An anarchist archaeology of equality: pasts and futures against hierarchy

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An Anarchist Archaeology of Equality: Pasts and Futures Against Hierarchy

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Scholars of the past frame the 'origins' or evolution of inequality, usually using archaeological or anthropological evidence as a basis for their arguments, as an intentional, inevitable, important step towards the development of states, implicitly framed as the pinnacle of human political and economic achievement. Anarchist archaeologies reject the idea of hierarchy as a positive or inevitable evolutionary outcome underlying the path to civilization. We argue instead for a radical reorientation towards archaeologies of equality. We propose a prefigurative archaeology that celebrates the myriad ways that human beings have actively undermined and resisted hierarchical social arrangements. We aim to reorient archaeology's focus towards societies that purposefully prevented or constrained the emergence of inequality. To demonstrate the potential of archaeologies of equality we present case examples from Oceania, Britain, West Asia and the American Southwest. Highlighting the accomplishments of societies of equals in the past demonstrates the contingency and problematic nature of present forms of inequality. It allows us to explore a different set of pasts and thus enact different presents as we imagine different futures.

Introduction

> Part of the heart of anarchy is, dare to go against the grain of the conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope.
>
> bell hooks (2011)

Scholarship concerning the origins of agriculture, cities and 'complex' societies is in flux. Decades of slow and painstaking historical, archaeological and anthropological research is yielding a more complicated, less linear and less uniform picture of the developmental trajectories of ancient cultures globally (for a recent overview, see Graeber & Wengrow 2021). These 'alternative' narratives about the past are a much needed factual corrective to a set of historical myths that have had outsized and wholly deleterious effects on the modern imaginary about social structure, power, progress and future possibilities (Black Trowel Collective *et al.* 2024).

Tales of the inevitable and linear pathway from 'savagery' to 'civilization' were formalized during the nineteenth century (e.g. Morgan 1877). They were often deployed to justify and naturalize the conjoined European capitalist and colonialist projects that created ongoing patterns of global inequality. Rebranded as grand narratives about the origins of agriculture and the rise of civilizations, or deep histories of human attainment, these stories projected patterns of social life that existed during the last 200 years or less into the deep past, usually rationalized using assumptions about 'common sense' or 'human nature'. These narratives universalized eurocentric ontologies and colonialist logics (e.g. Dunnell 1982). A series of popular books have informed the public that, from the study of the deep past, we can be sure that Eurasians were

destined (by such apparently immutable facts of nature as the distribution of infectious diseases, access to minerals, and physical geography) to dominate the rest of the world (Diamond 1997) where people were so unsophisticated that they misused their natural resources to the point their (inferior) civilizations collapsed (Diamond 2005). Further, such an arrangement is said to represent a positive development of human progress built on self-interested rationalism (Harari 2014). This is, not to put too fine a point on it, anachronistic, propagandistic hogwash: a shampoo to cleanse the colonial pig.

Most archaeologists today would likely argue that the discipline has moved on from its colonial roots, and its scientific knowledge base sits on an assumed 'right side of history'. As a rule, practitioners in our discipline believe, or at least say, progressive things about climate change, women's rights, systemic racism and Indigenous issues. We sip lattes in the morning, and comfort ourselves with craft beers or a cup of tea in the evenings, secure in the knowledge that the arc of history bends towards justice and that, if we put smart and good people into positions of authority, they will solve the difficult problems for us. We fly to self-congratulatory symposia around the world to celebrate the latest discoveries or toast the completion of an influential career. Too many of us see our work as 'objective' or 'apolitical', factual and scientific accountings of what happened in the past that broker no reimagining of presents or futures (Black Trowel Collective *et al.* 2024). This complacency obscures a deep-seated conservatism that does a disservice to past, present and future (cf. Orser 2011).

The origin myths that archaeologists believe they have left behind regularly transform and evolve, with new language repackaging stale ideas. One example is the wrapping of colonialist narratives of the origins of civilization or 'progress' in a more neutral-sounding language of 'scientific' cultural universals, for example a dubious cognitive 'revolution' supposedly correlated with humanity's arrival in Europe (Mellars 1996). This claim has subsequently been made even more dubious by clear evidence that human behavioural 'complexity' was more geographically widespread at an earlier date than previously understood by eurocentric researchers (e.g. Aubert *et al.* 2018; Clarkson *et al.* 2017; Martinón-Torres *et al.* 2021).

