

# **Postanarchism is Not What You Think: The Role of Postanarchist Theory After the Backlash**

Saint Schmidt

2008

# Contents

Postanarchism: Neither <i>post</i> -anarchism nor post- <i>anarchism</i> . . . . .	4
Reducing Reductionisms: The popular critique against postanarchism . . . . .	7
Postanarchists: Subjects supposed to know? . . . . .	10
A Note on Methodology . . . . .	12
Unfreezing Anarchism . . . . .	13
Conclusion . . . . .	14
References . . . . .	16

This title is a slightly adapted version of Charles Lermert's title for his book *Post-modernism is not what you think* (1997). Lemert and I understand that this implies two distinct meanings: first, postmodernism is probably not what you may think it is and, second, it is not primarily something that you *think* (ibid., 26).

\* \* \*

Postanarchism has not received the amount of attention or sympathy that it deserves from the radical community at large nor has it received anything more than a passing glance from the loose community of anarchist theorists. Part of the reluctance, I suspect, results from the empty spaces occupying the bookshelves of universities, alternative bookstores, and radical lending libraries across the world today, all of which will soon be greeted by new and emerging works on the topic (see, for example, forthcoming works from de Rota, 2008; Immedium Press, 2009; Mümken & Muller, 2008; Rousselle & Evren, 2009) in addition to a humbling stockpile of only three books dedicated explicitly to the subject.<sup>1</sup> However, the reception of postanarchist theory is hindered less by the problems associated with its propaganda than with a fundamental misunderstanding of what postanarchism itself represents coupled with a blatant misrepresentation, on the part of its critics (in particular: Antliff, 2007; Cohn & Wilbur, 2003; Cohn, 2002; Day, 2005; Franks, 2009; Sasha K, 2004; Zabalaza, 2003), of what the postanarchists' claims have been. This tension has hindered further dialogue and clarification on the key issues that were raised early in the postanarchist writings and has erected a barrier which might only be dislodged through careful and attentive readings into the way in which the debate has played out on both sides, between the postanarchists and their critics; judgement must be reserved on the basis of whether the resulting demarcations are worth retaining or abandoning. This essay should be understood as an attempt to walk through the associated discourses and examine the way in which the debate has played out up until this point.

I argue that the critics, in particular, have stifled serious engagement with the postanarchist offerings through two manoeuvres: first, they pursued a paradoxical and pragmatic attack which bounced between two misunderstandings/ misrepresentations of postanarchism and, secondly, they proposed that postanarchism benefited from a greatly reduced analysis of the key anarchist theorists.<sup>2</sup> With regards to the first manoeuvre, the critics have fluctuated between two contradictory arguments, the first of which was that postanarchism represented an attempt to rescue the presumed inadequacies of an increasingly stale orthodoxy (Cohn & Wilbur, 2003); this critique focused on the implied claim to have simultaneously gone beyond but to have also attempted to rescue traditional anarchism from its own demise.<sup>3</sup> With regards to the second manoeuvre, some critics have interrogated what they saw as the essentialist and reductive elements that were found to be at the core of the postanarchist narrative;<sup>4</sup> however, in doing so, the critics have only ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> In the English speaking world we have works from Call (2002), May (1994) and Newman (2001).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the two key anarchist theorists should be understood as Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin.

<sup>3</sup> For convenience only, and explicitly not for the purposes of *argumentum ad hominem*, I hereafter refer to critics that emphasize the reductive flaw of postanarchism as *traditionalists*. This is not to construct a false opposition, but merely to distinguish between the recipients (the postanarchists) and the proponents of the claim (the traditionalists). This is also not *necessarily* to represent all of the critics as those who would otherwise defend the entire anarchist tradition against outside attack, although at times this is implied.

<sup>4</sup> It should at least be noted that most of these attacks are aimed squarely at Newman (2001) rather than more broadly at the postanarchists as a whole, although some do generalize from Newman to all. A word of caution is

posed the extent to which they in fact shared in the defining attitude of the postanarchists. They failed by themselves narrowing postanarchist theory into a simple transcendence of traditional thought, thus passing the initial charges waged against them back onto the postanarchist; they thereby only appeared to be freed from the initial charges placed against them.

There are four interconnected sections to my rebuttal, the first of which considers the status that the postanarchists have given to their own work in relation to traditional anarchism; this section concerns matters of definition. I propose that it may be more in line with the postanarchist logic to speak of postanarchism as an assemblage of (sometimes contradictory) attitudes or discursive practices so as to provide for a more clearly articulated body of conceptual linkages between the two discourses and to thereby bypass the binary trap. In the next section I explore the more serious concerns that have been raised and extract a few themes that are shared in most writings *against* postanarchist theory (an elaboration of some of the issues which I have already discussed). In the third section I take issue with the supposed rift between the traditionalist and the postanarchist through a Lacanian framework and argue that through *negative transference* the traditionalist sought to undermine the postanarchist, but s(he) did this for either of the following two reasons: first, because there was thought to be no real problem with essentialist/reductionist discourses and/or second, because the postanarchist was envisioned as *other*, as the person responsible for offering a way out. In the final section, I pick up the argument that the current movement toward postanarchism may be one of a ‘vanishing mediator’, one which allows anarchists the opportunity to loosen up the strongholds that have tightened up around them. I argue that postanarchism may have operated as a response to what appeared to certain subjects as a ‘frozen signifier’ (namely, ‘anarchISM’).

