Culture,” *On Sham, Vulnerability and Other Forms of Self-Destruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 68*.

tion,” are the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the emergence of the state. Usually some of them are considered consequences, not causes — the symptoms, not the disease, from an anarchist perspective. Law and warfare are examples. The “element” of hierarchy, we saw, was a tautology. Barclay makes no attempt to reconcile the trait list theory with his earlier theory that the state developed out of certain leadership roles. But he does repeat the earlier theory in an even more fantastic version.

The Big Man plays no role in the emergence of the state. Barclay produces no connected argument that he does. There are no anthropological theories of state formation, old or new, which assign such a role to the Big Man. Barclay quotes only Harold K. Schneider who, discussing social structure among East African herdsmen, states: “Rather than being a stage in the level of government, the state, or rather the monarchy, [the Big Man] is but a point on one end of a spectrum whose other end is stateless societies containing only big men.”⁴⁴ Whatever this obscure comment means, it is about political taxonomy, not political development. The Big Man is not a stage in the evolution of the state, it is merely its analytic antithesis. Schneider does not address the origins or development of the state.

Otherwise, the only source Barclay cites, or rather claims, in his support — he does not even name the book — is Lucy Mair’s *Primitive Government* (1962). As its support for his position would be unique in the anthropological literature, his claim calls for scrutiny. In the first place, despite the generality of its title, Mair’s book is devoted entirely to the political systems of sub-Saharan north-east Africa.⁴⁵ The four states included are secondary states; in fact,

⁴⁴Harold K. Schneider, *Livestock and Inequality in East Africa: The Economic Basis for Social Structure* (Bloomington, IN & London: Indiana University Press, 1979), 207. The implication, probably unintended, that there are Big Men in all stateless societies is incorrect. They are unknown in band societies and many other stateless societies.

⁴⁵Mair, 20.

they are conquest states.⁴⁶ Mair does not make use of the term Big Man. She describes what sound like Big Man collectivities,⁴⁷ notably the anarchist Nuer, made famous by E.E. Evans-Pritchard.⁴⁸ Their village leader, the “bull” (the Nuer herd cattle) is an ambitious self-made man whose influence is based solely on his personal qualities.⁴⁹ The role is achieved, not ascribed. A Nuer village has a fluid population of several hundred. The bull is likely to be related to a substantial number of them. He probably owns more cattle than most people, but “He will not become a leader unless his personality commands prestige; this he may gain from a reputation for prowess in fighting in his youth, for skill in debate, or for ritual powers (which are believed to be inherited). A man who has gained prestige in these various ways may be able to build it up further by marriage alliances with similarly placed men in other villages; others may attain their influence in the first place through such alliances.”⁵⁰ A potential ruler? No. Mair immediately continues: “What the ‘bull’ gets out of his position is another question. No Nuer will let any other address an order to him. The leadership of the ‘bull’ is recognized only in the sense that people wait for him to give a lead.”⁵¹ This discussion is in Chapter 2, “Minimal Government.”

Here is Barclay’s claim for Mair’s authority: “In slightly more rank ordered societies where one has the so-called Big Man phenomenon one also finds the germ of state development. Mair has contended that the foundation of a state could be in this development by a leader of a dependent and loyal body of supporters” (53).

⁴⁶Mair, 30. “The Bantu states are secondary, not pristine states.” Otterbein, *How War Began*, 96.

⁴⁷Mair, 63–66.

⁴⁸E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1940), and other works.

⁴⁹Another of Barclay’s sources calls the Nuer bull a Big Man. Schneider, 207.

⁵⁰Mair, 64–65.

⁵¹Mair, 65 (emphasis added).