The latest zombie narrative to rise up and run rampant in archaeological models is hiding behind the seemingly innocuous concept of 'inequality'. Power-flows in the present are manifestly unequal and often linked with patterns Western sensibilities

have deemed 'civilized', so we look to the past to determine how this situation arose and to describe familiar disparities in ancient societies. And yet, far from offering liberatory narratives that challenge our contemporary status quo, an archaeology of inequality limits the field because it causes us to ask blinkered questions whose answers lead to only a few possible results (Orser 2011). In this formulation, inequality in its contemporary form is retrojected into ancient societies, and consequently becomes inexorable and unavoidable. Cyclical and teleological modes of argumentation framed around evolutionary logic position it, like farming, states, or urbanism, as an inevitable developmental stage in the human past (Fried 1967; Johnson & Earle 2000). In an archaeology of inequality, the language and concepts of contemporary political economy—in short, capitalism, colonialism and their patterns of social relations—are projected inappropriately into a uniform past. Which is a shame, because a much more interesting archaeology exists to be built out of the radical archive of alternative human social arrangements that survived and flourished in the past (see Estes 2019; Gelderloos 2010; Graeber & Wengrow 2021; Jennings & Berquist 2022; Mbah & Igariwey 1997) and the present (e.g. Acebo 2021; Knapp *et al.* 2016).

Our proposal: For the past to disrupt the inequality of our present world, we must reorient towards *archaeologies of equality*.

Focusing on societies of equals does not mean essentializing, romanticizing, or primitiviszing past peoples. Nor does it mean ignoring unequal societies in the past or present. Rather, it requires us to develop critical understandings of lived realities that spanned radically equal as well as radically unequal experiences. It also requires acknowledging the difficulty and complexity of maintaining orderly social spaces in the absence of arbitrary or unjustified rulers, states, priests, or other institutional forms of entrenched hierarchy (see Black Trowel Collective 2016; Clastres 1989). We acknowledge long traditions of radical anthropological thought that often existed within the same nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology that produced the origin myths described above (Graeber 2004, 16–18), as well as the rich legacies of anarchist intellectualism that developed in parallel from outside academia (e.g. Kropotkin 1902; Parsons 2004). As anarchist archaeologists (see Black Trowel Collective 2016; Borck & Sanger 2017; Flexner & Gonzalez-Tennant 2019), we seek to integrate the best parts of both traditions in theory and praxis.

We are, of course, accustomed to hearing that an anarchist approach to understanding the past is biased, naive, subjective, or romantic. We ask: what could be more biased than the use of metrics that apply capitalist values to assess social patterns in pre-capitalist worlds (Basri & Lawrence 2020; Kohler & Smith 2018)? What could be more naïve than an archaeology that reproduces an internalized capitalist realism (Fisher 2009) over and over again? What could be more romantic than assuming the current forms of inequality and 'order' are natural and inevitable outcomes of evolution, or even the better version of ourselves, rather than just one contingent possibility among many (see Gould 1989)?

We propose a revolution that takes us from a resigned obsession with inequality to a narrative of the past that celebrates the articulation, perseverance, resilience and maintenance of forms of equality. Our archaeology explores the fluorescence of many forms of social order in the past to prefigure alternative trajectories for the present and future. Our archaeology does not valorise hierarchies as success stories, but explores their destructive nature, and raises up the status of the societies that resisted the pull towards inequality and the stories of those who actively fought against emperors and kings. Our anarchist archaeology is an archaeology of equality because we recognize that more egalitarian pasts are where we find the potential for a more equitable and inclusive future for all. Most of these are knowable only through oral histories and the archaeological record because of how textual histories are encoded and preserved (Scott 2009, 32–6).

To build a better future, we plant our feet in the unruly past and push.

Against inequality

> Your heart is a muscle the size of your fist. Keep loving. Keep fighting.
>> Quote from a hand-carved print by Dalia Shevin created as a reaction to the WTO protests

We reject out of hand the just-so stories of progress, complexity, inequality and selfishness that fill the lectures of most introductory archaeology courses and the chapters of most popular archaeology textbooks (to give just one example of many: Renfrew & Bahn 2016, 179–86). They offer a mythic narrative that human beings, because of their nature, went from wandering bands of equals, to tribes in which rivals earned rank and titles, to chiefdoms in which inherited power became entrenched, and ultimately states
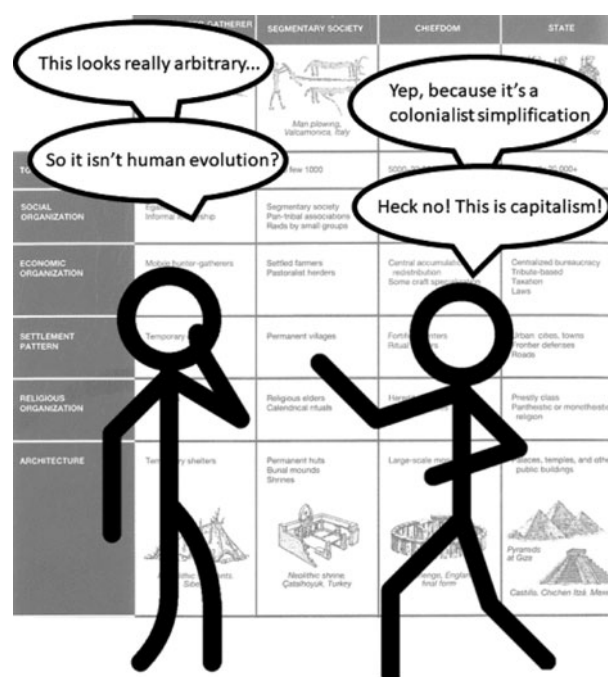
Figure 1. *Busting the Archaeology 101 myth linking social structure to evolutionary processes.*

