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The poststructural anarchist

Todd May

July 12, 2013, interview

Todd May is the poststructuralist anarchist who thinks anarchism is more than just a critique of the state, that there is more than one struggle, that Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard are important, that poststructuralism is elusive, that anarchism is bottom-up and liberalism is top-down, that 'how might one live?' is the down and dirty question, that Foucault's thought will remain standing when the dust is settled, that what it means to be human is a matter of practices, that Ranciere gets him emotionally, that friendship offers a different model from neo-liberalism and that his conception is about resistance not cohesion. High Five!

3:AM: What made you become a philosopher? Were you always aware of a kind of crisis?

Todd May: Many philosophers I talk with seem to get their start in philosophy from a teacher, often a college professor, that turns them on to the subject. For me, it was different. I went to a high school in New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s, where ideas and crisis were in the air. It was the kind of place where Melville, Faulkner, and Dostoyevsky, along with the Vietnam War, were regular staples of conversation. So early on I became interested in both ideas and political resistance. In college I studied psy-

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chology, but was never far from philosophy: I read *Being and Time* with a philosophy grad student. Another friend of mine, also a grad student in philosophy, gave me Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as a graduation present. In the few years I took off between college and grad school, I read most of Merleau-Ponty's work. Eventually I decided I wanted to go to grad school in clinical psychology, but wanted a phenomenologically oriented one, and so chose Duquesne University. But, as it happens, at the end of my first year there I was introduced to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, who raised unsettling questions for me about the entire project of psychotherapy. I pressed these questions in my classes at Duquesne, admittedly with the passion of which a person committed to ideas is capable, and at the end of my second year was informed that my funding was going to be cut off. So I spent a few more years reading and thinking about what is often called "post-structuralism," and finally applied to Penn State, where I had the chance to study these thinkers more rigorously. A friend of mine who is a radical lawyer once asked me why I wanted to study philosophy if I was so interested in politics. My response, to which he offered me a mocking stare, was that I felt somehow that in order to understand and solve political problems I needed to be able to grasp their ontological underpinnings.

3:AM: You've written about and are associated with 'poststructuralist anarchism.' I think you see it as coming out of an awareness that political philosophy was in crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union which kind of made it official that Marxism was dead. Can you say something about how you understand this crisis give that for many – and yourself – the Soviet block was hardly a viable model for political change?

TM: For most traditional anarchists like Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman, the Soviet Union was a crisis almost from the beginning. They saw it as hierarchical in character, and in that way a continuation of the kinds of domination characteristic of capitalist society. In fact, earlier on, in his dispute with Marx, Mikhail

Bakunin predicted that a Marxist takeover of the state would simply reproduce the hierarchical structure of social and political relations. As *The Who* said, “Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss.” This is where anarchism becomes associated with a critique of the state. My own reading of anarchism is, however, that it is much more than a critique of the state. It is a critique of domination in all its forms—political, economic, gender, racial, etc. So while the anarchists were certainly right about the Soviet Union, we should read their work as a more general critique of domination. Granted, this general critique is at times in the background of their work, but it is nevertheless recognizable. In this way, they differ importantly from Marx. For Marx, there is an Archimedean point of social change since there is a central point of domination: the extraction of surplus value from the workers. Therefore, there is really only a single struggle: the struggle for the ownership of means of production.

By contrast, for the anarchists there is no single struggle. As the British anarchist Colin Ward once said, there are always a series of struggles along a variety of fronts. This is where the poststructuralists, and especially Foucault, intersect with anarchism. Foucault traces historically different ways in which people become dominated. He does not reduce them to a single site or single type, but seeks to understand them in their specificity. The disciplinary power he writes about in *Discipline and Punish* is different from the role of sexuality he describes in the first volume of his history of sexuality, which in turn is different from the neoliberal governmentality he addresses in his lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*. So while the nineteenth and early twentieth century anarchists were able to resist the reductionism of a Marxist program, later thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard offer perspectives for theorizing the irreducibility of political relations and political struggle. That allows them to, among other things, take on board the feminist and anti-racist understandings that developed over the course of the twentieth century.

