

Power in Anarchism

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Power is a central issue in modern anarchist thought. Whereas anarchism was traditionally linked to authority—or its rejection—anarchists now talk in terms of power and counterpower. The change in emphasis is linked to the emergence of “postanarchist” theory: anarchism that draws on postmodern and poststructuralist thought, associated with Todd May, Lewis Call, and Saul Newman.

The leading figures of 19th- and early 20th-century anarchism—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin—were not unconcerned with power. On the contrary, even Proudhon, often regarded as the most individualist of the three, talked enthusiastically about the collective power of the workers. And many others defined *anarchism* as the abolition of power. But the concept was not made subject to sustained analysis—in contrast to law, authority, God, and science, for example. When they talked about power, 19th-century writers usually had one of two things in mind: the repressive machinery of the state or the liberating potential of collective actions. These two aspects of power were typically counterposed such that collective actions were believed to hold the key to the destruction of the state’s capacity to repress. What was important in this analysis was the image of power that it captured. On this account, power was about struggle against physical force (or as Max Weber would put it, the state’s monopoly of physical violence). Thus, the power of the state was typically equated with police, armed forces, prisons, torture, corporal and capital punishment—later on, surveillance—and the power of the oppressed was variously identified with barricades, terrorist or guerrilla actions, spontaneous revolt, the organization of peasants and workers in syndicates, ethical change, and the development of other nonhierarchical grassroots organizations. In the 1870s and 1880s, when memories of the Paris Commune were still very fresh and optimism about the prospects for European revolution high, the association between power and physical force was strong (though Tolstoyan anarchists always rejected the necessity and justifiability of this link). The same was true in the early 20th century, when anarchists were again engaged in revolutionary war. Nestor Makhno, who led anarchist resistance against counterrevolutionaries and Bolsheviks in the Ukraine during the civil war, characterized revolutionary action as a capacity to conquer or exterminate oppressors. The power of revolutionaries depended on overt coercion. In the latter part of the 19th century and again after the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, the emphasis shifted to the ethical and communitarian aspects of collective power: the ability of oppressed groups to find ways of living, organizing, and behaving—often explicitly nonviolent—that did not mimic the repressive practices of the state. This way of thinking about power was resurgent in the 1960s in the work of such anarchists as Colin Ward, George Woodcock, and Paul Goodman. Capturing the change, Woodcock described the old-style anarchists as “bellicose barricaders.” The new anarchists, he suggested, “had forgotten Spain and had no use for the romanticism of the *dynamitero*.... They were militant pacifists” (Woodcock, 1992, 45–46).

One of the premises of postanarchist thinking is that classical anarchism (Woodcock’s old and new anarchists) has a narrowly structural idea of power and wrongly considers that power can and must be abolished. May distinguishes between “strategic” and “tactical” philosophical approaches to power. The first—which captures the classical anarchist position—assumes that power refers to the central problematic, that it derives essentially or for the most part from the site on which that problematic focuses (the economic system, the state, etc.). In contrast, tactical political philosophy suggests, “there is no center within which power is to be located.” Power might conglomerate around particular sites, but these points of concentration are not points

of origin, and power extends to multiple sites as well as to the interplay between them. Like May, Call draws on Michel Foucault to elaborate his idea. Finding classical anarchists guilty of an obsession with capital and the state, Call rejects the simplistic top-down model of power to argue that it is present in any social relation. Power, he adds, always implies resistance. But resistance, counterpower, or antipower is nothing like the struggle of the classical anarchist, which was motivated by ideas of emancipation and wrongly assumed the existence of a human subject with free will. Why? Because on the one hand, postanarchists characterize the repressive nature of capitalism in novel ways, taking their lead from surrealists and situationists, and on the other hand, they deny the possibility of achieving a condition of liberation. Resistance, then, is about experimentation in everyday life and escaping the deadening discourses and consciousness of bourgeois capitalism through permanent resistance or, following Gilles Deleuze, rhizomatic action.

The difference between the classical and the postanarchist positions should not be exaggerated. Although postanarchists challenge the rationalist epistemology of much 19th- and 20th-century anarchist thought, the political significance of the revision is not as great as sometimes claimed. Insofar as arguments about power are concerned, the comparison between the two positions is misleading. Postanarchists have accurately characterized the 19th-century conception of power, but overlooked the analyses of related concepts—notably authority—in which the relational issues so central to contemporary thought were first probed.

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See also Bakunin, Mikhail ; Collective Action Problem ; Foucault, Michel ; Kropotkin, Peter ; Revolution ; Revolutionary Cell Structure

Further Readings

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