and empires which represent the pinnacle of both hierarchical order and human achievement (Fig. 1). This myth persists in research that not only normalizes inequality, but makes its discovery inevitable. Some would argue that neo-evolutionism in archaeology has already been criticized and even rejected (e.g. Frieman 2021). However, recent years have seen attempts to model past inequalities quantitatively through, for example, the calculation of Gini coefficients for a diversity of past societies (see Kohler & Smith 2018). The Gini coefficient is a ratio that indicates levels of inequality by equating them with levels of wealth. In archaeological case studies, this often means assuming larger structures indicate increased household wealth and then comparing structures of different sizes, as if all past people and all modern people shared equivalent concepts of the value of domestic space (Basri & Lawrence 2020). Other researchers claim to see hierarchy deep in the Pleistocene based on behavioural-ecological models of early human society (Singh & Glowacki 2022). This approach assumes an evolutionary structure of behaviour in which fitness is measured at the level of the individual whose own selfishness and ability to thrive in a given social and ecological environment contributes to his (always his) success (Boone & Smith 1998). It imagines a world of disconnected, self-aggrandizing, rational actors of the sort who have only ever existed in economics textbooks

Figure 2. *The tympanum over the main entrance of the former Oriental Institute of Chicago (recently rebranded as the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures), created by Ulric Ellerhusen, represents the passing of writing from the East to the West, illustrating the* Ex Oriente Lux *idea. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bas_relief_(3664138229).jpg (accessed 1 March 2023).*

(Sahlins 2013) and justifies contemporary social values and psychological traits by positing their evolutionary fitness since the deep past (Bamforth 2002).

We say: this myth fails along a number of axes.

It disrespects many living Indigenous people, travellers, and egalitarian collectives and societies around the world, erasing them and their social conformations from history. It finds its origins in colonial narratives of eurocentric domination, designed to prop up hegemony rather than accurately reflect past reality. It fails to account for the complex diversity of the archaeological record, making it a woefully inadequate interpretative framework. It creates an overly linear (eurocentric and anachronistic) model of historic development by drawing a parsimonious line

from Mesopotamia, to Egypt, through Greece and Rome, to the 'great' nineteenth-century empires of Europe, the so-called *Ex Oriente Lux* (Fig. 2). This, then, enforces a historic imaginary that allows us to take the present global order as a pre-ordained outcome on the basis of some 'primary' phenomenon (say, geography, *per* Diamond 1997), while placing other cultures, particularly those of western Asia, as ones that have lost their way to 'progress'. It reproduces an insidiously ideological Christian narrative that says people, by our fallen nature, will always compete, take advantage of, and lord over each other given the opportunity, resorting to violence to do so when needed (see Graeber 2004, 88–92).

In reality, humans are interdependent, altruistic and deeply irrational social creatures who end up unrealistically constrained and mischaracterized by

534

these sorts of *a priori* assumptions. Moreover, rationalizing and universalizing current ways of life (or, more accurately, a narrow range of practices and outlooks espoused by a non-representative sample of the contemporary world) by identifying them as evolutionarily more or less fit, is both deeply ignorant of the mechanisms of evolution and laughably teleological (McKinnon 2005). Instead, we champion an archaeology that sees a lacework of possibilities emerging, transforming, interweaving and disappearing. And disappearance is key: if we cannot envision the end of a society, or at least its radical transformation, we cannot envision the end of our own or the creation of a better future for anyone. Archaeologists should know better, considering how many 'eternal' cities, 'great' rulers and 'universal' empires now lie in the dust.

Let us imagine our own dust, and something better growing in it.

The anarchist reorientation

> The past has given us too many bad answers for us not to see that the mistakes were in the questions themselves.   The Invisible Committee (2009)

Feminist archaeologists (e.g. Battle-Baptiste 2011; Crumley 1987; Frieman 2021), Indigenous archaeologists (e.g. Atalay 2012; Kawelu 2015; Montgomery 2020), queer archaeologists (Rutecki & Blackmore 2016; Voss 2008; Weismantel 2013) and many other radical archaeologists of various stripes (Dunnavant 2021; Flewellen *et al.* 2021; Kiddey 2017; Morgan 2019; Zorzin 2021) have left a trail of breadcrumbs for the rest of us to follow in creating an archaeology of equality. Here, we incorporate the wider world of anarchist thought—scholarly and popular, academic, and activist—to outline why an archaeology of equality is critical both to realign understandings of the past and to create narratives that challenge the contemporary order and imagine different futures.