## **Postanarchism: Neither *post*-anarchism nor *post-anarchism***

“Neither the normalization of anarchism nor the depoliticization of theory!” was the rallying cry for the postanarchist position (Adams, 2003). Unpacking this motto reveals the desire to merge the most subversive elements within anarchism with the critically reflexive theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism. In other words, postanarchism was to be thought neither as the complete transcendence of traditional anarchist theory nor as its complete acceptance, but, as an ‘immanent transcendence’. Simmel, in his work *Lebensanschauung* (1999 [1918]), described this process as a form of transcendence which, while vitally a part of life, leads also to new forms of life. All life is understood to be lived inside the production of forms, but life worth living is life against and not satisfied by these forms. The dictum “ist dem Leben Immanent [transcendence is immanent to life]” appears strikingly similar to the Nietzschean ‘become who you already are’ or the biblical axiom, “you are already filled, you already have become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, we wish that you had become kinds so that we also might reign with you” (New American Standard Bible, 1 Corinthians 4:8). The term was subsequently picked up by the lesser known social thinker Alfred Weber, brother of Max Weber, and used as a tool for the construction of a variant of socialism that did not rely on the horrors of bureaucracy nor on the morality of the State. Alfred partook in a disagreement with his brother on this point: “[u]nlike

---

therefore in order: to reduce postanarchist theory to only that which is advanced by Newman is also to fall victim to the very attitude Newman seeks to avoid. For the purposes of this article, it is safe to use the critique against Newman as a gauge to explore the critique against postanarchist theory as a whole.

Max Weber, Alfred Weber could not conceive of a meaningful sociological interpretation or explanation of human thought or action that aimed to dispense with a value oriented perspective” (BookRages, 2008). In other words, Alfred Weber had come to recognize that the notion of immanent transcendence implied that there was a lack to the outside of power, that certain value positions were inherent to any sociological inquiry and were impossible to eradicate.

Postanarchism began with the assumption that power is a pervasive, multinodal, phenomenon which is both creative and destructive in its operation. As a result, resistance was thought to benefit from a disposal of the reactive, slavish, attitude of *ressentiment*; the assumption was that, following Newman, “there can be no external enemy for us to define ourselves in opposition to and vent our anger on .., rather than having an external enemy .. in opposition to which one’s political identity is formed, we must work on [the other within] ourselves” (2004a: 121). Postanarchism was therefore a reaction to the premises of an anarchism which positioned itself against any single (or series of) place(s) from which power unidirectionally emanates. Conversely, postanarchism is a painstakingly reflexive variant of anarchist theory which like a good friend of mine rarely stops for the night to take a rest. As Andrew Koch put it, “[f]rom the assumption of a transcendent unity of thought, whether as the ‘doctrine of forms’ or as things in themselves, the idea of political unity rests its foundation on [the] epistemological doctrine [of modernity]” (2009, forthcoming: 347). All of the postanarchist thinkers whose work has so often been criticized have quite explicitly adopted this perspective. None are more clear than Newman who, in his pivotal book *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power*, remarked,

.. poststructuralism does not see itself as a stage beyond modernity, but rather a critique conducted upon the limits of modernity. Poststructuralism *operates* within the discourse of modernity to expose its limits and unmask its problems and paradoxes. .. we must work at the limits of modernity, and maintain a critical attitude, not only toward modernity itself, but toward any discourse which claims to transcend it (2001: 15).

Since postanarchism is a reworking of anarchist theory in light of poststructuralist offerings, it would seem permissible that postanarchism, far from being characterized as a simple transcendence of classical and modern anarchism, operates necessarily within these discourses such that the appeal or spirit that characterized these periods in anarchist thought might continue on to influence the contemporary period. Adams (2008) compared this approach to the postmarxism of Laclau & Mouffee: “[w]hile it is *post-anarchist* it is also *post-anarchist*; in other words it is not a complete rejection of classical anarchism but rather a step beyond the limits defined for it by Enlightenment thought.” The emphasis remains somewhere in between the two rather than frozen upon any single pole.

The postanarchists have outlined, in each their own way, what they saw as the worthwhile commitments of traditional anarchism, thus emphasizing their indebtedness and attachment to traditional anarchism. Todd May, in his earliest work on the topic, concluded: “[t]hus poststructuralist theory is indeed anarchist [and] is in fact more consistently anarchist than traditional anarchist theory has proven to be” (2009, forthcoming). Adams likewise admitted that “[the postanarchists may] not explicitly identify with anarchism as a tradition so much as they identify with its spirit” (2008). It is this spirit or defining attitude, among a variety of others, which remains and assumes a more serious form within the postanarchist assemblage. May, for example, has argued

that what unites poststructuralist and anarchist political philosophies “is the denial that there is some central hinge about which political change could or should revolve” (2000: 13). Newman, himself the target of most of the debate, also found something within classical anarchist thought to be attractive:

[All forms of anarchism] are united, however, by a fundamental rejection and critique of political authority in all its forms. The critique of political authority — the conviction that power is oppressive, exploitative and dehumanizing — may be said to be the crucial politicoethical standpoint of anarchism” (2004a: 8).

And Lewis Call revealed his admiration for one of the prevailing anarchist attitudes:

Anarchism, which is by its very nature sceptical of fixed structures, is a far more fluid and flexible theory [than others]. [It] continues to provide the most effective and compelling critique of all varieties of state power. And because it is such a flexible body of theory, anarchism is perhaps better suited than any other political philosophy to articulate the critiques which must be spoken in our rapidly fluctuating postmodern world” (2002: 11).

Finally, it can no longer be said that the postanarchists have not clearly expressed their indebtedness to traditional anarchist theory and thus spoken of their reliance on it; indeed, the postanarchists have always found themselves, in one way or another, within the anarchist tradition rather than outside of it. Indeed, it may be argued that the postanarchists occupy a position which is at the outermost inside of the tradition.

