Postanarchism

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Abstract

Postanarchism has emerged over the last decade as a central genre in contemporary anarchist thought. While it has followed different paths and trajectories, it can generally be seen as a reformulation of anarchism through an encounter with poststructuralist theory. Postanarchism has involved two main theoretical moves. Firstly, it is a critical deconstruction of some of the epistemological limits of what I call classical anarchism—the anarchism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It questions some of its key assumptions about human nature, sociability, power relations and the immanence of revolution. Secondly, postanarchism is a positive political and ethical strategy that can inform contemporary radical struggles and movements. It is based around key political and ethical themes, such as the non-acceptability of power, the problematic of voluntary servitude, rethinking the idea of freedom and what I call ontological anarchy—in other words, it is an anarchism without fixed ontological foundations and without a specific telos. Yet, what is the place of anarchism today at a time when the horizon of radical politics is much more opaque, when reactive and fundamentalist forms of politics are gaining prominence, and when the machine of power increasingly reveals its nihilistic and 'anarchic' operation?

Postanarchism has emerged over the last decade as a central genre in contemporary anarchist thought. While it has followed different paths and trajectories, it can generally be seen as a reformulation of anarchism through an encounter with poststructuralist theory. Postanarchism adopts key insights from a range of theorists like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan as well as figures in the post-Heideggerian continental tradition like Giorgio Agamben and Reiner Schürmann. Postanarchism is thus shorthand for 'post-structuralist anarchism' rather than, as is sometimes alleged by its critics, a theoretical approach that claims to supersede anarchism. On the contrary, as I[1] and other 'postanarchist' thinkers like Todd May[2] and Lewis Call[3] have argued, poststructuralist theory has important consequences for contemporary anarchism. While it presents a serious theoretical challenge to what might be termed the revolutionary metanarrative of anarchism, and raises questions concerning its central assumptions about human nature and spontaneous rational order, when applied to anarchism's core ethos of anti-authoritarianism, poststructuralism has allowed a reinvention of anarchism in ways that make it much more relevant to the struggles of the present day. Rather than signalling a break with anarchism, postanarchism can therefore be seen as part of the heterodox tradition of anarchist thought.

Postanarchism, as I see it, has involved two main theoretical moves. *Firstly*, it is a critical deconstruction of some of the epistemological limits of what I call classical anarchism—the anarchism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, associated with Proudhon, Godwin, Kropotkin, Bakunin and others. This was an anarchism borne of the revolutionary optimism of Enlightenment modernity. It was an anarchism that believed that the coming revolution would liberate

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[1] S. Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power* (Maryland, MD: Lexington Books, 2001); *The Politics of Postanarchism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); *Postanarchism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

[2] T. May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

[3] L. Call, *Postmodern Anarchism* (Maryland, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

the whole of humanity and transform the entirety of social relations, ushering in harmonious and cooperative forms of coexistence; that what would be revealed would be the latent truth of sociability—long buried under layers of political and economic oppression and ideological mystification—a truth which provided the ontological foundation and conditions of possibility for the emergence of a self-governing community on the other side of state power. This is why the sovereign state was seen by anarchists as an unnecessary and destructive intrusion upon an otherwise rationally ordered society and why it was regarded as such an obstacle to human progress and flourishing. In the words of William Godwin, governments 'lay their hand on the spring there is in society, and put a stop to its motion'.[4] There is the metaphor of social relations as a self-functioning, autonomous mechanism whose steady motion is disturbed by the clumsy hands of government. In a similar sense, although in more violent terms, Bakunin described the state as 'a vast slaughterhouse and an enormous cemetery, where under the shadow and the pretext of this abstraction (the common good) all the best aspirations, all the living forces of a country, are sanctimoniously immolated and interred'.[5]

