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On Anarchy Today

Giorgio Agamben

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If, among those who think about politics, anarchy has never ceased to be relevant, given that it constitutes its extreme focal or vanishing point, it is so additionally today given the unjust and vicious persecution to which an anarchist is being subjected by the Italian prison system. However, to speak of anarchy, as one has had to do, on the plane of law necessarily implies a paradox, for it is contradictory (to say the least) to demand that the state recognize the right to deny the state, just as, if the right of resistance were to be carried to its ultimate conclusions, one cannot reasonably demand that the possibility of civil war be legally protected.

To think about anarchy today, it is therefore advisable that we situate ourselves within a completely different perspective, and instead question the way Engels conceived of it when he reproached anarchists for wanting to substitute administration for the state. In this accusation lies a decisive political problem, one that neither Marxists nor perhaps the anarchists themselves have posed correctly. A problem all the more urgent given that we are confronted today by an attempt to realize, in a parodic fashion, what was for Engels the avowed aim of anarchy — namely, not so much the simple substitution of admin-

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istration for the state, but rather the identification of state and administration in a type of Leviathan that assumes the good-natured mask of the administrator. This is what Sunstein and Vermeule theorize in their book *Law and Leviathan, Redeeming the Administrative State*, wherein governance, the exercise of government, exceeding and contaminating the traditional powers (legislative, executive, judicial), now exercises — in the name of administration, and in a discretionary manner — the functions and powers that once belonged to them.

What is administration? A *minister*, from which the term is derived, is a servant or helper, as opposed to *magister*, the master, the holder of power. The word comes from the root **men*, which means diminution and smallness. The *minister* stands to the *magister* as *minus* stands to *magis*, the less to the more, the small to the great, that which diminishes to that which increases. The idea of anarchy would consist, at least according to Engels, in the attempt to think of a *minister* without a *magister*, a servant without a master. Certainly an interesting attempt, since it can be tactically advantageous to play the servant against the master, the less against the more, and to think of a society in which all are ministers and none a *magister* or leader. In a sense, this is what Hegel had done, showing in his infamous dialectic that the servant ultimately ends up dominating the master. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the two key figures of Western politics remain in this way linked to each other in a perpetual relation, one which it is impossible to ever come to terms with once and for all.

In order for a radical idea of anarchy to release itself from the incessant dialectic of servant and slave, *minister* and *magister*, it can only situate itself resolutely in the gap that divides them. The *tertium* that appears in this gap will no longer be administration nor state, neither *minus* nor *magis*: it will rather stand between them as a remainder, expressing the impossibility of their coincidence. Anarchy, therefore, is first and foremost the radical disavowal not so much of the state or simply

of administration but rather of power's claim to make the state and administration coincide in the government of men. It is against this claim that the anarchist fights, in the name ultimately of the ungovernable, which is the vanishing point of all community among men.