

# I come to praise anarchism, not to bury it.

Ruth Kinna

2014

*The politics of postanarchism*, by Saul Newman, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 208 pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7486-3496-5

Anarchism, Saul Newman argues, articulates the ‘eternal aspiration of the radical tradition’, namely to break free from the conventions of sovereignty and enjoy a life without government and in a condition of autonomy. His bold claim, made in the opening pages of this book, seems to be addressed to a readership which identifies with radical politics, but not necessarily with anarchism. What follows, then, is a defence of anarchism; an attempt to persuade non-anarchist radicals, principally Marxists of various stripes, that the concept of equal liberty and the principle of democracy can only be realised outside a statist framework and that this positively utopian aspiration was also Marx’s. However, running alongside this first discussion is a second, addressed to a rather different postanarchist audience. These threads of the book are structured by Newman’s identification of a tension ‘central to anarchism’, between the anti-politics which stems from the rejection of the state, and the politics that anarchists develop through their activism. Endorsing the anarchist project, Newman seeks to formulate an ‘anti-politics politics’ which questions the ideas that anarchists have traditionally espoused and reflects instead on the possibilities arising from its tensions and aporia. Deconstruction provides the key to this and it involves a wholesale rejection of the conceptual frameworks that anarchists have employed as well as what Newman sees as anarchism’s flawed essentialism and the enlightenment thinking which underpins it.

Newman uses the term postanarchism to describe this project, although the term – like ‘communitarianism’ – refers to a looser body of thought, now principally associated with the work of Lewis Call, Todd May and Richard Day. As Süreyya Evren has argued, however, Newman is pre-eminent in the field and his work has achieved international recognition not only because he was one of the first to provide a scholarly account of postanarchism, but also because he has produced a sustained body of research which highlights the distinctiveness of postanarchism in contemporary political theory (Evren 2011, p. 8). In the book under review here, Newman is at pains to argue that postanarchism is a creative engagement with anarchism. It is neither an attempt to ‘move beyond’ anarchism since it does not signify a temporal shift or a coming ‘after’ anarchism’s presumed ‘end’. Nor does the ‘post’ in postanarchism indicate that anarchism

is somehow being left behind. To the contrary: postanarchism only makes explicit anarchism's politics of anti-politics (p. 11). It could be objected that this close association of anarchism and postanarchism is not always well supported in the text and the benchmarks that Newman uses to demonstrate exchange between the two are sometimes set quite low. At one point a refusal to dismiss anarchism becomes the test of the engagement and Newman indicates that postanarchism's theoretical and critical interrogation of anarchism in fact amounts to a revision. By incorporating 'insights from different thinkers and perspectives not commonly associated with the anarchist tradition', Newman's aim is to radicalise anarchism, to 'broaden its scope and expand its possibilities' (p. 20). Elsewhere, he introduces a different conception of postanarchism's outside: a 'moment beyond anarchism' (p. 69). Pinpointing precisely how he wants to couch the relationship between anarchism and postanarchism is one of the fascinations of the book, and it is major theme in the two sets of discussions that run through it.

The slipperiness of the relationship between anarchism and postanarchism might be explained by the way the relationship works in the two strands of Newman's argument. These are closely inter-connected. Indeed, the positions which he recommends in the course of the analysis emerge through a kind of dialectical unfolding, in which the focus of the discussion shifts between critiques of various forms of anarchism and Marxism. The opening chapters, where Newman reassesses classical anarchism and outlines the features of an-archy or ontological anarchism (terms used interchangeably with postanarchism) might be thought of as the first movement. This provides an anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist platform for the second. Drawing on the anarchist principles highlighted, Newman proceeds to discuss Marx, Leninism, the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe and the neo-Marxism of Hardt and Negri, highlighting both the heretical value of anarchist critique and the anarchistic currents buried within contemporary radical politics. In the final movement, the argument comes full circle. Against Murray Bookchin and John Zerzan, both presented as exponents of classical anarchism, Newman illustrates the distance between anarchism and postanarchism to argue that postanarchism supports a neo-Stirnerite yet solidaristic emancipatory ethics. At the same time, he develops a review of radical politics to show how postanarchism resonates with actual movements and resistance struggles and the autonomous, utopian, horizontal practices they support.

Underpinning all these discussions is a critique of the friend/enemy distinction that lies at the heart of Carl Schmitt's conception of politics. Newman does not wholly reject Schmitt's understanding but he argues that Schmitt's claim, that opposition to the state is tantamount to the rejection of politics, is mistaken. Newman argues that the autonomy of politics that Schmitt rightly wanted to defend was wrongly tied to the state and that it is only properly located in the antagonism, as Mouffe puts it, that exists beyond the depoliticised order and uniformity that the state enforces. The faultiness of Schmitt's elision of the state and politics is that it represses the conflicts inherent in human relations. To reject the depoliticised order of the state is not, then, to advocate an apolitical social order as an alternative to the state or to fall victim to the dichotomy between the state and society that Schmitt constructed. Like Schmitt, postanarchists recognise the autonomy of politics but argue that it can only exist beyond the boundaries of the state, in the insurgent forces of democratic anti-state resistance. Newman's neat formulation is that postanarchists acknowledge that the 'autonomy of the political ... invokes the idea of the *politics of autonomy*' (p. 10). The arguments he subsequently develops against Leninism and in defence of Stirnerite libertarian ethics are contextualised by this suggestion.