Bakunin and the other anarchists of the nineteenth century were of course right in pointing to the growing centralisation and accumulation of power in the modern state apparatus. Indeed, one of the key insights of anarchist theory lay in identifying the specific problem of institutionalised political power—something that it was much more attuned to than Marxism, for instance. However, what is central to classical anarchism is what I have referred to as a Manichean logic that assumes an ontological separation between humanity and power. Power, embodied in the state and in other social institutions, was seen as an alien coercive force that limits and distorts people's natural rational and moral capacities for freedom, development and what Kropotkin called 'mutual aid'—an evolutionary and biological instinct that he believed was latent within human societies and would form the basis for a cooperative society.[6]

Postanarchism casts some doubt on the epistemological assumptions that underpin this revolutionary metanarrative. Indeed, as Jean-François Lyotard claimed in the 1970s, we no longer live in the age of the metanarrative—the transformations of knowledge under conditions of late modern capitalism have meant a certain fragmentation and pluralisation of perspectives and the impossibility of a totalising, positivist representation of social relations; scientific knowledge and universal ideals have experienced a crisis of legitimacy.[7] While we should be a little sceptical about the 'postmodern condition' that Lyotard's work famously diagnosed, the standpoint of the 'incredulity towards metanarratives' that characterises this condition means that we have to call into question many of the ontological foundations of anarchism—such as the positivistic idea of a rational truth of social relations, or the natural tendency towards cooperation between individuals, or the faith in the social revolution that would sweep away power relations and redeem humanity. Anarchism could no longer adequately see itself as a science of society, and no longer found its moral and political claims upon a natural order that only science could reveal. Of course, amongst anarchists themselves there was a certain ambivalence towards scientific authority: Malatesta was critical of Kropotkin's scientific approach to anarchism; and Bakunin

[4] W. Godwin, *Anarchist Writings*, ed. Peter Marshall (London: Freedom Press, 1968), 92.

[5] M. Bakunin, *Political Philosophy of Mikhail Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism*, ed. G. P. Maximoff (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1953), 207.

[6] P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, ed. Paul Avrich (New York: New York University Press, 1972).

[7] J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

himself warned about the risks of a dictatorship of scientists and technocrats. The questioning of the universal rational and moral norms of anarchism emerges from within the anarchist tradition itself in the nineteenth century, principally with Max Stirner and his assault on the ideological 'spooks' of humanism that he saw as a hangover from Christianity.[8]

To some extent poststructuralist theory sharpens a kind of auto-critique already immanent within anarchism itself. Indeed, poststructuralism, as I have suggested, might be seen as a kind of continuation of the anti-authoritarian impulse of anarchism itself, but turns its critique on discursive and epistemological authority and fixed identities. For Derrida, poststructuralism is an attempt to break with the 'chain of substitutions' that reaffirms the authority and determining power of a centre—whether it is God, man, consciousness, or even the structure of language itself.[9] In this sense, what unites the diverse strands of poststructuralism—to the extent that this label has any real intelligibility—is the rejection of essentialism, or what Derrida refers to as the metaphysics of presence: the idea that there is a fixed, determined and determining identity (whether it is power, man, truth, the Good) behind or at the origin of the play of signifiers and social forces.

In light of this deconstructive approach, we must ask ourselves whether we can make the same assumptions about subjectivity held by the anarchists of the nineteenth century. Starting with Stirner, who argued that human essence was an ideological illusion, through to Foucault, who rejected any idea of a universal Subject behind the various historically specific ways in which subjectivity is constituted by power and discursive regimes of truth, the unity of the subject as a transhistorical entity has been placed in doubt. One of the key points to be taken from Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers is that there can be no ontological separation between the subject and external social forces, including power—the subject who resists power is also in part constituted by it. As Foucault put it: 'The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself'.[10] The decentering of the subject is also present in Lacan, who claimed that the subject, as the subject of language, is founded on a fundamental lack, an incompleteness that propels the dialectic of desire without fulfilment, or Deleuze and Guattari, for whom desire itself is a multiplicity of social forces that cut across and fragment the individual.