Since its emergence as a social and political philosophy, critics have equated anarchism with the inevitable state of chaos that would result in the absence of established rulers. These Hobbesian nightmares bear little resemblance to genuine anarchist thought. Anarchism is not a monolithic perspective tied to a central authority or tenet (e.g. Milstein 2010; Samudzi & Anderson 2018). Its possibilities have been articulated by an incredible multitude of sometimes harmonizing, sometimes dissonant voices. In this plurality of experiences and voices lifted

up by anarchists from around the world and all walks of life, there are core aspects that are shared and can be described as the fundamentals of anarchism: direct action; mutual aid; self-organization; and equality (see Black Trowel Collective n.d.).

Anarchism first and foremost is a creative force, one that seeks to create a better future, one based on its core principles of collective care, equity, and freedom.

This article does not aim to provide an overview, manual, or how-to list to apply anarchist thought in archaeological research, as there are many existing treatments of this (e.g. Angelbeck & Grier 2012; Black Trowel Collective 2016; Borck & Sanger 2017; Flexner & Gonzalez-Tennant 2019; Lerma Guijarro 2017; Morgan 2015). Instead, we introduce the specific concern that anarchists have with anthropological and archaeological understandings of power and the focus on inequality.

Following Francis Dupuis-Déri, a state of anarchy is 'the lived experience of a social practice without leaders or hierarchy. [...] The usual way it is expressed is "order without power", meaning community based, collective organisation without [top down] power, authority, or coercion, and without rules of punishments' (Dupuis-Déri & Déri 2017, 16). Some anarchists, along with many anthropologists and archaeologists, mistakenly see egalitarianism as a natural starting point from which inequality emerges (e.g. Zerzan 1994). Wengrow and Graeber (2015; see also Graeber & Wengrow 2021) challenge this assumption, suggesting instead that the archaeological record preserves the traces of experimentation with, or seasonal cycling of, a variety of social systems, embedding various elements of egalitarianism and hierarchy. As the Black Trowel Collective notes (2016), 'Anarchists, and thus anarchist archaeologists, have long recognised that organisational complexity is not produced simply from elite control, but also forms through heterarchies and networked collaborations.'

Anarchists recognize the structures of oppression, subjugation and exclusion that exist now also existed in past societies and will remain in existence if left unchallenged. We recognize the wide variation in relationships that different groups have with hierarchy, especially when expressed through soft power and carefully circumscribed. Following the Kwapa anarchist Eepa (2020), 'it is possible to characterise positions of hierarchy within some Indigenous systems as hierarchies based on respect, not domination' (see also Fowles 2014). Moreover, hierarchies can exist within

535

limiting structures, again as Eepa (2020) explains: 'another position for leadership was only active during times of war. The kwinemi (war chief) was selected by all Kwapa people, men & women, at a general meeting. His selection was based on his oration, his dreams for how to accomplish the war.' Anarchists recognize the multiplicities of hierarchy, and in so doing, accept the multiplicity of anarchies that can exist.

Anarchism offers us intricate, sophisticated theories of power.

Early anarchist understandings saw power as inextricably linked with authority (e.g. Bakunin [1872] 1950). This belief underpins the misconception that, at some moment in the past, inequality emerged from a prior natural state of total egalitarianism (e.g. Zerzan 2012, 110–47). Many anarchists now see power as a resource that is distributed throughout society, something that is also recognized in many Indigenous knowledge systems (e.g. Tomlinson & Tengan 2016). The anarchist historian Alan Carter (1989) argued that history emerges from the tensions in the distribution of power and the tensions between cooperation and competition.

In an archaeology of equality, power is like a body of water. In one time and place, it may be a widely dispersed wetland; in another, a fast-flowing river through a desert, accessible to all, but local only to some; elsewhere, a deep, cool reservoir behind a dam in which one person frolics while the downstream swamplands and rivers go dry. We seek to understand all of these modalities of power, how the wetlands were created, maintained, and destroyed.

A past rich in consensus-building, collective action and opposition to the centralization of power is a past that offers hope for a more equal future. In the words of Élisée Reclus (1894), 'there were "acrates" before the anarchists, and the acrates had not yet imagined the name of their learned formation that countless generations would succeed. In all ages there have been free men, those contemptuous of the law, men living without any master. [...] But if anarchy is as old as humanity, those who represent it nevertheless bring something new to the world.'

Anarchism gives us a path, one of many, towards bell hooks' 'place of hope'.

Archaeologies of equality: prefigurative approaches

Structures that try to preserve the top at the expense of the foundation are not sustainable. All trees need roots, all roots need water. Without water, the roots die. Without roots, the tree falls. And a [new] forest grows where there was once only shade.

Black Trowel Collective (2021)

Archaeology has produced a 'chronopolitics' that has overemphasized and mis-recognized the importance of non-horizontally organized societies. This leads to an archaeological record that makes hierarchy the natural outcome and squashes alternatives, many of which are Indigenous and Black histories (Borck 2018a). This is unsurprising, given archaeology's origins as a leisure pursuit of the wealthy and educated, a pattern that has not entirely changed in academia despite decades of work to make the field 'more diverse' (e.g. Heath-Stout 2020).

A call to arms, then: It is not enough to simply be against. We must produce creative alternatives in the present.