At this point I would suggest that it would be more fruitful to describe anarchism as an attitude of hostility in the face of all forms of representation, the least of which may be political or conceptual; or, as an assemblage of often contradictory attitudes held that interrogates representations along a variety of nodal points. Traditional anarchism can now be summarized as a specific attitudinal assemblage held in tendency, among others, within the larger anarchist assemblage, which, according to the postanarchist critique, holds a number of problematic assumptions. The most significant of these assumptions is that power derives from a particular place (the State), is an objective phenomenon, and emanates outward to repress an otherwise creative human essence. Postanarchism can be understood as the result of a paradigm shift within anarchist theory itself which emerged somewhere after the middle of the century and is associated with the failed/lost social movements of the time. Far from a mere overnight transformation of politics and far from a wholesale rejection of all anarchist theory in the past, postanarchism is simply another term for what has always already been going on within the anarchist movement (Prukis & Bowen, 2004). The purpose for finally giving it a name is twofold: on the one hand, it is a safeguard to combat dogmatic impositions, to keep anarchist theory fresh and exciting.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it represents an attempt to be critical of this very purity, to put into question the unique position which some anarchists claim to hold. The presumption is that there is something worth retaining in anarchist thought and practice and that there is still room for movement within its discourse, but certain other attitudes, those associated with the modernist perspective, must be

---

<sup>5</sup> David Graeber says that “anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what’s new and hopeful about it” (2002).

interrogated. Added to this is the belief that this space which allows for movement, narrow as it may be, is nonetheless vital in a world dominated by alluring apparatuses of power. The promise of postanarchism, as Koch puts it, “derives from the deconstruction of any concept that makes oppression appear rational,” whether in the name of anarchism or in the name of justice, the principle question which postanarchism asks, *a la* Foucault, is: “[h]ow does one keep from being a fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?” (Foucault in Deleuze, 2005 [1983]: xiii).

To summarize my main points for this section: postanarchism is a specific assemblage of attitudes that does not so much come after modern anarchism but which is a reaction to the promises that have characterized the modern anarchist attitude. That postanarchism is a changing of a mixture of attitudes, rather than a simple transcendence of anarchism, should not be glossed over. While one might suppose there to be attitudes which are specific to modern lines of argumentation, attitudes which are not carried over into postmodern lines of argumentation, this does not necessarily mean that *some* of the former attitudes are not retained in the latter. Within each of these assemblages there can be found linkages; for example, the central attitude that characterized modern anarchism, arguably, was a commitment to hostility in the face of representation, it is precisely this attitude that appears to have transferred over to the postanarchist assemblage with the added supplement of extreme reflexivity within a broader political terrain. With hindsight engaged, I turn now to a discussion of the more serious critique which has been raised against this rising body of thought.

## **Reducing Reductionisms: The popular critique against postanarchism**

Of the published critiques of postanarchism, most of which are directed at Newman (2001), there can be found two related themes and one more outlandish theme: first, that postanarchism represents an attempt to get ‘beyond’ anarchism; second, that the postanarchists reduce their analysis of traditional anarchism in order to advance their claims (because of this it is assumed that their claims are presumptuous and must therefore be dismissed), and; finally, the most bizarre and conspicuous argument against postanarchism is that it amounts to mere ‘intellectual masturbation’. I do not consider this final argument to be strong, nor do I believe that it merits much attention beyond that which I have already given it; I also do not necessarily consider it to be a criticism *per se* (who of us has not enjoyed and profited socially from self-masturbation?). Though I have already dealt with the first point sufficiently, it will come up time and again as I focus on the second point here. The most serious and engaging argument is that the postanarchists greatly reduce their analysis of traditional anarchist theory in order to advance their case for a postanarchist theory. This point of contention will be the subject of the following section. This theme is found in the thoughtful offerings from Antliff (2007), Cohn & Wilbur (2003), Cohn (2002), Day (2005)<sup>6</sup>, Franks (2009), Sasha K (2004) and Zabalaza (2003).

None have expressed this point more eloquently than Cohn & Wilbur (2003) who described what they saw as the problematic ‘postanarchist narrative’ thusly: “an aging, spent force (anarchism) is to be saved from obsolescence and irrelevance by being fused with a fresh, vital force

---

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Day offers a similar critique but still sees himself as “contributing to a small but growing body of work in postanarchism and autonomist Marxism” (2005: 10).

(poststructuralism).” If postanarchism is claimed to have gone beyond traditional anarchism then it does so only with a reduced understanding of what constitutes this body of thought. The latter statement no doubt follows from the former but it does so only through a passing of the blame: as I have already demonstrated, the postanarchists never claimed to have advanced beyond traditional anarchism, nor have they claimed to be operating from some privileged position outside of its problematic discourse.<sup>7</sup> Cohn & Wilbur continue, “[p]ostanarchism has, as one of its core narratives, a drastically reduced notion of what ‘anarchism’ is and has been . . . Reiner Schürmann [for example] is content to dismiss ‘Proudhon, Bakunin, and their disciples,’ in single paragraph, as ‘rationalist’ thinkers, plain and simple.” (ibid.). The type of attitude employed by Cohn & Wilbur is not entirely foreign to the postanarchists, it involves recognizing lines of thought inherent in any discourse which are essentialist and reductive and which claim to transcend an entire tradition. This is precisely the attitude they present in their concluding remarks: “[t]he anarchist tradition is not a complete, perfect whole which is beyond question or criticism; it stands in need of rigorous and permanent critique, and certain elements of poststructuralist theory might be valuable in this reconstructive work” (ibid.). In other words, by painting a reductive picture of postanarchist thought, Cohn & Wilbur have been able to advance their own anti-reductive narrative for classical anarchism – thus, in many ways, arriving at a sort of postpostanarchism: a passing off of the initial critiques raised against traditional anarchism back onto the postanarchist, thus reflecting the postanarchist attitude, but, in doing so, forcing postanarchism to reflect back on itself as well. What Cohn & Wilbur have so successfully illuminated is the *impasse* of postanarchism, but they have done so, quite paradoxically, through a defence of the *impasse* of traditional anarchism. Thus, there is evidence that the two thinkers have incorrectly read the prefix “post” through structuralist glasses: “the term [postanarchism] also suggests that the postprefix applies to its new object as well – implying that anarchism, at least as heretofore thought and practiced, is somehow obsolete” (ibid.). We have seen, though, that this is not the case. Claims of this nature are simply a projection of the modernist attitude onto the postmodern. Benjamin Franks has similarly argued that there is a variant of postanarchist theory, stemming from Lyotard, that “rejects traditional anarchist concerns, and instead proposes the adoption of new critical approaches and tactics that lie beyond the remit of anarchist orthodoxy, using as their basis those poststructuralist theorists that are antipathetic to traditional anarchism” (2009, forthcoming). However, as we have seen, postanarchism retains the spirit and promise of traditional anarchism and therefore does not so much claim to be beyond anarchism as to be beyond a certain nonreflexive, humanist or structuralist, variety of anarchism. The other closely related problem here is with a misreading of Lyotard; a more careful reading of his pivotal text *The postmodern condition* (1979 [1984]) would reveal that: “For Lyotard, postmodernity is an attitude . . . This means that ‘postmodernity’ need not necessarily come after modernity: it means not modernity at its end, but in its nascent state, which is constant” (Woods, 1999: 23). It would appear, then, that much of the problem stems also