Added to this is the question of whether there are privileged revolutionary identities today, and indeed whether radical politics can or should be based on identity. The anarchism of the nineteenth century generally had a much more heterogeneous understanding of revolutionary agency than the Marxian notion of the proletariat—it included also peasants, artisans, the lumpenproletariat. Yet, in late modernity, the revolutionary subject is even more opaque and we can no longer have much faith in the idea of a revolution of the whole of the working class against capitalism. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to seek an alternative to this in the politics of recognition of certain marginalised identities, even in a so-called politics of 'intersectionality'. Poststructuralism has, in my view, wrongly come to be associated with a politics of difference and identity—which is nothing more than a liberal or neoliberal biopolitics that does little to challenge structures of domination. Instead, and I shall return to this point later, poststructuralism is a refusal of any kind of identity politics and is better thought of in terms of a politics of

[8] M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[9] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[10] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 30.

singularity and becoming. As Foucault put it, 'maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse who we are'.[11]

The second area of investigation is the nature and functioning of power itself. Revolutionary theory has had to come to terms with the fact that the operation of power has radically changed in late modernity. It is no longer possible to see power relations as centralised and localised within the state, and, moreover, it is no longer possible to see power as functioning only in terms of law, prohibition and repression. The transition from the old sovereign paradigm of law, constraint and violence to the modern paradigms of disciplinary and biopolitical power has been well charted by Foucault, who said famously that 'in political thought and analysis we have still not cut off the head of the king'.[12] Not only are power relations coextensive with society and dispersed throughout everyday relations and social institutions and practices, but power also has to be seen in its productive positivity. Overturning the 'repressive hypothesis'—a model of power derived largely from Reichian psychoanalysis in which power is seen as a repressive force that limits and constrains an essential desire—Foucault argued that power 'produces and incites'. It produces desires, affects, knowledge, subjectivity itself as well as freedom and resistance to it.

Moreover, poststructuralism puts in doubt the very idea of revolution itself, if by revolution we understand a total transformation of social, political and economic relations and the liberation from power. Where and how a revolution can emerge from a field saturated and power relations, and what it is able to achieve, is a question we must ask ourselves today. Perhaps it is more productive, as Foucault claimed, to think in terms of localised forms of resistance and practices of freedom, rather than the great revolutionary event: 'Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case'.[13] Even if it is possible for these localised forms of resistance to converge with one another to affect changes on a broader social level, the idea of a liberated society that would emerge on the other side of power was a utopian fantasy. Power is coextensive with society; there will always be power relations in any post-revolutionary society, which is why it is better to think in terms, not of liberation, but of ongoing practices of freedom that maintained a kind of agonistic relation to power.[14] Indeed, the concept of freedom itself cannot be seen as ontologically different to power, but is only intelligible in relation to power and exists as part of a strategic 'game' conducted on the field of power relations.

We can see, then, that the encounter with poststructuralist theory poses certain problems for anarchism, particularly regarding the epistemological and ontological limits that it was initially framed within. However, contrary to what some have claimed,[15] it does not disable it. Rather, it opens up to us the challenge of thinking what anarchism might mean, politically and ethically, without the ontological certainties and moral and rational foundations it once relied upon. Therefore, the *second* move central to postanarchism is a 'reconstructive' one—an understanding

[11] M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Roberty Hurley et al. (London: Penguin, 2000), 326–348.

[12] M. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 88–89.

[13] Ibid., 95–96.

[14] M. Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom', *Ethics: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), 281–301.

[15] J. Cohn and S. Wilbur, 'What's Wrong with Postanarchism?' (The Anarchist Library, 2001) https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jesse-cohn-and-shawn-wilbur-what-s-wrong-with-postanarchism.lt.pdf

of postanarchism as a positive political and ethical strategy or series of strategies that can inform contemporary radical struggles and movements.