Anarchist archaeologies prefigure the possibilities of an egalitarian future by emphasizing the proliferation of societies of equals in the past, as well as the often aberrant nature of hierarchies, the current capitalist and colonial order being one of the worst our species has created.

Here, we offer four brief vignettes focusing on equal pasts. Space limits us from offering extensive accounts of each case study (see instead Flexner *et al.* 2016; 2018; Frieman & Lewis 2022; Frieman *et al.* 2022; Borck 2018b; Borck & Clark 2023; Politopoulos 2020), but the goal is simply to demonstrate the potential of using archaeological, ethnographic and historical data to construct accounts of the past that counter the notion that inequality is somehow normal or inevitable. We describe an archaeology that does not valorize or respect kings, pyramids, or great empires (as current archaeology often implicitly does). Instead, we explore the possibilities of an archaeology that understands the importance of societies or social groups that value —and intentionally work towards—mutual aid, tolerance, community and generosity. We probe the edges of hierarchical societies to examine sites of resistance, and the ways that horizontal organization could be brought into being within unequal social spaces and polities.

It is towards this reorganization that we begin to construct an archaeology of equality alongside similar arguments (e.g. Becker & Juengst 2020; Hodder 2022; Paynter 1989; Sanger 2023). We build an archaeology of equality to demonstrate that other social orders are not only possible, but desirable and achievable across near and distant futures.

536

Our case studies in archaeologies of equality span both time and space, from centuries of tradition in the South Pacific to the margins of the Roman Empire, to the spaces of resistance in Southwestern North America, to the very centres of West Asian royal urbanism.

Vanuatu: chiefs against centralization
There have been many chiefs named Iarisi on the island of Tanna in southern Vanuatu. Archaeological evidence points to at least 400 years of communal feasting in the area around Iarisi's village. Local traditions indicate there would have been a Iarisi at each of these events (Flexner *et al.* 2016). As a *yani en dete* ('talking chief' or orator), Iarisi was responsible for maintaining balance and order. He made sure people worked in their gardens, as he himself worked. Magical specialists in the village would guarantee abundant harvests using the powered stones that encouraged production of root crops, fruits and vegetables. There was plenty of food even during periodic disasters such as volcanic eruptions or cyclones. When reef and mangrove systems needed to recover, Iarisi, like other chiefs of Tanna, could place a *tabu* on the marine environment to ensure its continued productivity (Flexner *et al.* 2018).

Iarisi was there to mediate disputes and maintain the peace. When war became unavoidable, the *yani* ensured it was brought to an end quickly. As a good chief, Iarisi would bring plentiful yam bundles and the largest pigs to give away at the *nieri* (annual pig exchange festival). He would select the most skilful dancers from among the villages for the annual *nekowiar* (dance festival). The women of the villages would use their magic to guarantee that their dancers would be the most beautiful, and dance the best. Each evening, Tannese male society dissolves itself and is reconstituted through the whispers of spirits and ancestors. A good chief brings the strongest kava to the *imwarim* (kava drinking ground) to ensure his friends and allies achieve a dizzying high followed by a peaceful slumber where they can receive ancestral wisdom (Bonnemaison 1994, 182; Brunton 1979).

Iarisi, of course, was but one chief among many. There was and is a proliferation of chiefly titles across Tanna. According to one mid twentieth-century survey, a chief could be found among every 11 Tannese (Guiart 1956, 9). Titles have to be earned, and authority only comes from action. The highest chiefly attributes are generosity and ability to forge consensus. Titles bestow power, but they are also a burden. Disruptive young men could be given titles that channel their energy into useful activities, such as managing relationships with outsiders. Hosting elaborate feasts can be a pathway to power or prestige, but feasts in Tanna are about maintaining abundance and balancing competition. All gardens produce surplus, all surplus produces pigs. Pigs and yams can be used to gain or maintain one of thousands of titles on the island (Flexner *et al.* 2018, 256–9). Titles can bring prestige, but there are so many of them that constant competition through feasting, games and occasionally warfare (which involves some amount of feasting and gamesmanship) makes it impossible for any singular paramount authority to emerge on the island (Spriggs 1986, 16–18).

The arrangement in Tanna is not unique in the island societies of Vanuatu. Chiefly systems of Vanuatu use complex grade-taking ceremonies to ensure that rank is earned rather than bestowed, while maintaining social balance and harmony (Earle & Spriggs 2015, 522–5, 529). Sometimes, these ceremonies took place among monumental spaces in stone, soil and vegetation, which are only partly visible in the archaeological record (Ballard 2023; Bedford 2019). Roi Mata, perhaps the most famous individual in Vanuatu's Indigenous history, is known primarily for his abdication and rearrangement of power accumulated during a chiefly lifetime. Upon his death, Roi Mata was buried with his main warriors, retainers and wives. Having accumulated great authority during life, Roi Mata literally buried his hierarchy with his body (there is evidence from the burials that not all were interred willingly: see Spriggs 1997, 209–11) in a ceremony that simultaneously dispersed his wealth and titles widely among the living, leaving no heirs and no paramount, and set up a stable heterarchy that has persisted for over 600 years (Ballard 2016; Garanger 1972).