---

<sup>7</sup> The misunderstanding that postanarchists have claimed to move beyond anarchism, and that they have claimed to somehow offer the solution to the problems of essentialism and reductionism has led to such statements as the one from Mohamed Jean Veneuse that:

*You .. announced, created and invited PostAnarchisms as a substitute. .. Despite your claim the ‘dead Classical Anarchisms still belong to You .. I believe that this has occurred because You, as a Postmodernist Anarchist, have sought to find your dwelling place not in the past but rather in the future . . . You, a PostAnarchist, are yet still trying to escape a selective and inherited past, performing a partial excavation, as fast as possible, rather than returning faithfully to the past in order to move forward (2007).*

This, as we will soon discover, embodies the very problem of postanarchists as the *subject supposed to know*.



from a misreading of postmodernist and poststructuralist writers rather than simply a misreading of the postanarchist writers themselves. But, it appears that in offering this interpretation I have also succumbed to the problematic tendency of offering the correct and most appropriate reading of this or that particular author, and this or that particular tradition.

Sasha K (2004), for instance, argued that “Newman’s postanarchism is built upon an untenable and reductionist critique of anarchism.” Sasha’s rebuttal was that (s)he, in fact, agreed that ontological assumptions about human nature “would limit the possible ways humans could live and relate; something, one would think, anarchists would be against.” Yet, the real problem (s)he has with Newman’s postanarchism is that his understanding of anarchism is incorrect: “we should ask, is this view really that of anarchism?” (ibid.). This is the critique taken to its most natural form: whether the view expressed by postanarchism is, in the end, the proper view of anarchism. It is here that Sasha K, like the other critics, missed the forest for the trees. The defensiveness associated with this line of rebuttal serves only to conceal the desire, on the part of the traditionalist, to defend ‘anarchist’ theory and its key thinkers which, once again, is the very attitude which postanarchism seeks to reject. That this is, or is not, the proper way to read Bakunin and Kropotkin is, as Sasha K has correctly put forward, a real problem, however, that there is *any* proper way to read Bakunin and Kropotkin is quite another problem.<sup>8</sup> This is the same trap that Zabalaza falls into: “nonetheless, I wish to argue that Saul Newman’s article ‘Anarchism and the Politics of Ressentiment’ is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of anarchism . . .” Zabalaza recognized the problem with this line of argument when (s)he insisted that “[i]t is always possible to distort a text through selective quotation; arguing from isolated quotes might go on forever,” and yet this good point was counterbalanced by the followup: “[i]t is better to let the authors speak for themselves — particularly in the case of Bakunin and Kropotkin whom I have always found fairly easy to read” (2003). Indeed, there is a practical consensus among the sociological community that it is particularly impossible to read a work without allowing one’s subjective appraisals to contaminate the reading; in a word, power once again creeps its way into our analysis.

Through Cohn & Wilbur (2003) and Sasha K (2004) I have been able to demonstrate the most interesting and faithful response to the postanarchists. I take these critiques to be a good representation of all the remaining critics that I have not mentioned here. I have demonstrated that these critiques can often lead to a blind defence of the anarchist tradition (as with Sasha K & Zabalaza) as a homogenous entity, as if there is perhaps one correct interpretation of this or that writer, this or that tradition, or this or that event. On the other hand, they may also lead to a reaction of the sort found throughout all of the critical responses: one of passing off the blame to the postanarchist for claiming to have supposedly advanced beyond the problematic discourses while paradoxically employing them in order to advance their agenda. However, what the critics have glossed over is that the postanarchist agenda is, in the final analysis, an effort at problematizing rather than to eradicating these discourses and attitudes. By presuming that the postanarchists should be responsible for the eradication of these discourses or for demonstrating an alternative, the critics risk constructing the postanarchist as the *supposed supposed to know*, a topic to which I know turn.

---

<sup>8</sup> Postanarchists would benefit from a sober reading of Foucault’s *What is an author* (1977) and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (2002 [1969]) in which he identifies the “Author Function” as nothing other than a nodal or reference point among a sea of contradictions, tensions, and differences.

## Postanarchists: Subjects supposed to know?

Of the many charges placed against traditional anarchism, none have been more powerfully received than Newman's (2009; 2004a; 2001). In particular Newman has accused the anarchists of fostering the "pestiferous weeds of resentment" of which Nietzsche described:

While every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says 'no' from the very outset to what is 'outside itself,' 'different from itself,' and 'not itself'; and this 'no' is its creative deed ([1998]: 10).