Where does that leave us in thinking about our politics? Broadly with a bottom-up view of political struggle and change. Rather than seeking the Archimedean point of struggle, we must analyze the different and intersecting facets of domination in their particularity, and struggle against them. This does not preclude top-down theorizing altogether, but it offers a framework for political reflection and action that has been neglected in much of political philosophy.

3:AM: So poststructuralist anarchism is to be understood as being framed by French poststructuralist and in particular the works of Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard. Before coming to this trio and how they seem to offer a viable political philosophy and an alternative to Marxism can you tell us what you understand by ‘post structuralism’ and by ‘anarchism’ in this context?

TM: Poststructuralism is an elusive term. It is a bit chronological, like post-impressionism, and a bit conceptual. As chronological, it refers to the theories that arose in the wake of the heyday of structuralism. We might think of recent French philosophical history in terms of three successive movements, at least up until around the mid-1980s. There is the existentialism of the forties and fifties, which is rejected by the structuralism of the late 1950s and 1960s. And then, later in the 1960s, poststructuralism arises in part as a response to structuralism but not as dismissive of it as structuralism is of existentialism. This chronological view is a bit oversimplified. For instance, the structuralist Lacan was writing well before the 1950s, and Deleuze’s influential book on Nietzsche was published in 1962. But if we think of the prominence of the movements, this chronology offers a rough idea. Conceptually, structuralism rejects the primacy of the subject in existentialism, seeing the subject as constituted more than constituting. But for the structuralists, what constitutes the subject is more or less monolithic. For Lacan, it is the unconscious, for Levi-Strauss the structures of kinship, and for Althusser, at least in the last instance, it is the economy. Poststructuralism rejects these monolithic accounts of the structuring of the

specific people. Near the end of my book, I suggest that such friendships, in addition to providing an alternative social space to neoliberal relationships, also might provide training in the trust required of solidarity movements. Moreover, I cite as an element of that trust Ranciere's conception of the presupposition of equality between people. There is where, I think, my views might intersect with hers, although they remain on different registers. Schwarzenbach's view is tailor made for public cohesion. When reading it, I was reminded of some of the social attitudes characteristic of Denmark, where I teach for a couple of weeks every year. The relation of my own view to public cohesion is not as direct. Partly this is because the kinds of friendships I focus on can be exclusivist as well as providing tools for solidarity. And partly it is because my own concern is with movements of resistance, not with general social cohesion.

3:AM: And finally, are there five books you could recommend that would take us further into this set of ideas?

TM: Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (a bear to read, but enormously influential), Lyotard's *The Differend*, and Ranciere's *Disagreement*.

subject. For Foucault, the subject is a product of the intersection of particular practices of knowledge and power. For Deleuze, whatever actuality the subject presents carries within it a virtual field of difference that can make it very much other than it is now. Lyotard, in his turn, takes up themes in both Foucault and Deleuze during different points in his career, but in his major work *The Differend* offers a view of the subject as both constituted and constituting through a variety of different discursive practices. I haven't mentioned Derrida here, who is often thought of as the central poststructuralist. However, even though he does not figure in my poststructuralist anarchism, he can also be seen as a figure who sees the subject as partially constituted by something that lies outside of it and that cannot be brought into conceptual presence, like Deleuze. Although his view of what it is that does the constituting is diverges from Deleuze's.

As for anarchism, it is the historical movement that, theoretically at least, is rooted in the work of William Godwin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, articulated most clearly in the work of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, and others. It is often, as I said, associated with an anti-statist position, but in my view is better defined as a commitment to two positions: a critique of domination in all its forms and an embrace of bottom-up organizing and resistance. Viewing things this way leaves aside another strain of anarchist thought—the individualist anarchism associated with Benjamin Tucker and Max Stirner, and whose modern proponents are libertarians like Robert Nozick. However, the term anarchism is commonly thought to apply to the former more than the latter.

3:AM: Lyotard writes about the postmodern' rather than the poststructuralist condition. Is this a distinction that matters?

