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Anarchism & Poststructuralism

A review of Todd May's "The Political Philosophy
of Post-Structuralist Anarchism."

John Moore

1994

The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism

Todd May, University Park, Pennsylvania:

Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Any discussion of the interface between anarchism and poststructuralism is likely to be written from one side of the fence or the other, and this will inevitably affect the nature of the analysis undertaken. This text is written from the post-structuralist side, and as a result one must carefully scrutinise the author's grounding in anarchism. The book's bibliography provides a useful indicator in this respect. The anarchist titles listed comprise two books by Bakunin, three by Kropotkin, one by Proudhon, one by Bookchin, one by Ward, *Reinventing Anarchy*, *The Anarchist Reader*, and the standard overviews by Woodcock and Joll. The most notable aspect of this list is its omissions.

Elsewhere I have argued that anarchist history, on the model of feminist history, can be assigned a two phase periodi-

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Second Wave Anarchy Zine.

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sation. Just like first-wave feminism, anarchism has an early phase, conveniently labelled as classical anarchism. From its intellectual origins in Godwin and Proudhon, classical anarchism developed into its mature form during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, finding its climactic expression (but also its swansong) in the Spanish Revolution.

This is the phase of anarchism which Woodcock pronounced dead in the mid-1950s in the first edition of *Anarchism*.

But unbeknownst to those immersed in classical anarchist traditions, a new, second-wave of anarchism (akin and indeed roughly contemporaneous with second-wave feminism) was stirring. The Situationists represent a convenient marker of the transition point, and serve as origin for the remarkable efflorescence of second-wave anarchism that is currently underway. Second-wave anarchism is still frequently not even recognised by anarchists and commentators who still cling to the idea that classical anarchism is the one and only true form of anarchism, even though first-wave anarchism was seen as moribund by Woodcock forty years ago.

As a result, many outside the anarchist milieu are given the misleading impression that a) classical anarchism is anarchism, b) anarchism is therefore an historical phenomenon, and thus c) there are no current manifestations of anarchist praxis. The unfortunate consequences of these misconceptions can be seen in May's understanding of anarchism. With the partial exception of *Reinventing Anarchy*, the anarchist titles in May's bibliography consist entirely of texts on or by classical anarchists. (Ward, like Goodman, can perhaps be seen as a transitional figure, but his grounding in the British anarcho-reformist tradition of Godwin and Read underscores his classical anarchist orientation. Bookchin, particularly in light of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle-Anarchism*, can be unproblematically characterised as a late manifestation of the classical anarchist tradition.)

The question that must be addressed to May's text is: Where are the second-wave anarchists? Where are Debord, Vaneigem, Perlman, Zerzan, and so on? This is not mere pedantry. May is able to cast post-structuralist thinkers as latter-day anarchists precisely because his knowledge of anarchism suggests that currently there is an intellectual vacuum where classical anarchism used to be. The fact that this vacuum is an illusion—an illusion partly fostered by commentators who are either ignorant of, or refuse to acknowledge the existence of, second-wave anarchism—casts an unfortunate doubt on the validity of May's project.

May's book 'attempts to capture what is— or what ought to be— most lasting in the legacy of post-structuralist thought: its anarchism' (155). In order to achieve this aim, May distinguishes between three types of political philosophy: formal, strategic, and tactical. Formal political philosophy is 'characterized by its cleaving either to the pole of what ought to be or to the pole of what is at the expense of the tension between the two' (4). It provides abstract discussions of the large-scale principles that define the ideal society, and thus generates a totalising, unitary explanation of social relations.

Strategic political philosophy, on the other hand, is concerned with the historical implementation of political philosophies and thus with the pragmatic methodological concerns of achieving political goals. As a result, it 'involves a unitary analysis that aims toward a single goal' (11). In the strategic perspective, power is seen to emanate from a particular centre (eg, the State, capitalist economic relations) which then provides the focus for practical activities.