In the same way as Nietzsche's 'slave', anarchists have typically advanced the case that "human subjectivity is essentially moral and rational while the State is essentially immoral and irrational" (Newman, 2004a: 116). In particular, then, the anarchists have constructed themselves as slaves through "a fundamental need to identify oneself by looking outwards and in opposition towards an external enemy" (ibid.). In doing so, the anarchists have only possessed the illusion of a truly radical subjectivity, they have been blinded by their very desire to overcome the place of power,<sup>9</sup> and have only offered new hegemonic alternatives in place of the older hegemony, a mere changing of the guard. Through passive participation anarchists have risked domination by the State, through policy implementation or reform anarchists have risked popularizing and legitimizing the State, and through revolution anarchists have risked transferring the place of power (changing the guard).<sup>10</sup> In any event, the State succeeds and the subject is defined by his or her desire to have a master.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, the anarchists have not been particularly happy with this diagnosis. And when we speak in the authoritative tone of the psychoanalyst, who could blame them for being a little sceptical? This is one of the three interrelated problems that I would like now to discuss: first, there is the issue of transference that I have discussed throughout this article but have not yet explained in a systematic manner; second, there is the traditional anarchists construction of the postanarchist as the *subject supposed to know*, and; finally, returning to the issue that led us here, there is the problem of the postanarchist actually adopting this troubling positioning.

It was in his later work that Lacan made his most forceful attempt to discuss the issue of transference in relation to the subject supposed to know position. He eventually made the claim that "as soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists .. there is transference" (1977 [1964]: 232). Put another way, as soon as one positions oneself, or is positioned by another, as *the analyst* (in the proper sense of the term), as the person who has or claims to have the answers to the problems of the analysand, there is transference. The issue of transference and the issue of the subject supposed to know are therefore mutually constitutive and must be granted equal weight

---

<sup>9</sup> This desire to overcome the place or power, typically resides in the form of "revolution" (which operates at the other side of the hegemony paradigm, opposite to reform).

<sup>10</sup> Max Stirner:

*The revolution aim[s] at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. It is not a fight against the established ... it is only a working forth of me out of the established. ... Now, as my object is not an overthrow of the established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not political or social but (as directed toward .. my ownness alone) an egoistic purpose indeed (Stirner, 1845).*

<sup>11</sup> During the height of the May 1968 student rebellion, Lacan issued the following statement to his students: "Revolutionary aspirations have only one possibility: always to end up in the discourse of the Master. .. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. You will have one!" (Lacan as quoted in Stavrakakis, 1999: 12).

in any critical endeavour. If the subject supposed to know arises, either through the imposition of a knowledge claim onto the analyst by the analysand or vice-versa, there may be a few undesirable results:

If the analyst agrees to play the role of the subject supposed to know, and falls into the trap of believing he or she really does know that which can never be known in advance .. the analyst .. slips into a false sense of mastery — which generates an imaginary relationship with the analysands (Fink, 1995: 88).

In a word, if the analyst, or in our case, the postanarchist, positions oneself in such a way as to encourage a particular position of intellectual superiority, this position risks being transformed into one of dependency and mastery rather than as the position of a unique individual on a similar journey and with similar irresolvable confusions. For the postanarchist, this gets translated as a false sense of mastery, a false sense of knowledge about this or that tradition ('traditional anarchism is this and not that', 'postanarchism is this and not that', 'Kropotkin's theory was about this and not that') and translated less less as an assemblage of attitudes held by a particular subject who may be out to own her own desires.

Of course, as I have previously alluded to, the same sense of false mastery may be projected onto the analyst (traditionalist) by the analysands (postanarchist). Thus, Lacan cautions the analyst to make continual attempts at warding off such an association with the subject for the benefit of both parties. This negative transference arises when the analysand rejects the specific analysis or when, as Lacan alleges, "you have to keep your eye on him [sic]" (1977 [1964]: 124),<sup>12</sup> this process is captured by the reaction to postanarchism by the traditionalist camp. Transference thus carries within it two possible effects, one may be the cause of seduction on the part of the analyst or, conversely, one may be caused by the fear of the analyst on the part of the analysand. In either case, feelings of anger, hostility, and resentment surface; and *within this bundle of emotions also comes the feeling of being misunderstood*. I take the position that it would indeed be wise for the postanarchists to keep their sights set on the traditionalists because it is precisely at this moment (when the reaction has occurred and the projection has been established) that a crucial opportunity exists for the benefit of both the traditionalist and the postanarchist, if only this opportunity would be realized. At the same time, the tide goes both ways, and so the postanarchist must also be weary of counter-transference. As Fink puts it:

[E]xplicitly acting as if one were such a subject [the subject supposed to know] tends to elicit imaginary relations of rivalry on the analysand's part, the worst possible relations between analyst and analysand. That is Pitfall 1. Pitfall 2: if analysts believe they really do have that presumed knowledge, they are bound to hand down interpretations as if they were lecturing from a pulpit, providing interpretations which can have little if any beneficial effect on their analysands, and serve only to make the latter more dependent on their analysts (1995: 88).

---

<sup>12</sup> This is in contradistinction to 'positive transference' which, as Lacan puts it, is "when you have a soft spot for the individual concerned" (ibid.). Here, in the rift between the postanarchists and the traditionalists, we don't necessarily sense a problem with overassociation between the traditional anarchists and the postanarchists but the contrary type of association.

These are among the many the traps of postanarchism: through negative transference the traditionalists have only passed of their own essentialisms and reductionisms onto the postanarchists, presumably in an attempt to discredit them for not being able to do precisely what they claim to want to avoid, but they have done so only through a problematic desire to (re)construct the postanarchist, whether implicitly or explicitly, as their subject supposed to know. At the same time, by not responding to these critiques, the postanarchists risk missing a crucial opportunity to pass on the postanarchist attitude to the traditionalist by responding positively to the charge of reductionism, as we have here, but negatively to the implied insistence on there being proof of being freed from such a plague. In other words, the opportunity at hand is one in which we can throw some of our emotions on the table. Finally, it is here that I come to a partial agreement with Evren when he says: “So, instead of accusing some postanarchists for employing problematic conceptions of anarchism, I would like to ask where those conceptions actually came from?” (2008). The answer to this question is clear but it is also the answer that none of us are very much ready to admit: it came from the (post)anarchists ourselves!