We have to concede that the horizon of radical politics is much more opaque today; and that, despite impressive forms of political experimentation—as we have seen in recent times with the Occupy movement, which in many ways took its inspiration from anarchism—these have been unable to create any viable or sustainable alternative. Yet, in response to the assault on all forms of social life and the natural environment by neoliberal rationality, there has been a re-intensification of political life—whether in renewed forms of activism against environmental destruction, police violence, border controls and anti-immigrant measures, or in more reactive forms, as we have seen in the resurgence of violent fundamentalisms and authoritarian, racist and neofascist populism. This is surely a dangerous and uncertain time for radical politics. Moreover, resistance to domination can always be colonised by the power it opposes. Radical politics, including anarchism, therefore has to be seen in terms of multiple struggles, strategies, localised tactics, temporary setbacks and betrayals—an ongoing antagonism or 'agonism'[16]—without the promise of a final victory. As Deleuze says: 'the world and its States are no more masters of their plane than revolutionaries are condemned to a deformation of theirs. Everything is played in uncertain games'.[17]

In my more recent work on postanarchism, I have sought to stake out a number of key political and ethical coordinates for thinking about these new modes of radical political engagement.

The Non-Acceptability of Power

Postanarchist politics always starts from the assumption that no relation of power can be naturalised or taken for granted, that power is never automatically legitimate, that it is, on the contrary, always contingent, uncertain and therefore contestable. We should refuse to see power as being grounded in anything other than its own historical contingency. This divests power of any claim to universal right, truth or inevitability. As Foucault says when describing his 'anarchaeological' approach, 'there is no universal, immediate, and obvious right that can everywhere and always support any kind of relation of power'.[18] This is not the same as saying that all power is bad; rather it means that no form of power is *automatically* admissible. This ethico-political standpoint is one that is largely consistent with most forms of anarchism. However, where it differs is in making the non-acceptability of power one's *point of departure* rather than where one finishes up. In other words, perhaps we need to think of anarchism today not so much as a specific project determined by a certain end goal—a fully liberated, non-alienated society without power relations—but rather as an open and contingent enterprise that takes the non-acceptance of power as its starting point. Perhaps we can understand anarchism as an enterprise that starts, rather than (necessarily) ends up, with anarchy. To quote Foucault: 'it is not a question of having in view, at the end of a project, a society without power relations. It is rather a matter of putting non-power or the non-acceptability of power, not at the end of the enterprise, but rather at the

[16] C. Mouffe, *Agonistics: thinking the world politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

[17] G. Deleuze, *Dialogues*, trans. H. Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 147.

[18] M. Foucault, *On the Government of the Living, Lectures at the College de France 1979–80*, ed. M. Senellart, trans. G. Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 77.

beginning of the work in the form a questioning of all the ways in which power is in actual fact accepted'.[19]

We have here the idea of an anarchist politics not determined by fixed objectives, or a rational *telos*, or universal normative criteria—but rather founded on a certain contingency, open-endedness and freedom of thought and action. This means that it does not have a specific ideological shape and may take different forms and follow different courses of action at different moments. It might resist and contest specific relations of power at localised points of intensity, on the basis of their illegitimacy and violence; it might work against certain institutions and institutional practices by either working within and in support of other kinds of institutions, or through creating alternative practices and forms of organisation. In other words, taking anarchy or non-power as its starting point, postanarchism as a form of autonomous thinking and acting, can work on multiple fronts, in a variety of different settings, institutional and non-institutional, producing reversals and interruptions of existing relations of domination.

So rather than thinking of postanarchism as a distinct project, it seems more useful today to see it in terms of a certain mode of thought and action through which relations of domination, in their specificity, are interrogated, contested and, where possible, overturned. What is central for me in anarchism is the idea of autonomous thinking and acting which transforms contemporary social spaces in the present sense, but which is at the same time contingent in the sense of not being subject to pre-determined logics and goals. This does not of course mean that anarchism should not have ethical principles—but rather that it should not, and perhaps any longer *cannot*, see itself as a specific programme of revolution and political organisation.