TM: I have never liked the term postmodernism. If poststructuralism is a difficult term to define, then trying to capture postmodernism is like trying to stabilize mercury with your thumb. My understanding is that it was coined around 1979 by Christopher Jencks in regard to architecture. In the arts, it is often seen

as a view that there is nothing new to be done, so art must recycle old themes and styles, often although not always in an ironic style. And one can see this in certain artists, like David Salle and Julian Schnabel. People claim this label for David Foster Wallace as well, but if the ironic recycling of old themes and styles is characteristic of literature, then why isn't Joyce a postmodernist? Moreover, I don't see any domination of what is called postmodern literature in the 1980s similar to what happened in painting or perhaps in architecture at that time. In philosophy, outside of Lyotard's work, it is practically nonexistent. For Lyotard, postmodernism was largely what he called the rejection of grand narratives, single overarching stories that explain, say, who we are and how we got here. As a definition of postmodernism, it has resonances with my definition of poststructuralism. However, even here there are complications. For Foucault, for instance, what might be called micropolitics is a way of analyzing our historical situation, whereas for Lyotard it sometimes seems like an alternative political position to be embraced. That is, while for Foucault the move to micropolitics is analytical, for Lyotard it sometimes comes off as normative.

3:AM: What are the advantages of this approach to say Rawlsian 'difference principle' approaches to political theory, or Nozick's or, say, the Critical Theorists of Adorno, Lukacs, and Habermas?

TM: The anarchist angle of approach is quite different from that of liberal theory on the one hand and Critical Theory on the other. At a first go, we might say that if anarchism is a bottom-up approach, liberalism is top-down. That is to say, liberalism starts with a set of principles (different principles for different theorists) that focus on the state, where anarchism starts with the people in the polity and asks what kind of social relations ought to obtain between and among them. This distinction isn't entirely clean, however. It seems to me that both Rawls and anarchists share some important moral principles about how people should be treated—or if sharing is too strong, then at least there is some important overlap. Rawls, like most liberals, then tries to conceive a state that

TM: The friendship book is certainly indebted to the ideas of Foucault and Ranciere, but it is more focused specifically on the problem of what neoliberalism makes of us and what we can do about it. In his set of lectures entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault notes that American neoliberalism is not just an economic theory, but a view of what human beings are like: entrepreneurs of themselves, human capital that invests itself to various ends. The decline of the welfare state has contributed to our being such entrepreneurs. After all, if you're not going to get any support in case you falter in your life, then you had better invest whatever resources you have—money, talent, charm, good looks—in the most efficient way possible. My argument in the book is that close friendship can offer us a different model for being together from the one neoliberalism promotes, which sees our relations to others as investments in future gain. In a close friendship, for instance, people don't worry so much about who has done what for whom and when. There isn't a balance sheet being kept between the friends. In fact, if a balance sheet does emerge, that usually means there is a problem in the friendship. In addition to providing an alternative model for human relationships, close friendships can teach some of the skills that solidarity work requires, like trust. This does not mean that everyone in a solidarity movement can become good friends. They can't. But friendship teaches us ways of relating to one another that the individualizing and isolating influences of neoliberalism diminish or at times even extinguish.

3:AM: Sibyl Schwarzenbach also sees friendship's political dimension although she is not coming from your tradition. Do you see overlaps as well as contrasts between the positions regarding friendship?

TM: I am familiar with her idea only through the 3 a.m. interview you did with her. Her concept is an interesting one; it is aligned with the concept of solidarity in some ways, but, as she points out, does not have some of the masculinist or exclusivist baggage. My focus is much more on the close friendships that develop between

movements operate, whether consciously or not, on the presupposition of the equality of everyone. When I first read his political work, I was struck by two things. The first was theoretical: his ideas offer a normative framework within which to see the critical work of Foucault and others. In addition, it was consonant with the anarchist orientation of my own political thought.

The second thing I was struck by, and this elicited a more emotional reaction, is that he seems to capture the sense of the political movements I have been involved in when they are at their best. The anti-apartheid movement, the Palestinian and gay rights movements, are most exciting when they are not just demanding equality, but presupposing it in their collective action. That is the idea I try to capture in my book on Ranciere and the political movements you mention. It also provides a basis for thinking about non-violence in political action, a project I am beginning to work on now.

