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A Jealous State? The character of Covid government in the UK.

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Introduction

Anarchist thinkers have long identified the jealousy inherent to the modern state; an exclusive sovereignty claimed against other nation states, secessionists, non-state geopolitical actors, and especially against independent organisation by the people themselves. However, under neo-liberalism, the centrality of the state has been eroded and much of its productive capacity and governing power has been ceded to private corporations and supranational bodies. Conceived thusly, the state no longer jealously guards its sovereignty, but hands it over willingly, and even acts as a ‘broker’ for capital (Chowdhury 2020), intervening to shape society to suit market interests.

The Covid-19 crisis appears to confirm this ‘unjealous’ ceding of productive capacity, with the UK government handing out £16.5 billion to private corporations to carry out core services and meet essential needs (up to 26th October 2020 (Tussell)). On closer inspection though, the neo-liberal principle of market competition has been absent during the crisis, and the cronyistic embrace between the government and private corporations has (further) blurred the distinction between state and capital. Moreover, the crisis has in fact enflamed the state’s inherent jealousies, as evident in attempts to co-opt and suppress the upwelling of mutual aid initiatives that have autonomously addressed peoples’ needs during the crisis.

'I am the Lord thy God Government'

Bakunin saw a common jealousy in God's demand for exclusive worship of a single deity and the exclusive sovereignty demanded by the modern state (2018: 104). Scathing anti-statism is to be expected from anarchists, but this recognition of 'the jealous state' also extends into the, not *usually* anarchist, field of International Relations (the earliest anarchist IR contributions include Prichard (2011) and Kazmi (2012)). In the 'orthodox' IR reckoning, the state's exclusivity has three competitors:

1. other nation-states and secessionists, in a 'claim to "ownership" of its citizenry' (Swift 1991);
2. 'nonstate actors in world politics' (Wendt 1994: 385) such as world religions and internationalist ideologies; and
3. 'powerful financial and market interests' (Gottlieb 1994: 112) including multinational corporations and supranational institutions. The conspicuously absent fourth 'competitor' is the people's own capacity for independent organisation. Kropotkin wrote that emerging early-modern nation-states, whether republican, parliamentary or monarchist, were 'agreed in asserting that no separate unions between citizens must exist within the state... "No state within the state!"' (2009: 183).

The first two facets of state jealousy are abundantly evident in the UK context: today's 'enemy' nations include Russia and China; Scottish nationalists are loathed secessionists; Islam is a feared global spectre; and Brexiteers portray the European Union as a supranational affront to British sovereignty. The third jealousy, against 'financial and market interests', ought to be redundant under neo-liberal globalisation, but the idea that the UK state simply cedes its power to an extraneous private sector misunderstands the intertwinement between state and capital, and this cronyism has proliferated during the pandemic crisis.

The fourth jealousy, identified by anarchists like Kropotkin but *not* by orthodox IR scholars, functions differently. While jealousy of rival 'geopolitical actors' is framed as defence against outside threats, the state's demand for exclusive control over 'its people' is presented as a benevolent intervention 'oriented to achieving the common good' (O'Donnell 2010: 73). However, as Scott (1998) highlights, the results of state centralisation and control are 'often disastrous' (in King 2019: 2), and so it has proved in the Covid state.

The crony Covid state

Neo-liberal ideology demands that the state ‘roll back’, offering up production and services to the supposed efficiencies of free market competition, and the UK government faithfully privatises any-and-all of its functions as a priority. This has been augmented in the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, with unprecedented sums handed over to private corporations. Indeed, the UK government no longer has the capacity to meet basic social needs, even at a time of crisis – the state has already outsourced itself to the point of incompetence.

So, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was *correct* to say that ‘[i]t wasn’t the state that made the gloves and masks and ventilators that we needed at such speed’ (6th October 2020), but his subsequent vaunting of ‘the private sector, with its rational interest in innovation and competition and market share’ as rising to the demands of the crisis simply doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. Under emergency procurement measures since 18th March 2020, competition for government contracts has been suspended (Cabinet Office 2020) – up to the end of October 2020, more than 2,000 contracts had been handed out with no tender process (Tussell data). Millions of pounds have gone to companies that don’t have any employees or trading history (Delahunty 2020). Contracts worth £1bn have been awarded to Tory party ‘friends and donors’ (Crerar 2020). And those are just the figures that are available – the UK government was found to have ‘acted unlawfully’ in its failure to even publish the details of Covid-19-related contracts in February 2021 (Conn 2021). In this fast-moving crisis condition these figures will rapidly become outdated, but their enormity reveals endemic profligacy and cronyism – this is a far cry from Johnson’s celebrated ‘rational interest’ of the competitive market. So it is *not* the case that the state has forgotten its jealousies when it comes to the private sector, it’s just no longer possible to distinguish one from the other.

‘No state within the Covid state!’

The state’s failure to meet people’s immediate needs in the pandemic crisis was addressed by a blossoming of local-level mutual aid initiatives. Thousands upon thousands of people joined together to support vulnerable neighbours, produce Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), deliver food and medicines, and much more besides. The striking characteristic of these mutual aid groups is their autonomous organisation, quite separate from established charities, political parties, or indeed the state (Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK FAQs). But of key interest here is how the state, via co-option and suppression, has jealously squeezed out the space for these autonomous expressions of community self-reliance.

The UK government’s first response was to co-opt the surge of mutual aid co-operation

under a state-run volunteer scheme. The NHS Volunteer Responders was rolled out in March 2020 – 750,000 people signed up, but even during the first peak of virus infections, few volunteers had been assigned any tasks, leaving many ‘disgruntled that they [had] yet to be called upon’ (Butler 2020). People’s energy and desire to help one another was wasted, or, put another way, successfully absorbed and directed away from autonomous mutual aid initiatives.

The severe shortage of PPE for frontline healthcare workers was another symptom of the state’s abandonment of public service – Movianto, outsourced to manage the UK’s PPE stockpiles, was sold off just as the pandemic crisis was beginning to bite (Davies 2020), and the government then hurriedly spent (at least) £5bn to fill the subsequent shortfall (Bright 2020). Autonomous initiatives such as Scrub Hub stepped in to produce PPE, supplying healthcare workers directly. Other volunteer scrub production schemes such as For the Love of Scrubs (FtLoS) were recruited into the NHS Trusts’ procurement mechanisms. The co-optive and suppressive faces of state jealousy emerge here, with the autonomous Scrub Hub producers being threatened with prosecution for ‘circulating unregulated PPE’ (Rudd 2020), causing volunteers to leave groups for fear that they were doing something ‘illegal’ (Lachowicz and Donaghey forthcoming), while the founder of the officially compliant FtLoS was awarded an OBE (BBC News 2020).

Lieffe compares the state to ‘an abusive lover who grip[s] ever tighter the more it los[es] control’ (2020: 143), and this has been the jealous character of the UK government during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The state requires its ‘subjects and resources [to] be *assets*, serving the imperatives of the state’ (King 2019: 3). When people challenge those imperatives by organising independently to meet their own needs, the state rushes to re-assert its sovereignty and control. *This* is the jealousy at the core of the state – not against geopolitical competitors and certainly not against market interests, but against the people’s own ability to organise themselves.

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