Voluntary Inservitude

Central to postanarchism is the ethical and political problem of what Étienne de La Boétie termed long ago *servitude volontaire* or voluntary servitude—the phenomenon of voluntary obedience to tyrannical power. This is an obedience that was not coerced, but freely given, and it was this, which for La Boétie in the sixteenth century, as it is still for us today, was the central enigma of politics and one of the greatest obstacles to any kind of radical action. The curious condition of our time is one in which the decline of traditional structures of authority and the growing invisibility of power are accompanied by ever-greater levels of conformity, docility and obedience. However, the key insight to be taken from the problematic of voluntary servitude is that power—even tyrannical power—has no consistency or stability of its own but is something entirely dependent on, indeed constituted by, our free obedience to it. Power would not exist if we did not choose to obey it, if we did not freely abandon our own mastery over ourselves and render ourselves up to power. Put more radically, power is an illusion constituted by our own identification with it; power, on its own, does not exist. This means that just as the constitution of power is a matter of will and free volition, so is its undoing. As La Boétie put it, 'Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed'.[20] We overcome power, not by destroying it as such but by simply refusing to recognise and obey it, by turning our backs on it; the reflexive illusion

[19] Ibid., 78.

[20] É. de La Boétie, 'Discours de la servitude volontaire', *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008), 47. http://library.mises.org/books/Etienne%20de%20la%20Boétie/The%20Politics%20of%20Obedience%20The%20Discourse%20of%20Voluntary%20Servitude_Vol_3.pdf

of power, constituted by our own obedience, is thus dispelled. We can speak here—as Foucault did[21]—of a 'voluntary inservitude', the reclamation of our own will.

Ownness

Voluntary servitude, and its flipside voluntary inservitude, reveals something that we have all forgotten: we are *already* free and we need only to realise it. As thinkers from La Boétie to Arendt have argued, people always and in every situation have the power if only they choose to act upon it. We can think of freedom, then, not as a goal to be achieved, but rather as the ontological ground upon which we can act. Postanarchist theory understands freedom as thinking and acting *as if* power does not exist. This would be how Stirner understands freedom, or what he calls 'ownness'.[22] Already in the nineteenth century, Stirner had come to the realisation that the accepted notions of freedom and liberation had reached a dead end, that they were idealist illusions that had no real meaning and which led to an alienation of individuals at the hands of external social relations and institutions. Today, freedom seems even more ambiguous and opaque, especially as the idea has been contorted under neoliberalism, where it has become precisely the threshold upon which we are governed according to the rationality of the market. Stirner's notion of 'ownness' should be taken, then, as an invitation to think freedom differently—to see it not as an ideal to be pursued but rather as a kind of ontological reality, a presupposition of the singular individual. Ownness is also associated with notions of self-mastery, with an ethical sensitivity about our dependency on power, the temptations of self-abdication and the dangers of 'possessedness' as well as the anarchic self-constitution embodied in Stirner's notion of the ego, which is an open space of flux and becoming rather than any kind of fixed or essential identity.

From Revolution to Insurrection

We must think about political action in new ways, and this is where the notion of the insurrection becomes central to postanarchism. Following on from a number of themes outlined above, the insurrection might be seen as a kind of revolt not so much against the external world of power—although that might be a consequence of it—but more so as a kind of ethical form of self-transformation, a revolt against fixed identities, modes of action and forms of life that power imposes upon us or which we have freely internalised. Again, I am indebted to Stirner here and his idea of the Empörung (*Uprising*):

> Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or *status*, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising but a rising of individuals, a getting up without regard to the *arrangements* that spring from it. The Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer

[21] M. Foucault, 'What is Critique?', in J. Schmidt (Ed), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 382–398.

[22] Stirner, *Ego and Its Own*, 141–154.

> to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. It is not a fight against the established, since, if it prospers, the established collapses of itself; it is only a working forth of me out of the established.[23]