3:AM: Inequality has never been quite so stark and obvious to so many as it is now. And it seems obvious that that issue seems to require a political solution. So many will be surprised to find that in Ranciere he links his political thinking with an art theory? How plausible do you find this element of his ideas? Is he asking to look in unlikely places to find that democracy and equality can work?

TM: Actually, the relation between his political views and his aesthetic ones is tricky. Both speak about equality, but in different ways. For Ranciere, politics is collective action under the presupposition of equality. In aesthetics, equality arises in more modern artwork, for example in Flaubert's treatment of all subjects as worthy of literary address. Ranciere says that the two overlap, but there is no coincidence between political and aesthetic equality. Art does not exist to serve the political movement of equality.

3:AM: Your book *'Friendship In An Age Of Economic Economics'* comes out of the poststructuralist anarchist tradition we've talking about. It's subtitled: 'resisting the forces of neoliberalism.' So how do you approach friendship so that it can do that?

can meet the demands of those principles. Anarchists are leery of the focus on the state. They are concerned that the state, being an important site of power relationships, is not the proper focus for enacting those principles. So they turn to the people themselves, asking how people can organize themselves into a just polity.

For my own part, I think that liberalism, especially in the hands of people like Rawls and Sen, is often correct at the level of moral principle but often naive about power. This naivete happens at two levels. First, they fail to recognize many of the power games that occur at the level of the state and that preclude meeting the moral principles that they set out. In fact, if you look at many movements for justice, it is often at the level of the people that they begin: the state often does not create justice but responds to demands for justice from its people. Second, they do not recognize what seems to me a central insight of Foucault's work: that power often works not by restriction but by production. That is, power helps produce who we are. So, for instance, one of the reasons people conform to and even endorse unjust social arrangements is that they have been inculcated into practices of normality that make these social arrangements seem natural. (That is a one-sentence and entirely superficial summary of *Discipline and Punish*.) This is not to say that there's a conspiracy involved. Rather, it is to say that power often operates at the level of our daily practices, making us who we are. If this is right, then political resistance also has to focus on those practices, that is, it has to be bottom-up.

That said, unlike many anarchists, I do not oppose the state in principle. I think it is less effective in creating change than liberal theory would allow, but there does seem to me an important place for thinking about the justice of the state. So while there are advantages to the anarchist—or poststructuralist anarchist—approach to political thought, I do not believe that it is a substitute for liberalism.

As far as Critical Theory goes (and let's keep in mind that the recent work of Habermas is probably more liberal than Critical The-

oretical), it has much insight to offer. However, that insight is embedded in a largely Marxist perspective that shares the difficulties of being a single explainer theory of the kind poststructuralism rejects. So the advantage of anarchism to Critical Theory lies in its ability to take on board the insights the latter offers while not reducing political thought to the Marxist framework.

3:AM: You read Deleuze through the lens of a single giant question: How might one live? I think you see this as a question that has replaced the modern ethical question of how should one act, which in turn replaced the ancient question of how should one live? Can you say why Deleuze's question is a better one than the ancient or modern questions?

TM: The distinction into three questions is one down and dirty way of trying to see what Deleuze is getting at. The question of how might one live is a Nietzschean question. When he criticized the moral question of how one should act, he did so in the name of the creativity of different lives. Deleuze is thinking in very much the same terms. He wants to know what possible new and different lives might be lived. In this sense, I think that by replacing the modern question with the Nietzschean one, he opens the possibility of thinking and living differently. Of course, in order to see how that possibility worked, one would need to study his ontology of difference, which is a much larger question.