## A Note on Methodology

Until this point I have been proceeding on the basis of an implied definition of discourse, using the word ‘discourse’ interchangeably with ‘attitude’; at this point I would like to explain my hesitation in the methodology of Foucauldian discourse analysis. Admittedly, there are a good many reasons to such an approach when considering the postanarchist debate, the least of which is that, by historicizing structuralist theory, Foucault’s work appeared as a reaction to the presumed binarisms and unities of discourse (see Dosse & Glassman, 1997, especially page 234) which have for so long plagued the anarchist tradition. By uncovering the ruptures and discontinuities inherent in any discursive statement Foucault positioned himself somewhere beyond the *impasse* of the structuralist tradition, making structuralism acceptable to new audiences. However, by doing away with the subject, dissolving subjectivity into the rules of the enunciative field, and by assuming that the structuring effects of discourse define the possibilities for speaking (“[I am] proposing that this enunciative domain refers neither to an individual subject, nor to some kind of collective consciousness, nor to a transcendental subjectivity; but that it is described as an anonymous field whose configuration defines the possible position of speaking subjects”) Foucault fell squarely back onto the determinist grand theories<sup>13</sup> shared by many of the structuralists (Foucault, 1971: 122). In doing so, Foucault was unable to envision the possibility for resistance freed from the contaminating effects of power, the subject was thought to be wholly determined by discourse, by effects of power, that captured and controlled the subjects very ability to speak. Resistance was thought by Foucault to always be contained because “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1990: 100), and, through this interpretation, agency is rendered meaningful only after it is firstly structured by a given discursive regime: “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power .. one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned” (ibid., 94). Here I am only reformulating the argument raised by the Lacanian anarchist Saul Newman,

---

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent examination of Foucault’s inclination toward grand theory see Skinner, 1990.

By seeing human essence as an effect of power [or, in our example, discourse], Foucault has denied political theory the notion of the uncontaminated point of departure, the place upon which anarchism is founded. .. The problem left unanswered by Foucault, however [is] that of finding a positive non-essentialist figure of resistance (2001: 92).

By invoking Lacan, then, against Foucault and countless sociologists, I am able to retain the possibility for an uncontaminated place of resistance at the subjective level through the notion of *lack* which is inherent to power, but not dependent upon it; *lack* can be understood as an outside to power which is paradoxically on the inside of power (ibid., 10). To break with the structuralist desire to speak on behalf of and through power, as Foucault ultimately does, the notion of ‘attitude’ proceeds on the basis of the presumption of a radical possibility for subjectivity and agency, for freedom and autonomy, which is produced through the traversal of fantasies and the embodiment of pure desirousness (see Fink, 1995). By adopting the language of attitudes rather than the language of discourse I hope to sidestep issues which inevitably surface through connotations associated with the macrosociological determinism of Foucault and others, and to advance the case for a radical subjectivity which can not be grasped by any apparatus of power. In summary, I have argued that the critics, who seek either to defend traditional anarchist theory or to simply refute postanarchist theory, risk transferring the blame off onto the postanarchist as the subject supposed to know. I have argued that this is crucial to the development of postanarchist theory and, if handled appropriately, actually operates to its benefit. One appropriate strategy is to admit to not having the answer to the discourses that the postanarchists seek to problematize. Our job, as postanarchists, never complete: we have only to fold back onto ourselves and ask some very threatening questions such as: how and where can we best employ the (post)anarchist attitudes?

## Unfreezing Anarchism

This leaves me with a final point about the way in which anarchism has often come to be a roadblock, a master signifier, which freezes the play of signifiers and sometimes leads to anarchists stumbling around for some other anarchist subject supposed to know who by virtue of their writings, theories, or experiences, comes to embody the very definition of what it means to be an anarchist. When this happens anarchism itself becomes a frozen signifier, and the subject tirelessly falls into the imaginary demands associated with it as an-other. In this interpretation anarchism, like the Lacanian name-of-the-father, designates the isolated signifier which endlessly returns to the heart of any discussion, as the taken-for-granted signifier which subjects must not advance beyond, but must instead settle upon and be contained by the narrow options permitted by its discursive trajectory. The master signifier then becomes the nonsensical (Fink, 1995: 77) place/other against which the subject must project its unattainable desires.

According to Lacan, it is only by ‘dialectizing’ the term ‘anarchism’, by bringing it into play with what is outside of its discursive reach, that the subject will be able to symbolize the term, grant it meaning, and therefore become a mobile subject. As Fink puts it, “Plainly speaking, the analysand [will] no longer [be] stuck at that particular point of his associations; after running up against the same term off and on for what may have been months on end, it begins to give” (ibid., 78). The postanarchists have attempted to discover the meaning behind anarchism, by bringing it into relation with its own outsideness (the State), demonstrating the ways in which the logic

of the State is wrapped up in the very discursive practices shared by certain anarchist thinkers.<sup>14</sup> As a result, “a new position in relation to the cause” (Fink, 1995: 79) is brought about through traversal of the fantasies associated with ‘frozen’ (traditional) anarchism and postanarchism rises to take on the new, missing, position.

It may very well be that postanarchism arose as a ‘vanishing mediator’, itself ready to fall (if it has not already) away when something else, something less limiting, is found to replace it. Bob Black once candidly remarked that the “Type 3 anarchist takes more out of anarchism than anarchism takes out of her, and he tries to get more out of life than life gets out of him” (2004), this is precisely the type of attitude that anarchism will need to uncover should it be ready and willing to thaw itself out. “War is too important to be left to the generals, and anarchy is too important to be left to the anarchists” (ibid.), the lesson gained from the postanarchists, among others, is that anarchism itself can fall into the very discourse it seeks to avoid, that it, itself, may restrict one’s options, become another order to be followed, another religion for which servants must oblige or be excluded from the church.