The revolution works to transform external social and political conditions and institutions, whereas the insurrection is aimed at one's own self-transformation. To engage in an insurrection means placing oneself *above* external conditions and constraints, whereupon these constraints simply disintegrate. It starts from the affirmation of the self, and the political consequences flow from this. The insurrection, unlike the revolution, is radically anti-institutional—not necessarily in the sense of seeking to get rid of all institutions, as this would lead simply to different kinds of institutions emerging in their place—but rather in the sense of asserting one's power over institutions, and indeed, one's indifference to them, as if to say: 'power exists but it is not my concern; I refuse to let it constrain me or have any effect on me; I refuse power's *power* over me'. This notion of insurrection is radically different from most understandings of radical political action. It eschews the idea of an overarching project of emancipation or social transformation; freedom is not the end goal of the insurrection but, rather, it's the starting point. What Stirner's notion of insurrection alerts us to is the extent to which we are often complicit—through our own self-abdication—with the systems of power that we see as dominating. Perhaps we need to understand power not as a substance or a thing, but as a relationship which we forge and renew everyday through our actions and our relations with others. As the anarchist, Gustav Landauer, put it: 'The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently'.[24] He places the emphasis not so much on the revolutionary seizure or destruction of the external system of power, but rather on a micro-political transformation of the self and its relation to others, and the creation of alternative and more autonomous relations—the result of which is the transcendence of state power.

Ontological Anarchism

Many of the ideas and themes I have been outlining here are reflective of a central condition that can be referred to as *ontological anarchy*. The Heideggerian thinker, Reiner Schürmann, defines anarchy as the withering away of the epochal first principles, the *arché* that defined metaphysical thinking:

> The anarchy that will be at issue here is the name of a history affecting the ground or foundation of action, a history where the bedrock yields and where it becomes obvious that the principle of cohesion, be it authoritarian or 'rational', is no longer anything more than a blank space deprived of legislative, normative, power.[25]

[23] Ibid., 279–280.

[24] G. Landauer, 'Weak State, Weaker People', in G. Kuhn (Ed), *Gustav Landauer: Revolution and Other Writings, a Political Reader* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 213–214.

[25] R. Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. C.-M. Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 6.

For Schürmann, this is an experience of freedom: it frees action from its *telos*, from fixed normative frameworks, from the rule of ends that hitherto sought to determine it. Action becomes 'anarchic'—that is to say, groundless and without a pre-determined end.

However, it seems to me that the implications of ontological anarchy for anarchism and radical politics in general are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, as I have tried to show, anarchism must embrace this experience of anarchy and no longer rely on firm ontological foundations that formed the basis of classical anarchism. Postanarchism is an anarchist politics and ethics that embodies the contingent openness of the present moment. Our experience of the world today suggests that the tectonic plates of our age are shifting, that familiar and once hegemonic institutions and principles—both economic and political—appear increasingly empty and lifeless to us, that the great secret of power's nonexistence is being exposed. Never has political and financial power been in a more precarious position, never has the 'establishment' been under greater threat and held in greater disdain, having completely lost its symbolic legitimacy. This makes possible new and more autonomous forms of political action, communication, economic exchange and being in common. On the other hand, this sense we all have of an increasingly dislocated world, spinning off its hinges, confronts us with immense and unparalleled dangers—the empty nihilism of the global capitalist machine and the appearance of apocalyptic and fascistic forms of politics that seem intent on hastening the coming disorder. The condition of ontological anarchy is always accompanied by the temptation to restore the principle of authority, to fill in its empty place with new and terrifying proliferations of power. We confront the realisation that power itself has become dangerously anarchic; that, deprived of any sort of consistent legitimation, power suffers paroxysm after paroxysm as the emptiness at its core is revealed. The functioning of state and governmental power is increasingly nihilistic in that it is no longer driven towards any general project for social improvement or human fulfilment; it is simply the blind and contingent operation of power, which seeks merely to manage, with ever-greater levels of incompetence and ineffectiveness, the crises (of security, economy, ecology) that it itself generates.

Against this blind and nihilistic drive, anarchism today must affirm a kind of ethical care or even conservation for what already exists, for a natural world faced with ecological collapse, as well as cultivate and affirm new forms of life, community and autonomy which are already being made possible by the ontological rift opening before us.

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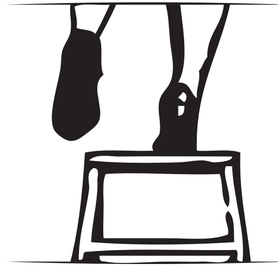

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The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism (edited by Carl Levy & Matthew S. Adams), chapter 17, pp. 293-303, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-75620-2_17.

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