Newman's arguments are presented with characteristic fluency and clarity but also with passion and commitment. His mastery of the literature and the firmness of his political convictions enable him to move deftly through complex fields of critical theory. The evaluations he presents are concise, and even those who are not as deeply immersed in Continental political theory as he is should find it easy to follow. However, the analysis is sometimes truncated: Newman tends to play ideas off against each other, using postanarchist criteria to adjudicate between them and to present a kind of balance sheet of success and failure. This approach subordinates detailed analysis of theory to the assessment of principles or positions that are selected because they dovetail, reinforce or run counter to his own. Simon Critchely, for example, 'is right to suggest that the state today is too powerful for full-scale assaults' but wrong to argue that it is 'a permanent, inevitable feature of political life'. Slavoj Žižek 'raises important questions about the efficacy of politics outside the state' but his alternative, which revives 'the vanguard party, the proletarian dictatorship and revolutionary state terror' is 'completely defunct and outmoded' (p. 116). Alain Badiou 'is correct in suggesting that the (Hardt) and Negri thesis ... mirrors and fetishes the fluxes and flows of global capital'. He is also right to think that 'the moment of separation essential for radical politics must be theorised on a different ontological register, not that of History, but that of the Event'. But his treatment of the political event as something 'so rare ... that it almost never happens' is mistaken. Newman's view is that the event is something that takes place 'on an everyday basis' (pp. 128–129).

Newman adopts the same approach to anarchism, and the attention he pays to the contrasts between anarchism and postanarchism take up the greater part of the book. In the past, Newman's account of anarchism, or what he calls classical anarchism has attracted considerable criticism, particularly from historians of ideas. Since these have been so well-rehearsed it seems churlish to go over the same ground here. Yet, it is difficult to move on from debates about Newman's interpretation of anarchism and concentrate on the substance of the normative argument as long as anarchism or classical anarchism is used as the Aunt Sally for postanarchist analysis. Moreover, the critique of anarchism that Newman develops sheds some light on the nature of his own political theory.

The theoretical shortcomings of anarchism are listed early on in the book and they include 'an essentialist conception of the subject; the universality of morality and reason, and the idea of the progressive enlightenment of humankind; a conception of the social order as naturally constituted (by natural laws, for instance) and rationally determined; a dialectical view of history; and a certain positivism, whereby science could reveal the truth of social relations' (p. 6). Variations on this sketch appear at regular intervals throughout the book and they are advanced with blunt insistence. Classical anarchism, Newman reminds us later on, is 'a political philosophy that is framed within an Enlightenment rationalist-humanist discourse. Central to anarchism is the idea of rational progress, the unfolding of an immanent social logic, and the emancipation of the subject from external constraints and oppressions – motifs which were incorporated also into liberalism and Marxism' (p. 46).

A mainstay of Newman's critique is the idea that anarchism is Manichean. For example, he claims that Kropotkin proposed 'a sort of moral and conceptual division between society and the state, between humanity and political power' (p. 36). But this framing was not confined to Kropotkin's work. The 'Manichean division – between the natural social principle, and the artificial political principle, between, in other words, society and the state', Newman tells us, is 'central to classical anarchism' (p. 110). The point, Newman insists 'is that for anarchists, people

are intrinsically and organically part of a social whole, and that their cooperative instincts tend to come to therefore in this social context. There is a kind of social essentialism here, the idea that society embodies a rationality and a morality which is immanent, whose laws and processes are scientifically observable; a logic ... that is unfolding and emerging in opposition to the logic of power' (p. 39). The reason Newman insists on this point might be explained by his concern to answer Schmitt's critique. The dichotomy between the natural and the social that Newman builds into classical anarchism illuminates the originality of the postanarchist challenge to the conception of politics and sovereignty that Schmitt proposed. He argues: 'for anarchists, the autonomy of the political signifies precisely the triumph of the organic and rational social principle over the artificiality of the political principle of state power'. Postanarchists have a 'different way of thinking about the political principle', and he continues: 'This is where the autonomy of the political translates into the politics of autonomy ... In this formulation, the autonomy of the political is retained – it is not subordinated to an organic social principle – but it is disconnected from the principle of state sovereignty which has for so long served as the prison house of politics' (p. 99).