## Conclusion

I opened up my email one morning to find an invitation to this year’s “Renewing the Anarchist Tradition” conference in Montpelier, Vermont. In the message was written: “2008 is a strange time to be an anarchist in North America .. it is easy to feel marginal, .. defeated and irrelevant as we watch some of our dearest ideas coopted, sucked of content, .. and projected into the mainstream political scene” (Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2008). Many anarchists were saddened to find their comrades running to the polls to vote in a more progressive government, joining the ranks of university professors, holding signs in another protest, wishing in the worst system possible in an attempt to have the masses revolt, or directly advocating an immediate revolution. It appears as though, as one side-effect, the anarchists are, as Bob Black (2004) suggested, “having an identity crisis,” and we are finding it increasingly difficult to define what it means to be an anarchist today. I have argued that the best chance of renewing the anarchist spirit is with a sort of ((post) post)anarchist attitude which does not fall victim to the pitfalls of the subject supposed to know, but maintains an attitude of forthrightness in the face of the growing concerns to ‘have the answers, solutions or proper alternatives’.<sup>15</sup> I have also alluded to the prospect that ((post) post)anarchism will never be enough, any assemblage will require a tireless commitment to a playful, but negative, reactivity rather than a strategic positive hegemony.

I have also made a number of assumptions in this article. One of these has been that postanarchism is a step in the right direction and that as a body of theory it offers anarchists the best chance to finally take seriously their own internal relations of power and, more specifically, their own latent microfascisms. However, this also opens the door for problems amounting to a tireless reflexivity. I don’t profess to have the answers to any of these problems, all I claim

---

<sup>14</sup> The German anarchist Gustav Landauer argued that the State was a certain way of relating to other people, its destruction relied on the ability of anarchists to relate differently to their surroundings (see the Anarchist Encyclopaedia, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Zizek once confessed, with respect to anarchism, following Engels, “yeah, I agree with your goals, but tell me how you are organized” (2002). I have tried to argue that anarchists can avoid responding positively to these false attacks. Any critique of this or that organization does not necessarily have to embody elements of a clearly defined alternative, as Bakunin was keen to remark: ‘the passion for destruction is also a creative urge!’

to have are more problems. Saul Newman offered us some promise, “this is what I understand ‘poststructuralism’ to mean. It means that our work is yet to be done” (2001: 15). And as long as we continue to have something to do, a reason to do battle against fascism, there is also a reason to live and a reason to continue thinking about anarchy.

I have also assumed that critics of postanarchism have failed to see the forest for the trees. With their critique of the postanarchist reduction of classical anarchism they have appeared only to want to defend the classical tradition or to reduce postanarchism itself. Evren has picked up on this:

There is a postanarchist reduction of classical anarchism seen in texts of some key writers on postanarchism.. Up until now, this feature of the postanarchist tendency has been criticized by various anarchists .. But actually, ‘anarchists’ should admit that ‘postanarchists’ didn’t invent this! ‘Postanarchists’ have been using the common anarchist history writing on classical anarchism which can be found anywhere in any reference book (2008).

Thus, though I argue in favour of postanarchism, I also do not believe that it is desirable or even possible to pigeonhole unique individuals into two distinctly labelled boxes, namely ‘classical anarchist’ or ‘traditionalist’ and ‘postanarchist’, the postanarchist attitude is characterized by the endless interrogation of the reality of these very boxes. As I have demonstrated, those who might be understood as anti-postanarchist have, in their own way, expressed this very same and contradictory attitude in their writing. Critiques of various readings of the classical anarchists should be read faithfully, according to the central tenants of postanarchist thought, and judged by their attitude less than their faulty readings of this or that theorist or their reliance on a particular signifier. It should also be mentioned that rising to the defence of such thinkers by claiming that there are interesting lines of thought on the margins of their writings, does not necessarily rescue the classical anarchist attitude against the postanarchist attitude. Instead, one should recognize that these margins are only now being developed by thinkers equipped with a postmodern scepticism. The proper question that should be asked is, ‘Why, today, are we finding these passages at the margins of key theorists interesting, why not yesterday?’

Suffice to say, postanarchism is not what *you* think. It is an attitude that one adopts – many times without realizing it – in particular contexts, in the face of specific truth claims. Moreover, it is an attitude that spits in the face of tradition and produces a heightened desire for experimentation in order to approach the freedom of the individual from the clutches of orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> May suggests that this allows for promising new practices to emerge: “practices that change, undermine, or abandon the power relationships that keep old practices in place” (1994: 113). It is this attitude for experimentation with different tactics to oppose the fascism of our time, coupled with a sincerity and forthrightness, that has come to characterize today’s most promising anarchist theories – whatever their variety, whatever their signifier. Suffice to say, postanarchism is not primarily what you *think*.

---

<sup>16</sup> “This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of land at all times” (Deleuze, 2004 [1987]: 161).

## References

- Adams, Jason. (2008) What is “postanarchism”? In *The postanarchism Clearinghouse*. Retrieved September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 from [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)
- — . (2003) Postanarchism in a nutshell. *Interactivist Info Exchange*. Retrieved September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 from [info.interactivist.net](http://info.interactivist.net)
- Anarchist Encyclopaedia. (2008) Gustav Landauer (1870-1919). Retrieved on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [recollectionbooks.com](http://recollectionbooks.com)
- Antliff, Allan. (2007) Anarchy, power, and poststructuralism. *SubStance* (36)2: 5666.
- Black, Bob. (2004) Theses on anarchism after postmodernism. *Insurgent Desire*. Retrieved September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [www.insurgentdesire.org.uk](http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk)
- Call, Lewis. (2002) Postmodern anarchism. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Cohn, Jesse., & Wilbur, Shawn. (2003) What’s wrong with postanarchism? Retrieved August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 from [info.interactivist.net](http://info.interactivist.net)
- Cohn, Jesse. (2002) What is postanarchism post? In *Postmodern culture* (13)1
- Curious George Brigade. (2003) Anarchy in the age of dinosaurs. Mosinee, Wisconsin: Yellow Jack Distro.
- Day, Richard. J. F. (2005) Gramsci is dead: Anarchist currents in the newest social movements. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
- Deleuze, Gilles., & Guattari, Felix. (2004) [1987] A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- de Rota, Aton. (ed.). (2008, forthcoming) Antologia de Postanarquismo. Spain: Wordpress
- Dosse, Francious., Glassman, Deborah. (1997) History of structuralism: 1967-present (Translated by Deborah Glassman). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Evren, Sureyya. (2008) Nietzsche, postanarchism and the senses. *Siyahi*. Retrieved September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [magazines.documenta.de](http://magazines.documenta.de)
- Fink, Bruce. (1995) The Lacanian Subject: Between language and jouissance. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. (2007) The politics of truth. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e)
- — . (2005) [1983] Preface. In G. Deleuze, & F. Guattari, *Antioedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- — . (1990) The history of sexuality (Volume 1). London: Penguin Books.
- — . (1977) What is an author? (Trans. Donald F. Bouchard, Sherry Simon.). In *Language, countermemory, practice*. New York: Cornell University Press.