In contrast to these totalising forms of political expression, however, tactical political philosophy refuses to align itself with the poles of either what is or what ought to be, preferring to oscillate between the two. Refusing any grand narrative or totalising explanation, the tactical perspective does not see power as residing in a specific locus, but as arising at a number

of sites and in the interplay between these sites. In practical terms, this means that political intervention must be local and plural, rather than general and unified. It also has important implications for social agency in that it questions the legitimacy of representation. If the sites of power are multiple, then no one vanguard group is in a privileged position to speak or act on behalf of others.

For May, poststructuralist political philosophy differs from other types of politics because it affirms the tactical rather than the formal or the strategic. However, in anarchism—despite its ambivalent commitment between tactical and strategic thinking— he perceives “a forerunner to current poststructuralist thought” (13). In an interesting discussion, May exposes the failures of Marxism in terms of its adherence to rigid forms of formal and strategic thinking. He then proceeds to a consideration of anarchism (for which read: classical anarchism) and thence to a discussion of the compatibility of anarchist and poststructuralist thinking, with the aim of outlining (in the words of a chapter title) the ‘steps toward a poststructuralist anarchism’.

The problem with this project is that it remains framed entirely within terms of classical anarchism. May sees (classical) anarchism as unsatisfactorily ambivalent in its strategic and tactical tendencies. The reason for these contradictory commitments is easily deduced. Classical anarchism is strategic insofar as it locates the source of power in a single institution— the State, but tactical where it resists the different types of power that emerge where the State exists. For May, however, the fact that (classical) anarchism— in contrast to Marxism— has pronounced tactical tendencies remains sufficient to cast it as a ‘forerunner’ of poststructuralist politics, and to characterize the latter as the contemporary form of (intellectual) anarchism.

This is clearly unsatisfactory as well as inaccurate. Anarchism is not the forerunner of anything— least of all a pallid academic tendency such as poststructuralism— because it is

held by the author. On one level, however, the text stands as an indictment of the distance between academia and contemporary anarchism, and between anarchist commentators and the present anarchist milieu.

The point of [classical] anarchism's resort to the idea of a benign human essence is to be able to justify its resistance to power. Suppose that anarchists had a different view of power, one that saw power not solely as suppressive but also as productive: power not only suppresses actions, events, and people, but creates them as well. In that case, it would be impossible to justify the resistance to all power; one would have to distinguish clearly acceptable creations or effects (as opposed, in the case of the suppressive assumption, to exercises) of power from unacceptable ones. (63)

The coercive nature of both suppressive and productive power has been demonstrated above, and there is little sense in staging a defence of classical anarchism. However, the intent of this passage is clear, by discrediting the notion of essentialism, May attempts to undermine the anarchist project of resisting all power. This ploy remains ineffective when applied to second-wave anarchism, however.

While classical anarchism may rest its claims on Being, second-wave anarchism emphasises Becoming. Following from Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming, the Situationists stress radical subjectivity as the basis for resistance. The project of resisting the totality rests, not on some essentialist human subject, but on the subject-in-process, or better, the subject-in-rebellion: the radical subject. The processual nature of this identity undercuts May's charge of essentialism, but at the same time provides a basis in lived experience for resistance to the totality, rather than reformist quibbling over acceptable and unacceptable forms of power.

May has written a stimulating and readable book, and one worth reading for its candour about the politics of poststructuralism alone. This text allows one to think through important issues, even though one's conclusions differ widely from those

not a dead Victorian doctrine, but a living, thriving project. The fact that it has undergone various transformations during its second-wave which have rendered it invisible or unrecognisable to some, should not disguise the fact that classical anarchism can no longer be taken as the basis for discussion of contemporary anarchism. Second-wave anarchism has expanded the project of the classical anarchists: the focus of contemporary anarchism is not the abolition of the State, but the abolition of the totality, of life structured by governance and coercion, of power itself in all its multiple forms. And it is here that contemporary anarchism departs markedly from May's post-structuralist anarchism. Not least in the fact that second-wave anarchism incorporates an explicit rejection of the political as an appropriate focus for practice.

