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Outwitting the State by Peter Shalnik,
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One of the most tenacious of contexts within which thinking about society takes place is the context of social revolution; the context that conceives of human society as some kind of organism that evolves, just as human bodies are known to have evolved from other kinds of primates, and ultimately from fish like creatures. This idea, that society, *i.e.* human activity, evolves over lifetime is a most powerful analogy and is poetically gripping. It is perhaps the most poignant product of a positivistic science of man. But it is also a fantasy. More specifically, it is the creation myth of the society of industrial capitalism. By telling and re-telling this myth, the society is by turn justified, criticized, eulogized, and finally resigned to or

else wholeheartedly embraced. Those outcasts who don‘t fit in to this myth are usually blotted out.

In *Outwitting the State*, this evolutionist myth is largely renounced in the light of eight case-studies which examine various forms of social organization that in the myth, are forerunners of the modern state; but in reality are fundamentally contradicting the state and not simply pre-dating it. In other words, what is being said here is that tribal social organizations, such as ‘chiefdoms’ and kin-based clans, are *not* only not the ancestors of the modern state, but that they aren‘t seven related. The state must look elsewhere for its heritage. In this light, the state is historically less the inevitable cumulation of some kind of quasi-mystical process of evolution, and much more the occasional aberration intruding upon thousands of years of otherwise unalienated human interactions — which by no means were entirely libertarian or lovey-dovey; there is plenty of intrigue and violence, though arguably less so than today. The point is that none did/does not need a license to kill, nor a permit to love. There are no registration forms, no legal precedence, no laws to speak of beyond what you and yours say is right and wrong. As the great eighteenth century American vagabond Henry Tufts wrote: “I far prefer a savage life, to gloomy cares or vexing strife.” The modern state that currently encircles the entire planet is an aberration that appears to be here to stay, at least until everything else is gone, devoured in its maw as it were. Yet it these case-studies are any evidence, they indicate that the state has so far been unable to entirely control the world it presumes to own. These are not tales of revolution. Some are more, some are less subversive than that. These accounts of outwitting the state have to do with practical, cultural and ethnic motivations rather than ideological, or philosophical rationales. Neither the Kreisha Bedouins (Jordan) nor the Ponapean chieftains (Micronesia) are interested in spreading revolution; They are instead looking to claim for themselves as much autonomy as they can in the face of a stronger power — that of the modern state.

Particularly in the more developed regions, *i.e.* Europe, North America, and western Asia, the logic of the state forms the bedrock of the prevailing world views. Clastres, in *Society Against the State*, examined the ways in which other societies resisted such logic, and how *their* world views had built-in guards against the development of absolute hierarchical relations of power. The societies he studied were ones that had not as yet had the state imposed on them from without. *Outwitting the State* looks at some of these other kinds of societies, as they are now, after having had the state imposed on them for 50–300 years. What emerges is the generalization that throughout the world are various indigenous forms of social organization that continue to struggle against the modern state. They are not always so successful, and none of them succeed in entirely escaping the pressures of the state. Yet some of them do manage to establish grounds upon which they can retain their culture and their autonomy, at least temporarily.

The last study in this volume especially clarifies this general situation. It concerns two entirely different indigenous forms of social organization. They are the Nanumba and the Konkomba of the Nanun (Ghana). While the Nanumba are people whose organization consists of a centralized hierarchical polity, the Konkomba are described by anthropologists as "acephalous tribesmen" (leaderless, communal). These two ethnic groups came into violent conflict with each other in 1981, largely owing to arbitrary border shifts effected by the state of Ghana. After a few years, both the Nanumba and the Konkomba came; to realize they had more in common with each other than either had with the state. They've since become allies against the alien modern form.

What makes the indigenous hierarchy of the Nanumba different from the absolute hierarchy of the state is that the Nanumba polity was local, without abstract law, was not production based (the Nanumba economy was subsistence farming and had no way of forcing people to work. Whatever authority the Nanumba chief has is directly related to his ability to convince with words, for there

are no police in Nanun. Or there weren ‘t any prior to the arrival of the state. It is thus reasonable to say that the hierarchy of the Nanumba chieftaincy is fundamentally different from the hierarchy of the state, in that the former is comforting (in this case, to the people of Nanun), while the latter is oppressive. Local authority is different from expansive power. The former does not evolve into the latter. ln fact, it is a simple thing to trace the origins of the state for the Nanumba. It begins on November 30; 1896 and is imported by German colonialists who conquer them, and make them work.

Another case study, on the Russian Old Believers (raskol’niki) who currently live in Alberta, Canada, under (what they believe to be) the shadow of the antichrist (which is more or less tantamount to the modern state) is of special note. The Old Believers value very highly their *vol’nost’* (freedom). Indeed, it is in order to retain their *vol’nost’* that the Old Believers have migrated from place to place, always living on the edge of a nation-state until that state became too imposing with its controls and bureaucracy. As the title of this articles suggests, “there is always somewhere to go.” But *vol’nost’* specifically refers to freedom of action. According to Scheffel, as much as the Old Believers value their *vol’nost’*, just so do they abhor *vol’nodumstvo* (freethinking). The modern state has it the other way around. Here is permitted all the *vol’hodumstvo* you can eat, and forbidden is any of this *vol’nost’*. This begs the question of what kind of *vol’nodumstvo* is possible in a society bereft of *vol’nost*.

In addition to the Nanumba and Konkomba, Old Believers, Ponapean chieftainships and Kreisha Bedouins, there are studies of the Cree Indians (James Bay, Canada), the indigenous polities of Pahang and Kelantan (Malaya), and of Maradi (Niger), as well as the coastal sultanates and inland chiefdoms on Borneo.

This is recommended reading for all nomads and ’bolo builders.