- — . (1972) *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse on language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- — . (2002) [1969] *The archaeology of knowledge* (Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith). London/ New York: Routledge.
- Franks, Benjamin. (2009) Postanarchism: A partial account. In D. Rousselle, & S. Evren (eds.) *The postanarchism reader: Writings at the intersection of poststructuralism, postmodernism and anarchism* [forthcoming]
- Graeber, David. (2002) The new anarchists. *New Left review*. (13) JanuaryFebruary.
- Immediumpress. (2009 forthcoming). Postanarchism: Beyond ideology. As Retrieved October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [www.immediumpress.com](http://www.immediumpress.com)
- Institute for Anarchist Studies. (2008) RAT 2008: Call for proposals. Retrieved September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [www.anarchiststudies.org/node/218](http://www.anarchiststudies.org/node/218)
- Jean Veneuse, Mohamed. (2007) AnarchaIslams: War of dreams: Becoming(s) of a redeemed circle A with an eye and a redeemed eye with a circle A. *Miasma Infoshop* Retrieved September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [kingston.roadnetwork.org](http://kingston.roadnetwork.org)
- Koch, Andrew. (2009) Poststructuralism and the epistemological basis of anarchism. In D. Rousselle, & S. Evren (eds.) *The postanarchism reader: Writings at the intersection of post-structuralism, postmodernism and anarchism*. [forthcoming]
- Lacan, Jacques. (1977) [1964] *The seminar, book XI: The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. A. Sheridan (trans.) London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of PsychoAnalysis.
- Lehman, David. (2008) The questions of postmodernism. *Jacket #4*. Retrieved September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [jacketmagazine.com](http://jacketmagazine.com)
- Lemert, Charles. (1997) *Postmodernism is not what you think*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lyotard, JeanFrancious. (1984) [1979]. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Dover, NH: Manchester University Press.
- May, Todd. (2009) Is poststructuralist political theory anarchist? In D. Rousselle, & S. Evren (eds.) *The postanarchism reader: Writings at the intersection of poststructuralism, postmodernism and anarchism* [forthcoming]
- — . (2000). Poststructuralist anarchism: An interview with Todd May. *Perspectives on anarchist theory*. (4)2 Retrieved September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [flag.blackened.net](http://flag.blackened.net)
- — . (1994) *The political philosophy of poststructuralist anarchism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- McQuinn, Jason. (2004) The incredible lameness of Leftanarchism. Retrieved on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [news.infoshop.org](http://news.infoshop.org)

- Mills, C. Wright. (1959) [2000] *The sociological imagination*, Fourteenth anniversary edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mümken, Jürgen., and Muller, T. (eds.). (2008, forthcoming). *Postanarchismus Sammlung*. Germany: Verlag Edition AV.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1998] *On the genealogy of morality* (M. Clark, & A. J. Swensen, trans.) Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. New American Standard Bible. (1995) [1963]. La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation.
- Newman, Saul. (2009) The politics of postanarchism. In D. Rousselle, & S. Evren (eds.) *The postanarchism reader: Writings at the intersection of poststructuralism, postmodernism and anarchism*. [forthcoming]
- — . (2009) The politics of postanarchism. Edinburgh University Press.
- — . (2004a) Anarchism and the politics of resentment. In J. Moore, & S. Sunshine, *I am not man, I am dynamite: Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- — . (2004b) Interrogating the Master: Lacan and radical politics. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*. Houndmills: (9)2.
- — . (2001) From Bakunin to Lacan: Antiauthoritarianism and the dislocation of power.
- Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. Purkis, Jonathon., & Bowen, James. (2004) *Changing anarchism: Anarchist theory and practice in a global age*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Rousselle, Duane. & Evren, Sureyya (eds.) (2009 forthcoming) *The postanarchism reader: Writings at the intersection of poststructuralism, postmodernism and anarchism*.
- Saint Schmidt. (2008) Toward a postanarchist critique of anarchist businesses: A reply to Lawrence Jarach. *Infoshop News*. Retrieved September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 from news.infoshop.org
- Sasha K (2004) Postanarchism or simply postrevolution? *Killing King Abacus*. As Retrieved September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from www.geocities.com
- Shrag, C. O. (1992) *The resources of rationality: A response to the postmodern challenge*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Simmel, Georg. (1999) [1918] *Lebensanschauung*. In *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*. (16). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Skinner, Quentin (ed.). (1990) *The return of grand theory in the human sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (1999). *Lacan and the political*. London: Routledge.
- Stirner, Max. (1845) *The ego and its own*. As Retrieved on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 from www.lsrprojekt.de

- Woods, Tim. (1999) *Beginning postmodernism (Beginnings)*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Zabalaza (2003) *A platformist response to postanarchism: Sucking the golden egg: A reply to Newman*. As Retrieved on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from [info.interactivist.net](http://info.interactivist.net)
- Zizek, Slavoj. (2002) *I am a fighting atheist: An interview with Slavoj Zizek [interview]* D. Henwood., & C. Bertsch. Retrieved September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008 from [bad.eserver.org](http://bad.eserver.org)

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Saint Schmidt  
Postanarchism is Not What You Think: The Role of Postanarchist Theory After the Backlash  
2008

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