Cornwall: communities against empire
How does a community resist the tsunami pull of empire? History tells us the Roman empire broke like a wave over the European hinterlands, smashing up settlements, reorganizing the landscape, shifting anything of value not tied down and mixing in muddy eddies with local ways of being, doing and believing. In Britain, at the far edge of this inundation, we see myriad changes in response to the Roman invasion and domination (Mattingly 2006): new infrastructure, like roads, walls and military installations; new material culture, including whole new suites of ceramics likely linked to new foods and dining practices; new types of settlement, including urban centres and hinterland estates called villas; and new social practices, from dress to funerary rite to ritual practice.

537

But in Cornwall, the far southwestern corner of southern Britain, there is no clear break with tradition following the Roman invasion. Shifts in pottery forms, house styles and landscape division in the first centuries of the first millennium CE make clear that neither culture nor technology were stagnant, but these changes demonstrate clear continuity with earlier practices and little obvious Roman intrusion into daily life (Borlase 2020). Prior to the late twentieth century, it could be hypothesized that perhaps Cornwall lay above the waterline of the Roman invasion. Finds of coins, roads, milestones and (notably) four Roman military forts disprove that guess (Thomas 2021).

The increasing abundance of Roman infrastructure and materials in Cornwall suggests an equivalent abundance of Roman people and Roman-derived (or Romano-British) practices. Yet, instead of the transformations seen elsewhere in Roman Britain, Cornish archaeologists have documented a landscape divided up by enclosed manor farms that predated the Roman occupation of Cornwall and continued for several centuries after the wave rolled back (Rose & Preston-Jones 1995). This pattern of settlement testifies to a complex but extremely stable network of power and practice, likely based on carefully maintained kin connections (Frieman & Lewis 2022).

With the Roman reorganization of Brittany and northwest France, longstanding cross-channel kin ties attenuated; and, as the Romans took control of the rich Cornish ore sources, local strategies for wealth accumulation shifted from copper to cattle (Frieman *et al.* 2022). Although elites seem to have been present in Cornwall prior to the Roman invasion, social power was dispersed through complex horizontal ties of kinship and obligation, a pattern that continues throughout the first millennium CE (Thomas 2021). Without a centralized elite to co-opt or convert and lacking the ability to infiltrate networks of power built around lineage, affiliation, marriage, access to land and shared grazing rights, Romans and their culture had few inlets into Cornish society. Meanwhile, local families ate some introduced foods, wore some new brooches, occasionally hammered Roman hobnails into the soles of their boots (Johnston *et al.* 1998–99), and the imperial wave receded, having caused only minimal disruption.

American Southwest: axiology against the state
No extensive and long-term state system ever solidified in the American Southwest, excepting potentially Chaco Canyon (e.g. Lekson 2018). There have been many attempts to explain this, particularly since states developed in other environmentally similar parts of the world (e.g. Yoffee 2001). Many

archaeologists characterize this as a paucity. For example, when movements towards states are shortened, they are often described as a failure, or a collapse (e.g. Scheffer *et al.* 2021). However, states are not inevitable and, as anarchist theories and Indigenous philosophies and oral histories remind us, they can be deliberately avoided by dismantling their early forms (e.g. Borck & Clark 2023; Estes 2019; Simpson 2017; Wilcox 2010). Through an archaeology of equality, the traditional interpretations of this as failure historically to produce states instead becomes the success of the American Southwest to avoid, even destroy, nascent states (see also Fowles 2010).

At the centre of these successful dissolutions of emerging state structures was probably a common concept that still exists in most Indigenous societies in the Southwest. The exact meaning and name varies from group to group. For the Apache it is *Ghózhó* (balance: e.g. Laluk 2021), for the various O'Odham it is *Himdag* (way of life: Martinez 2019), for the Tewa Pueblos it is *Wo-wa-tsi-tu-wa-ji* (seeking life: Naranjo & Swentzell 1989). While each is unique, all revolve around balance as a central tenet—a concern with making sure each individual and each community maintains their balance with each other, their neighbours (human and otherwise) and their environment.

These values of balance regularly end up at odds with societies where power centralized with a few individuals. In the American Southwest, sometimes immediately, but usually within a few generations, social movements against centralized power emerged, either as a singular large scale or as many small-scale ones (e.g. Russell *et al.* 2011; Wilcox 2009). Going back to Chaco Canyon, this construction of equality appears to have happened in a few different instances as communities responded to the centralized power system that grew within, and as a result of, the Chaco Phenomenon (e.g. Borck 2018b; Fowles 2010).

One of these resistances occurred to the east of Chaco Canyon. Groups of farmers, who are labelled the Gallina culture by archaeologists, moved to an uninhabited highlands region away from an expanding Chacoan system around 1100 CE (Borck & Simpson 2017). The similarity between Gallina houses and material culture, lack of elite goods, and architectural forms that reference houses from the distant past led to archaeologists interpreting the Gallina as people who 'developed only a rudimentary and belated form of Anasazi culture, little influenced by the achievements of their neighbors' (Green 1962, 154).