This claim does significant violence to non-postanarchism. For example, Newman bypasses the discussion of sovereignty and critique of state theory which Kropotkin presents in *The state: its historic role*. He ignores the substantial body of sociological and anthropological research that anarchists have discussed since the nineteenth century and which belies the treatment of 'natural' society that he attributes to classical traditions. Newman says that postanarchism 'seeks to detach society from a natural, moral foundation outside politics' (p. 112). Kropotkin would have agreed. Newman's attempt to counter the position leads him to read back into anarchism an understanding of the distinction between the state of nature and government, familiar in contract theory and central to Hobbes' construction of sovereignty, that Kropotkin and others dismissed as a myth designed to legitimise monopolistic and hierarchical configurations of power. But it also hints at the limits of postanarchist thinking, for in categorising anarchism as anti-political in Schmittian terms, Newman reveals the extent to which postanarchism is rooted in a theoretical approach that is deeply statist, even while he seeks to move beyond it. The real disagreement with Kropotkin is that Newman aims 'to detach the notion of politics from the state' (p. 112), whereas Kropotkin wanted to practise a different kind of politics by challenging statist principles and organisation. On his account, the state is not a depoliticised order, but an order in which politics is practised in particular ways. The political extended across a spectrum of forms, from anarchy to state; it was not rooted in one particular order or another.

The tripartite distinction between the depoliticised state, postanarchist politics and depoliticised natural anarchy frame Newman's discussions of power and utopianism. The principle claim Newman seeks to make is that anarchism naively anticipates the abolition of power, unlike postanarchism which understands that 'even radical politics' is 'an activity conducted within a field constructed by power'. This argument seems to depend on the conceptualisation of power that Newman develops. Following Foucault, he argues that power relations 'are both pervasive and constitutive of social identities, practices and discourses' (p. 6). While Newman is clearly correct to argue that anarchists have not typically conceptualised power in these terms – and certainly not the nineteenth-century proponents of classical anarchism that he identifies in the book – the warning he issues to anarchists about the permanence of power relations is actually rooted in the conjunction between power and politics rather than the nuances of poststructuralist analysis. The uncontroversial statement that politics 'suggests ... some sort of engagement

with relations of power' gains its full force when set in the context of the claim that anarchists believe 'power and authority are unnatural and inhuman' (p. 6). Newman's observation that this belief is gainsaid by the problem of voluntary servitude and 'a desire for authority and self-domination that was revealed by psychoanalysis, from Freud to Reich' rings hollow in its application to anarchists who witnessed phenomena such as jingoism, nationalism, militarism, colonialism, racism, serfdom and the brutal operation of systems of conscription. But leaving the historical and contextual arguments aside, the philosophical differences that Newman wants to find also appear quite thin. The discussion of anarchism's utopianism provides another illustration of the problem. Newman recommends a particular kind of utopianism as 'a vital dimension of any politics that takes emancipation and radical transformation as central' (p. 67). In terms reminiscent of Oscar Wilde, he declares 'that the vision of a society without government has to be taken as the ultimate ethical and political horizon of any radical politics worthy of its name' (p. 67). Postanarchist utopianism is defined against the idea of the blueprint. Early on in the book Newman says that he will 'formulate a different approach to a utopianism' one which will not 'lay down a precise programme for the future' but will instead 'provide a point of alterity or exteriority as a way of interrogating the limits of this order' (p. 7). While the implication seems to be that anarchism is utopian in this programmatic sense, the charge of blueprint utopianism is not one that he lays at anarchism's door. The utopianism of anarchism is instead located in the harmonious, apolitical natural society that anarchy represents. Once the assumptions about the apolitical character are set aside, non-postanarchist utopianism dovetails surprisingly closely with postanarchist forms. Newman comments: 'I have argued ... that power relations will never be entirely eliminated, and that anarchists must always be aware of the potential for new forms of domination that can emerge in any form of social arrangement – even in libertarian ones'. Nevertheless, he acknowledges 'that Kropotkin is correct in stressing the need for some sort of alternative vision of a social order in motivating political action against the current order' (p. 67).

Newman's discussion of anarchism is only a part of this book, albeit a substantial one, and it seems a pity that the real contribution that he wants to make, which is to put anarchism at the heart of radical political theory, depends on a claim to postanarchism's originality that is distracting and which occupies space that might be given over to a more detailed critical analysis of the contemporary writers with whom Newman engages. Newman does make some interesting and important interventions in this book, about the character of the surveillance state, the significance of contemporary protest movements, the ideological permeability of different strands of anarchist and non-anarchist socialisms and the relationship between ethics and politics. But the analysis supporting these insights is not always as sustained or developed as it might be: most of the discussion of contemporary radical theory is covered in 35 pages in Chapter 4. Wilde argued that originality was properly understood to be about judgment and the treatment of a subject, not the development of new content. On this view, the value of postanarchism does not rest on showing its distinctiveness from anarchism, in any of the different ways in which this relationship might be cast, but on the interventions it encourages in current political theory. The politics of postanarchism hints at postanarchism's potential, but for all its many merits it does not fully exploit this.

## Reference

Evren, S., 2011. *How new anarchism changed the world (of opposition) after Seattle and gave birth to post-anarchism*. In: D. Rouselle and S. Evren, eds. *Postanarchism: a reader*. London: Pluto, 1–22.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Ruth Kinna

I come to praise anarchism, not to bury it.

2014

Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021 from [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com)

Published in *Journal of Political Power*, 7(1), 155–160. doi:10.1080/2158379x.2013.849369.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**