However I do want to distinguish my own views from Deleuze's here. For Deleuze, as for many contemporary Continental thinkers who follow his and Foucault's work, the modern question of how one should act needs to be jettisoned. As Deleuze would put it, we need to abandon morality in favor of ethics, where ethics is defined in Nietzschean and Spinozist terms. I think this view is mistaken. While the question of how one might live is certainly worth reflecting on, and Deleuze provides an interesting framework for doing so, it cannot replace the modern question. After all, not all creations are worthwhile ones. Certain creations commended by Nietzsche, for example, particularly the more martial ones, strike me as re-

TM: The book *Our Practices, Ourselves* was a project of writing for a wider audience without losing philosophical rigor. In that book I argue that who each of us is as a human being is largely a product of the practices one engages in. I define a practice as a regularity or set of regularities of behavior, usually goal-directed, that is socially normatively governed. It seems to me that in thinking about who we are, instead of looking for some core "me-ness" inside of us, we should instead look at the practices we participate in and the ways we participate in those practices. From what I've said so far about anarchism and French thought, this way of seeing things should not be surprising. The subtitle of the book—what it means to be human—does not point at the attempt to distinguish humans from other animals, but rather suggests that who we are as human beings is dominantly a matter of our participation in practices. In the book I try to show how knowledge arises from within practices, how it can intersect with power as Foucault suggests, and how we can situate a lot of our normative thought within practices.

3:AM: You recently turned your attention to the thought of Jacques Ranciere and the idea of equality in action in relation to some contemporary political movements such as Montreals Sans-Status Algerian refugee movement, the first Palestinian Intifada and the Zapatistas. So can you say something about what you find important in Ranciere? Is it his focus on equality that you see as promising reinvigoration of democratic arrangements, supplanting things such as identity, meritocracy and the market, for example?

TM: That is exactly it. One of the frustrating aspects of Foucault's work is that he never puts his normative cards on the table. I think this is because he did not want to prescribe for others. But the idea that, as an intellectual, he shouldn't engage in such prescription is itself a normative stand. Moreover, books like *Discipline and Punish* have a strong critical bent, even though the normative bases of the criticism are not laid out. What Ranciere brings to political discussion is a particular normative orientation: that democratic

tion. This allows a renewed thinking of anarchism, one that both intersects with and develops the anarchist themes of thinking of power as multifaceted and needing to confront domination from the ground up. Foucault's rejection of phenomenology, which to my mind is a bit too cavalier—especially in the case of Merleau-Ponty—is complicated in its inspiration. For one thing, like Deleuze, he believed that we needed to look at how the perceiving subject is constituted rather than constituting. For another thing, much of the French generation of his time associated phenomenology with Sartre, and associated Sartre with the idea of a master thinker that dictated to others where their interests lie. Since Foucault rejects the role of intellectual as master thinker, and so rejects Sartre, it is unsurprising that he would take a jaundiced view of phenomenology.

On the other hand, the rejection of German idealism, especially Hegel, is, I think, partly a result of a reductionist view of Hegel's thought. The more simply one understands the workings of the dialectic, the more constraining Hegel's thought seems to be. I think that in the background of the rejection of Hegel is an interpretation of his thought that would probably itself be disallowed by top Hegel scholars like Robert Pippin. There is probably also a sociological element to the rejection of both phenomenology and Hegel. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on the one hand and the great Hegelian Jean Hyppolite on the other were the teachers under whom Foucault's generation studied. And there is a tradition in recent French philosophy of having to move beyond the previous generation. I once described French philosophy as instantiating Woody Allen's description, in *Annie Hall*, of relationships being like sharks: they have to keep moving forward or they die. That seems to be a going theme of French thought over the last sixty or seventy years.

3:AM: You've written about our practices, our selves and what it means to be human which seems to draw on many of the ideas you've discussed so far. So how should we go about answering the question: What does it mean to be human?

pellent. Alongside the need to create, then, is the parallel need to assess our creations. And for that, the question of how one should act remains relevant.

This may be a bit of an aside, but I have found over the years that many of the claims of overthrowing the philosophical tradition that get made in Continental thought are overblown. When one begins digging into the claims of many recent French thinkers, one is often brought back to traditional philosophical questions. To be sure, this can happen in new and interesting ways. But the old questions don't go away so quickly.

3:AM: How does Deleuze answer the question? Is it to be constantly unsettled? Is this anarchism? And is this best seen as a continuation of ideas found in Spinoza, Bergson and Nietzsche?