The axiology (i.e. the nature of one's values) of the researchers (*sensu* Wilson 2008), becomes clear

538

within those semantics. Growth, expansion, constant innovation, aggregation; these fundamental aspects of colonialism and capitalism are seen as positive values. Moves away from those, or prioritizing values like sustainability or creating accountable relationships, are assigned negative values and terms like collapse or postclassic (Borck & Clark 2023).

Chaco Canyon, the heartland of the Chaco Phenomenon, is considered sacred by many Indigenous groups in the Southwest because of their ancestors' achievements there, yet many also see it as a place where things went wrong. As Rina Swentzell (2004, 50), a philosopher and architectural historian from Santa Clara Pueblo, wrote about her first visit to the place that her community considers ancestral and sacred:

> It was clear that the purpose of these great villages was not to restate their oneness with the earth … They were not about the Pueblo belief in the capability of everyone, including children, to participate in daily activities … [T]he structures had been built by [those] who embraced a social-political-religious hierarchy and envisioned control and power over place, resources, and people.

Indigenous histories in the Southwest are complex, multi-vocal and non-linear. They are often infused with axiologies at odds with the capitalist-oriented colonialism that glorifies constant productivity, growth and competition. Running counter to the axiology of so many archaeologies of inequality, these histories are often effaced by Western scholars who have trouble seeing beyond their personal epistemologies and ingrained values. Contemporary Indigenous groups in the Southwest like the Tewa and the O'Odham are embodiments of thrivance (Acebo 2021) as their communities have flowered even in the face of ongoing genocide. Their very histories laid the foundation for those centuries of resistance. Yet, these histories are scraped off the page by academic acts of settler colonialism intent on rewriting and limiting the meaning of success and achievement: on stealing not just land, but pasts.

In the case of the Gallina, what was lost was a social movement, a revolution. The Gallina moved into their highland environments and reorganized their material structures and social systems in ways that intentionally built equitability. This was both local and regional. They focused on household autonomy by moving from centralized housing to dispersed communities while maintaining widespread relationships and accountability through large-scale commons-based agricultural systems and food distribution. Evidence of inequality within

and between households is limited, and most labour that in other societies would lead to surplus was instead poured into their massive terrace systems and their lovingly crafted single-family homes (Borck 2018b; Borck & Simpson 2017). Network analyses of non-local, curated (i.e. non-contemporary) ceramics also indicate that the Gallina 'decided to step out of a cultural and ideological trajectory diametrically opposed to their ideas on how life should be' (Borck 2018b, 111).

Assyria: workers against elites
Assyria and its capitals have long fascinated the western mind, sparking the imagination with their complex giant palaces, cryptic ziggurats and treasures of gold and ivory. And, of course, their kings. The city of Sennacherib, we say for Nineveh, the city of Sargon for Dur-Šarrukēn (it is named for him, after all!). But not even in the wildest imaginings can we see Sennacherib or Sargon laying down bricks and mortar under the scorching sun to build a wall in exchange for a bowl of grain. Rarely, in fact, does research consider those who actually built these cities, as they are often invisible in the archaeological horizon, and only sparsely mentioned in texts.

And yet they were legion. To construct the mudbrick wall of Dur-Šarrukēn alone, the estimated amount of required labour ranges between 3.8 and 5 million work-days, or anywhere between 1000 and 1500 individuals working every single day for 11 years (Politopoulos in press). The Assyrians have left us with records of people often collectively called the 'labour force' whose efforts (paid for in blood, sweat and bowls of grain) are quantified to estimate the productivity of empires (Politopoulos 2020, 141). But the people themselves, the harsh conditions they endured and the ways they adapted to and resisted these were almost immediately buried beneath the rubble of history and subsumed into the glory of their kings.

There are various forms of forced labour in Assyria, from Assyrian citizens completing their mandatory state duty (*iklu)* to the thousands of deportees, people displaced from their own land by war and conquest (Lorenzon & Wallis 2023). And while these people are often rendered invisible, we get some glimpses of resistance from texts. An example comes from a text talking about 125 workers who did not perform their daily tasks of carrying straw, which put a hold on the production of glazed bricks (Parpola 1995, 65). Such acts of everyday resistance illustrate that the 'labor force' was not an amorphous mass of passive individuals. To write an archaeology worthy of their efforts and oppression, we can reorient ourselves away from the kingly outputs to the builders' own

