

THE OLDEST CHECK ON POWER, IN ONE PAGE

Exit Is the Original Commons

Domination is harder to stabilize when the people subject to it keep a credible ability to leave. That is the oldest and most durable check on power in the human record — not a law, not a vote, but the standing option to walk.

Four bodies of work converge on the same point. Christopher Boehm found that the flattest human societies we can study stayed flat because the group actively suppressed anyone who tried to dominate — mockery, ostracism, and in the last resort, worse. James C. Scott found the mirror image: early states depended on concentrated, legible, taxable populations, and often built themselves around preventing that population's flight. David Graeber and David Wengrow named the freedom to move as one of three primordial freedoms visible in the deep record, alongside the freedom to disobey and the freedom to reorganize the group's own rules. And the economist Albert O. Hirschman gave the mechanism a name: exit can discipline power without first winning that power's agreement. Voice — resisting while staying — needs an organization and a listener, and both can be captured.

Enclosure, then, is at bottom what makes exit costly. Sedentary agriculture is history's most common cause of that — stored grain and cleared fields are sunk costs a forager's kit never carried — but it is not the only way exit gets closed. The Northwest Coast peoples of North America built ranked societies, hereditary chiefs, and, in some documented cases, chattel slavery without staple-crop agriculture: concentrated, defensible salmon runs did comparable work. Where exit becomes costly, hierarchy becomes easier to sustain, whichever way the cost gets imposed.

None of this makes leaving alone the whole answer. Elinor Ostrom's work on durable commons shows how voice and self-government — monitoring, low-cost dispute resolution, the right to organize — can be institutionally protected once the physical door out is mostly gone.

The pattern repeats now. Compute — the infrastructural substrate beneath the machines that think — is being enclosed this decade by a very small number of firms and people, the newest strategic bottleneck, as land and capital were before it. Whether logging off is a real exit or just a safety valve that lets the enclosure tighten everywhere else for everyone who remains is not yet settled — which is exactly why it's worth asking before the question gets decided for us.

**“The oldest check on power was never a law.
It was the standing option to walk.”**

THE ARGUMENT, IN THREE WORDS

A One-Page Glossary

EXIT — withdrawing from a deteriorating arrangement. Needs no permission and no organizing to attempt — though what it costs, and who can afford it, varies enormously.

VOICE — trying to change an objectionable condition while staying inside it, alone or together. Needs an organization or a listener, and either can be captured.

RECONSTITUTION — the ability to create or transform the social arrangements themselves, not just resist or leave them. (Not Hirschman's own term — this book's label for a freedom David Graeber and David Wengrow name separately.)

Exit is not a clean hero. It can drain a coalition of exactly the people most willing to resist, leaving the rest easier to rule. "People can leave" does not by itself predict which way power moves — which is why voice and reconstitution still have to do real work once exit is costly.

READ THE FULL ARGUMENT

Chapter One: the wave, not the stain

theleveling.org/essays/the-stain

Where the book tries to kill its own argument

theleveling.org/cold-shower

Who's writing this, and why

theleveling.org/about

FURTHER READING

Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest* (1999)

James Woodburn, "Egalitarian Societies" (1982)

James C. Scott, *Against the Grain* (2017)

Graeber & Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021)

Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970)

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (1990)

A TEST CASE: HIERARCHY WITHOUT AGRICULTURE

The Northwest Coast peoples of North America built ranked societies, hereditary chiefs, and — in some documented cases — chattel slavery without staple-crop agriculture. Control of concentrated, defensible salmon runs could constrain exit much as control of a granary did. Agriculture is history's most common route to closing that door. It is not the only one.



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