TM: Deleuze's answer to this question, in a word, is "experiment." This answer is rooted in his ontology, and Deleuze is above all an ontologist. It is impossible to give an overview of his ontological view in the short context of an interview, but at the risk of being at once obscure and oversimplifying, let me say this. He believes that the actual identities that we encounter carry within them a field of difference that allows them to be very different from what they are. The scientist Ilya Prigogine, a fan of Deleuze's ontology, offers an illustrative example. There are certain gasses that exhibit an unusual behavior in conditions that are far from equilibrium. Imagine, he says, a container with a barrier in the middle. The barrier has a single small hole. Now imagine pouring a blue gas into one side of the container and a red gas into the other. Over time, one might expect that both sides would look more or less purple. But in conditions far from equilibrium, some gasses do something else. At regular intervals, each side will switch from blue to red, and then back again. It's as though the gas molecules know what the other molecules are going to do, and they all coordinate behavior. Of course, the molecules aren't conscious. In Deleuze's terms, there is a field of difference that actualizes itself under certain physical conditions.

How might one live, then, in Deleuze's view? We don't know what lives we are capable of. So a life ought to be an experiment, or a set of experiments, in living. We investigate what is possible, what we can become. This investigation is not limited to anything individualistic. In fact, Deleuze's ontology is not an individualistic one. Experiments can happen at the individual, group, and even subindividual level.

All of this is not, in itself, anarchism in the political sense. However, it does refuse an arche of the human, a constrained view of human flourishing that the state would then seek to maintain or enforce.

As for the three thinkers you mention near the end, Deleuze borrows from all of them. From Spinoza he borrows a monism (difference is not transcendent to identity, but within it); from Bergson he borrows a rich conception of the past and *durée*, and from Nietzsche he borrows several elements, including the distinction between active (experimenting) and reactive (seeking to stop others from experimenting).

3:AM: Can you say how Levinas, Derrida, Lyotard and Nancy contribute to our understanding of Deleuze and poststructuralist anarchism?

TM: Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy don't contribute to our understanding of either, particularly of Deleuze. I mentioned above that Derrida and Deleuze have very distinct approaches to difference. For Derrida, difference is an economic relation between presence and absence that refuses to be captured by our perceptual experience or conceptual categories. Nancy works with a similar, although not identical, approach. Derrida winds up in an ethical position very close to Levinas, where one must be vulnerable to the other that one cannot assimilate to one's own categories. He applies this in particular, although not exclusively, to the situation of immigrants in Europe. We might say that the ethics of Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy, is an ethics of vulnerability.

By contrast, Deleuze's ethics of one of experimentation, or, to use another term loosely, an ethics of expression. It is not, of course, commending expression of any pre-given identity. But it does commend investigating what one is capable of rather than making oneself vulnerable to the other. In this way, it is Nietzschean in inspiration. It is not, to be sure, an ethics of invulnerability. To experiment is, in an important way, to render oneself vulnerable. But it is to render oneself vulnerable to the experiment itself, not necessarily to others. This is why Deleuze's models for experimentation are often artists.

3:AM: Foucault you see as working 'between genealogy and epistemology and asking the shadowy Kantian question : What is our present? Is it again because Foucault is asking a question that sits more easily with Deleuze's one about how should live than how we should act that you find him important? Can you say something about Foucault approaches his question and why this connects with the post structuralist anarchist tradition and not, say, a phenomenological approach, or German Idealism?

TM: Foucault, I believe, is the most important of his generation of French thinkers. When the dust settles on the French philosophical movements of the 1970s and 1980s, it is his thought that will remain standing. When I look back at my book on poststructuralist anarchism, I see the influence of his thought more than that of Deleuze or Lyotard. In utilizing Nietzsche's genealogical method—but with a lot more care to the facts of history—Foucault shows how to understand the way power works on the ground, in everyday lives. In introducing the idea that power doesn't just repress, it produces, he helps us understand how we can become complicit in the things that oppress us in ways that are beyond just being misled or having false beliefs. And in seeing the intersection between knowledge and power, he opens the door to new types of reflection on the ways in which we seek to know ourselves. Among the effects of all this is to loosen the Marxist grip on leftist thought, a grip whose effects were a reductionist view of power and domina-