539
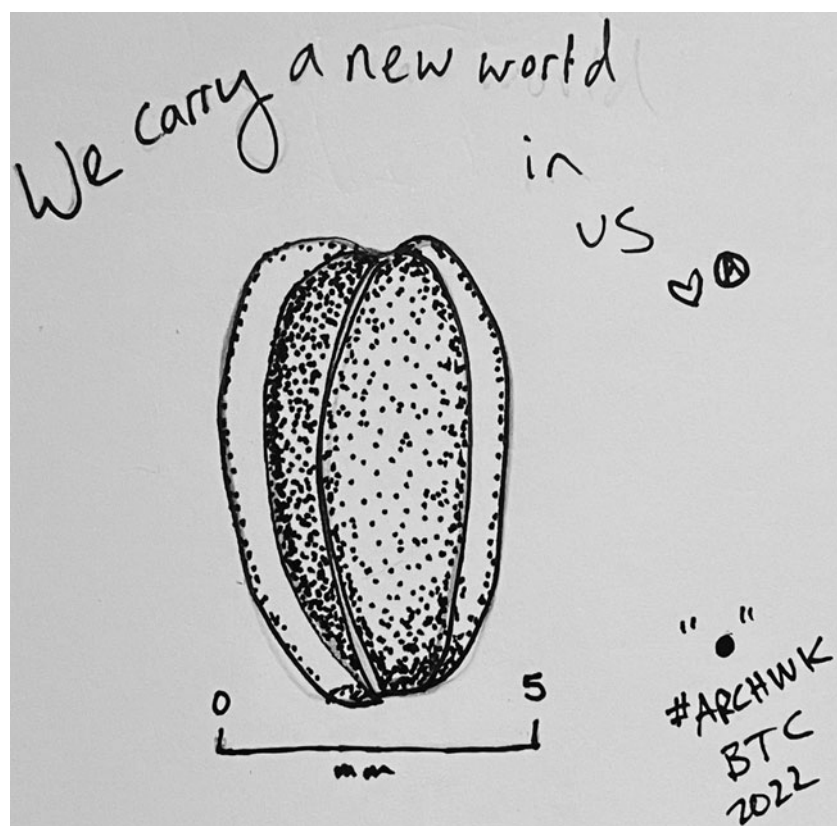
Figure 3. *'Seed' from Black Trowel Collective's 'Inktober' artworks. (By Colleen Morgan, reproduced with permission.)*

relationships of resistance, care, commitment and solidarity, forms of mutual aid that can emerge within lower strata of societies—what David Graeber (2011) called everyday communism.

So how would that look in the construction site of Dur-Šarrukēn? Admittedly one can only hypothesize. Actions of everyday care and solidarity, especially among the least powerful, tend to be materially ephemeral, and records mandated by kings rarely take note of them. But we can articulate a past that does not echo the soldier's whip crack in its drive to move history forward. Rather, we must focus on the helping hand of one worker to the other, the sharing of bread, the sharing of load, the solidarity in resistance and the commitment to making it to the next day. To date, we have been too distracted by the glory of kingship to remember the hands that laid down courses upon courses of bricks, mortar and reeds. But without them, no walls would stand to glorify those long-dead kings. At the end of the day, it was these thousands of workers that were on the ground, building cities up. The stories of the kings have been told for centuries; we should be telling the stories of the people.

Radical pasts for more equal futures

The past offers us fertile ground from which to cultivate the present towards a better future for human and non-human alike. But we must choose the seeds we plant with care so that our harvest is diverse, sustainable, beautiful and nutritious. This is what it means to prefigure.

Archaeologists, and anyone who works to bring the past into dialogue with the present, are well equipped to help humanity understand how structures that promote human equality and autonomy, or human oppression and misery, came to exist (Graeber & Wengrow 2021). We echo Graeber's (2004, 105) observation that 'we have tools at our fingertips that could be of enormous importance for human freedom. Let's start taking some responsibility for it.' Archaeological studies of inequality, exclusion and oppression have, for the most part, shirked this responsibility by naturalizing existing structures of power and authority, instead of focusing on the mechanisms that have built and could help build more equitable relations (e.g. Kohler *et al.* 2017).

Recognizing that our present modalities affect our interpretative framework (Gero 1985; Tuhiwai Smith

540

2021), we argue that archaeology is not and has never been just about the past: it speaks to our own world and shapes our future imaginaries (Black Trowel Collective *et al.* 2024). This is why contemporary authoritarians justify acts of domination and discrimination by anchoring them in the deep past. In this, they must be opposed. Applying the concepts, tools and methods that capitalists and colonizers have developed to quantify, classify, measure, track and increase inequality and then retrojecting them indiscriminately into the past is a fool's errand (Lippert 2006). Archaeologists are not just failing to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde 1984); we are using those tools to reinforce the foundations and build them a conservatory extension.

With this article we seek to germinate a range of approaches to equality and inequality that might blossom into a different future. We have laid out a garden of ideas into which we invite our colleagues to explore and experiment, to plant their own seeds (Fig. 3) and to decide which are the weeds and which the productive crop.

There is no question we are living in an age of cascading disasters, but we find hope in the myriad pasts, the invisible people, those who refuse to be invisible, and all of their struggles to resist domination and decimation. We, along with many others both inside and outside archaeology, tell their stories as part of our work towards a world that values and cares for people, non-humans and environments horizontally and via an ethos of care.

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544

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