In dealing with issues of power, May draws extensively upon Deleuze, Lyotard and (particularly) Foucault. While approving of the classical anarchist recognition that power is arranged through intersecting networks rather than exclusively through hierarchies, he asserts: 'The anarchist picture of networks requires deepening' (51). And the poststructuralist analysis of power is to provide this development. Poststructuralism, for May, rejects 'the a priori of traditional (ie, classical] anarchism* (85): the notion of power as solely a negative, repressive force, and the notion of subjectivity as a viable source of political action. On the basis of a critique of these ideas from a poststructuralist perspective, May postulates 'a new type of anarchism' (85) which rejects strategic thought for a comprehensive tactical approach: poststructuralist anarchism. The fact that 'a new type of anarchism'— ie, second-wave anarchism— already exists, and has on occasion (eg, in Zerzan's 'The Catastrophe of Postmodernism') been very critical of the poststructuralist project, escapes May altogether.

Following Foucault et al. May affirms the idea that power is not always suppressive, but sometimes productive. But like

his poststructuralist mentors, he fudges the issue, from an anarchist perspective, by reiterating this familiar formula. Whether power is suppressive or productive, it is still power that is to say, it still uses force (whether overtly or insidiously) to construct and define individuals and make them think or act in particular ways. Whether power say 'thou shall not...' or 'here are your options ...', coercion is involved. "One would not call all exercises of power oppressive," May states (96). But surely that depends upon whom one is. May admits that 'anarchists are suspicious of all power' (61), although (as far as the second-wave is concerned) suspicion is a far too cautious term for a project aimed at the abolition of the ensemble of power relations, the control complex itself. But this is not the case with Foucault, who is quoted approvingly as saying:

relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free oneself... The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the Utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination. (123)

The references to law, management and minimalist domination, plus the explicit anti-utopian stance, suggest the incompatibility of Foucauldian ideology with contemporary anarchism, and undermine May's claims for a poststructuralist anarchism. "The question," May avers, "is not whether or not there is power, but which relationships of power are acceptable and which are unacceptable" (123) But this is merely the question of liberalism, and indicates the recuperative nature of poststructuralism in co-opting radical impulses.

For contemporary anarchism, no relationships of power are acceptable. "If power is suppressive, then the central political

question to be asked is: When is the exercise of power legitimate, and when is it not?" (61). But for second-wave anarchism, the answer is the same, whether power is suppressive or productive: never! 'Given that the old answers to political problems— appropriating the means of production, seizing or eliminating the state, destroying all relations of power— are found to be lacking, what perspective can poststructuralist theory offer for thinking about political change as well as power and political oppression?' (112). Aside from the fact that for anarchists these are social not political problems, the putative failure of 'the old answers' is not proved and thus cannot be taken as a given. What can be established, however, is that the perspectives offered by poststructuralism are reformist.

May offers an unconvincing defence to the charge of reformism: "The mistake that is made in contrasting revolution and reform lies in the assumption that the former involves a qualitative change in society, while the latter involves only a quantitative change. However, on the alternative picture of politics being sketched here, there are in reality only quantitative changes, qualitative ones being defined in terms of them" (54) But this too fudges the point. Revolution (better: insurrection) depends on a rupture, whereas the poststructuralist perspective offered here depends on piecemeal change, the mark of the reformist, and never results in that definitive break. Further, from a second-wave perspective, the totality— the totality of power relations— cannot be resisted in piecemeal fashion, and thus poststructuralist anarchism could never hope to engage in dismantling the totality. As May remarks, "The task of a poststructuralist politics is to attempt to construct power relations that can be lived with, not to overthrow power altogether" (114).

In fact, by undermining subjectivity as the basis from which to launch resistance. May leaves no space from which the totality might be questioned.